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**This, You Protect**

by owlet

**Summary**

The mission resets abruptly, from objective: kill to objective: protect
The mission has been complicated. It should have been a standard kill job, but the target had been slippery and surprisingly well trained, with obnoxious backup. Really obnoxious, flying backup. Who has that?

Not to mention the distractions. The mission was clear: kill. But the Asset had watched instead, and the target’s voice made weird echoes inside the head that caused the Asset to pull punches, to fire off the mid-line.

To falter. To speak. To fight the objective, even if the objective (kill) momentarily took the form of the target’s stupid face.


There have been mission overrides before. There is a protocol for it. The passcode is given at each brief. The passcode for this mission is not:

- You are my friend
- James Buchanan Barnes
- end of the line

Nonetheless, the mission resets. Unlike other resets, this is not the smooth slotting of a cog into a new process. The reset is painful: one more landmark on the map of hurts.

In the space of the reset, the mission falls.

The Asset watches the mission recede among debris and fire. It gives the Asset vertigo – that sliding-sideways feeling that results from too long since cryo, when the mind creates non-mission-related distractions that cause increased heart rate and respiration, migraine.

The vertigo lasts long enough for the formerly-kill mission to fall almost out of sight. The Asset cannot protect from outside visual range. Mission failure: unacceptable.

Чорт, the Asset says, and dives.

The protect-mission has unfortunately dislocated the Asset’s flesh shoulder, which makes diving/catching/swimming tricky. Given the weapon arm and its buttress of metal along the shoulder and spine, the Asset is not buoyant. Luckily, the Asset has tactical flexibility woven into its tendons, far below the messy, unreliable level of thought and brain.

The mission is now protect. Each brief contains the phrase ‘do what is needed to complete the objective.’ So the Asset hooks the formerly-kill mission in a leg hold about the waist and swims steadily to shore using the metal arm. Like the Asset, the now-protect mission’s enhanced
physiology makes drowning unlikely … except that the Asset had already put a bullet in his gut. And beat his face to jelly.

Пиздец.

The Asset drags the objective out of the Potomac and watches, ready to administer CPR despite dislocation and water streaming from the metal arm that has a 73.4% likelihood of interfering with fine-motor skills until dried, conferring mission-significant risk of causing injury to sternum/ribs/lungs. The Asset leans over, stares. The possibility of mission failure has caused the Asset’s baseline respiration to increase by 15%. The metal arm clenches and unclenches.

But the target breathes, coughs out water. Medical attention is needed beyond the Asset’s basic first aid capability: gunshot wound to the shoulder, possibly through-and-through; gunshot wound to the abdomen, bullet in situ; possible head trauma; significant facial fracturing – all bathed in water poisoned by fuel, coolant, burned plastic, and who knows what else by the collapsing vehicles. Polluted water also currently inhabiting the man’s lungs. Likelihood of infection and pneumonia without immediate medical intervention: 96%. The mission override is a klaxon blaring behind the Asset’s eyes. High likelihood of pneumonia. Critical: must avoid.

Useless bystanders line the riverbank, filming the vehicles’ wreck. The Asset peels a phone from a weedy-looking kid in a stupid hoodie.

“What the fu-“ the kid gets out before his eyes focus on the Asset. The Asset’s face arranges itself into a configuration of bared teeth and narrowed eyes. The kid shuts his damn mouth.

The Asset knows 911. It has worked as a useful diversion on occasion. The Asset is less than confident that the civilian on the line understands latitude and longitude, but there is no other way to say “Captain Steven Grant Rogers with a gut wound on the riverbank” and be assured that they will find the correct location. Civilians are terrible at navigation.

“Hurry,” the Asset says.

Mission imperative pounds in the Asset’s chest, takes the form of increased pulse rate and respiration, a tightening of the throat. Backup is required to protect the objective’s lungs.

“It’s Captain goddamn America. Hurry.”

The Asset doubles back to ensure that the ambulance arrives quickly. Alternate plan: the metal arm is 20% dry. The target can be carried to a hospital if necessary. Exposure is secondary to protection.

The phone makes a sound like a banjo – a sound that makes the Asset wish to rip its own ears off and throw them as far away as possible. The phone’s screen now reads, ‘hey man, give Tyler back his phone.’ There is a siren nearby. Response: low priority.

The large, out-of-shape EMT drops his backboard at the sight of their patient on the riverbank. The small woman accompanying him smacks him in the arm, and they curse at one another. This delay causes the Asset to rock back and forth from right foot to left. The Asset can see the target’s chest rise and fall, and it stills itself. The EMTs roll the man gently onto the backboard and heave him – the larger with grunts and the smaller with sheer grumpy stubbornness – into the ambulance at a speed approximately half what the Asset would consider adequate.

Once the ambulance has gone, the Asset sets the flesh shoulder against a tree and pops it back into place: one flash of the sort of agony that makes pictures in the brain (needles, bright light, the
flavor of rubber) followed by easing and improved movement. Less than twelve hours to full healing.

Regroup:
- clothing
- cash
- relocate the target

The safe house on Avenue G is in shambles. The bank, with its chair and its deep freeze, is not an option. The Asset cannot protect the mission from cryo.

For basics, the Asset can trust the ridiculous wastefulness of Americans: food and clothing are everywhere for the taking. The Asset keeps its boots but finds pants/shirt/jacket/hat in less than thirty minutes. Guns and tactical gear are hidden high in a tree in the park near the river; knives will suffice among civilians. The phone makes its banjo sound three more times with admonishments to return it to Tyler. The Asset texts back: ‘bite it, asshole.’

The Asset is not consciously aware what the phrase means. The response, ‘bro that is harsh,’ satisfies. The Asset feels the head nod and lips press together. It is harsh. Message conveyed successfully.

The Asset walks in the direction the ambulance took. Given the general state of falling-apart in the area, other sirens soon help guide the Asset to George Washington University Hospital. Blood on the face and the flesh hand give the Asset cover – that he is mobile puts him low on the priority list.

The flying man sits on the second floor in an alcove with a dark-haired woman. A troublesome redhead arrives soon after. The Asset sits in a blue plastic chair outside the alcove. The Asset stares hard at the redhead from under ballcap and hair. He knows she is danger without knowing how he knows it. He angles the chair out of her line of sight. He practices looking asleep-not-dead for a long time.

Eventually a doctor approaches them. Her words make the little group sag and cover their eyes in a way the Asset recognizes as ‘danger passed.’ The Asset’s body feels as if it is falling, though he sits in the same chair. The Asset’s lungs get rid of all their air. The Asset presses his abdomen: these could be signs of internal bleeding. The tissue feels pliable. Monitor, he tells himself. Bleeding out from the inside would interfere with the mission.

The doctor passes by him. He pulls out the phone. There are now seventeen texts from ‘Dale’ about returning the phone to Tyler. The Asset makes note to calculate the feasibility of a side mission to return the phone to Tyler and make him eat it, preferably in one piece.

The Asset uses the phone’s search function to look up Dr. Chitra Ghambire. Board-certified surgeon with fifteen years of experience. No open complains or malpractice suits. Top ten in her class at Johns Hopkins. Excellent reviews on ratemydoctor.com. Acceptable. Surgery lasted four hours. Anesthesia should last 1.5, maybe two more hours before Steven Grant Rogers, Captain, US Army, will be moved to the main ward.

The Asset roams the hospital’s hallways to obtain supplies: unguent, bandages, a foil-topped cup that proclaims itself ‘chocolate pudding.’ On the geriatric ward, in the room of Mildred Greene, he cleans his face and wraps the small cuts on his right hand and arm. The old woman snores in her
bed. The Asset eats the ‘chocolate pudding’ and feels his brain flip over sideways. He throws the cup against the wall. Note: avoid ‘pudding.’ It distracts from the mission.

The Asset makes his way to the hospital’s roof and tucks himself into a dark corner as far as possible from the helipad. The phone (six new texts and five missed calls) reports local time as 0032.

“Set sleep: two hours,” the Asset tells himself.

At 0243, Asset emerges from a stairwell into the still-busy ER. His shoulder no longer aches, and his eyes blink without dragging like sandpaper. In the hallways of the hospital 36.9% of personnel have beverage containers, most of which are white with brown banding.

A tall, dark-skinned woman sets her container down to flip through a chart. Asset grabs the cup as he passes by her. He does not expect the hot liquid to burn his tongue. It makes his left hand clench with a soft whirr. Then sweet-fat-rich registers in his mouth; his eyes cross a little, and he staggers. No wonder civilians are so distracted, with their pudding and their hot drinks.

“I will choke the shit out of anyone who tries to take this from me,” he thinks.

To avoid any examination of pronouns, he peers at the cup. The label reads ‘Starbucks’ and depicts a woman smiling while being devoured by a cephalopod. He clutches the cup close and walks.

He doesn’t even have to break into anything: he climbs to the second floor, drinking his beverage (according to the cipher on the cup, a three-shot two WM EW), when he overhears one nurse say to another,

“I saw him in recovery, before they took him up to the fourth floor. It’s definitely him. No one else would be that cute after major surgery.”

He glares at the young man’s excessive breach of security protocols, then takes the stairs up. He’s faster than the elevator.

No one has thought to post guards outside Captain Steven Rogers’s door. Asset grits his teeth. It’s clear why the mission rewrote. No one else seems to give a rat’s twitching ass about protecting this guy.

He slips inside the room. The numbers on the monitors are within acceptable limits for pulse, BP and O2 saturation. The oxygen tank is sufficiently full for overnight use.

His body is reacting strangely to the beverage (‘don’t care will have more,’ he thinks) – he breathes high in his chest and has to consciously move his eyes to look at the man in the bed. But of course he must examine his objective: it’s a mission imperative.

Rogers’s color is good, and his feet are adequately covered by the blanket. Though a second would be better. Asset increases the angle of the bed by 11 degrees to better protect against pneumonia.

Rogers shifts in the bed, and his nasal cannula pops out.

“Are you even kidding me,” Asset whispers.

He tucks the cannula gently back into Rogers’s ridiculously large nose in the middle of his stupidly big head, then curls the tube back in place over Steve’s acceptably sized ear. Steve frowns in his sleep and turns his head toward Asset’s hand.
Apparently ‘avoid frowning’ falls under the purview of protection, because Asset’s imperative throbs along with his heartbeat.

He presses his right thumb against the wrinkle in Steve’s brow. Rogers exhales in his sleep and settles back into the pillow, frown smoothing away.

Voices approach in the hallway: one unfamiliar, one the flying man. Asset ghosts out the window and down to street level.

There is a cephalopod-eating-lady sign a block away. It is open, even at 0413. Asset hangs toward the back, fingering the pilfered cash in his pocket, until he deciphers their bastardized Italian code. He orders with confidence.

“Size?”

“Big.”

The resulting beverage, according to the board, contains sufficient calories for a two-hour burst of combat, six hours’ hard travel, or ten hours sitting in the building across from the hospital watching Rogers sleep. The cup is very large, and his face curls at the sight of it. The worker’s face curls too, and Asset thinks ‘smile.’

“Hey, you enjoy that, man,” the girl says to him.

“Yes ma’am.”

They are words his mouth knows but not his brain. But it’s an easy order to follow, to sit in a warm room at a small table with a view of all exits and a drink that, deciphered, means three-shot two-pump white chocolate mocha with extra whip.

The sound emerging from his curled face is suspiciously akin to a giggle. It makes his heart rate increase. After the second ‘venti,’ Asset’s eyes are quivering in their sockets and he is struck by the urge to order a third and walk very quickly around the hospital to check the perimeter.

Point eight miles around the outer sweep zone, the phone’s ringing becomes so insistent that he answers it. Unlike the banjo texting sound, the ring sound is something that the Asset thinks is either music, a young man being castrated, or a distressed cat.

“Who is this?”

“Who is this? It’s Tyler, man, you have my fucking phone. Who are you?”

“Asset.”

Tyler laughs. Asset thinks fondly of Tyler eating a phone sandwich with a nut-shot chaser.

“Ass…hat? That’s an appropriate name, brah, because you are totally an asshat for not giving me my phone back.”

Asset considers the news that his name could inspire derision. Probability of mission distraction: 62%.

“Come on, dude. All my Coachella pictures are on there. Please, man. I don’t want to call the police.”

Asset hangs up. He goes into the photo folder on the phone to find 126 snaps of the same group of
young people wearing poorly made Sioux war bonnets or, barring that, wearing what appear to be feathers from domestic turkey or various pet bird species in their hair. None of the young people are wearing adequate sun protection, and all are suffering from extreme dehydration and heat stroke, if he correctly interprets the reason for their tongues hanging out.

They look like morons, and if they were smart they’d pay him to dump the phone into the Potomac or the hospital’s medical waste incinerator.

Still. He knows the difference between Asset and asshat, but the homonym isn’t unreasonable. He needs a cover ID for the mission.

‘Steve Rogers’ is the name his brain latches onto given half a second to itself, but this is no double-and-cover mission. ‘Tyler’ and ‘Dale’ are sackwipe names possessed by pure examples of the sackwipe type.

Captain Rogers called him ‘Bucky.’ Asshat potential: 58%. But one of the non-passcodes was a name. It means nothing to him, but ‘Barnes’ sounds like a civilian name that will pass. He hopes.

Perimeter check complete, the … Barnes swipes a new hat from a street vendor and reenters the hospital. Rogers finally has guards outside his door. He walks smoothly down the hallway, frowning at door numbers as if lost. Soft music plays over the sound of monitors beeping in Rogers’s room. Around the corner, he looks up the badge numbers of the two officers at Rogers’s door: one long-term decorated department veteran and one rookie, honorably discharged from the Marines after two tours in Afghanistan. Acceptable. For the moment.

He loiters in the hallway. It’s still busy enough for him to be overlooked. He waves his cup and nods at the few people who bother to meet his eye. At 0819, the flying man emerges, speaking softly on his phone, which probably does not sound like a banjo when he has a text.

“Yeah, still out of it,” the man says. “I’m gonna go home, grab a shower, and come back around lunchtime. Doc said he ought to wake up this afternoon.”

Time, then. When the flying man leaves, the officers smile at him, nod, then resume their unfocused stares at the hallway. A nurse enters Rogers’s room, then leaves after 11.6 minutes.

As- Barnes. Barnes enters a room down the hall, exits the window, and scuttles like a crab across the side of the building. *Crab is an odd choice,* he thinks, fitting fingers into crevices in the concrete. Trusting that civilians will never look up.

Windows are goddamn inconvenient these days. So few of them open. People putting themselves in tanks like fish. The … Barnes can actively remember yesterday and the day before, but nothing to suggest why he has a strong opinion about windows. Rogers’s room is in an older wing of the hospital, regardless, and Barnes’s right arm forces the elderly lock.

Rogers looks better in the morning light, closer to his usual rosy self for the moment. Barnes narrows his eyes at the idea that Rogers should be so pink, but the mission briefing he does not remember that results in mission objective: protect gives him the information that pink is the usual color unless Rogers is angry, laughing, or embarrassed, in which case the color is red.

So pink will do. The monitors still show acceptable numbers, and the nasal cannula is gone. Barnes checks the IV stand: saline, Percocet, antibiotics.

The bed has been lowered again, and Rogers has kicked the blanket off his feet. Barnes sighs. He raises the bed, retucks the blanket.
Steve shifts and kicks the blanket loose.

The mission override comes with the strong sense that protecting this man is one long pain in the ass.
I live to serve, people. I live to serve.

Chapter two: in which we learn that a certain Seargent Barnes has the slightest tendency toward melodrama. Bless his heart.

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On the third day, Barnes wanders the hospital’s hallways in pilfered scrubs and a stupid paper hat, phone vibrating in the pocket of the lab coat proclaiming him Darius Mohsen, Vascular Surgery, when he overhears Rogers’s guards planning his discharge.

“Anybody else would be here at least a week.”

“Anybody else would be dead.”

AVOID, the mission imperative says.

There’s a burst of laughter from the room: the flying man, and a baritone chuckle that makes Barnes’s body go still.

WITHIN OBJECTIVE PARAMETERS, the mission imperative says.

The sound makes his ears twitch. He wants to hear it again, like he wants another white-chocolate mocha and he wants to figure out how to make the phone stop sounding like a banjo. If the phone made a sound like that laugh every time he got a text, Tyler would be his new favorite person.

SECOND FAVORITE, the mission imperative notes.

But the civilians are idiots for letting Rogers go so soon.

“Doctor,” the tall guard says.

Barnes has been staring. The two men are not touching their weapons, but their hands are drifting gunward. Not bad, civvies. Approved.

“Sorry,” he says, and waves the chart in his hand. He wanders away, weaving around the hallway as if he were absorbed in the text. Discharge means time to move.

But the redhead shows up, and she is one of the echoes that might be a memory if he had any. What he has instead is the mission, and its opinion is clear: AVOID.

He follows as close as he dares, but the redhead is tucked up close to Rogers, walks with her stupid little arm around his waist as if Rogers wouldn’t smash her flat if he fell over. Such a fall would not be fatal. Could be caused by a boot to the ankle or a projectile of sufficient heft. Such a fall might cause sufficient re-injury to require a day or two more of hospitalization.

ALLOWABLE DAMAGE. Okay, then.
The woman turns at that moment, as if she can feel Barnes’s eyes on her back. He ducks behind a potted tree, and the mission goes sideways: the small crowd hustles out the door and into a waiting car. There’s just long enough for bystanders to recognize the patient and crowd together at the doorway, snapping cellphone pictures. Barnes can’t push through without drawing attention.

The car turns right out of the hospital, but beyond that, he loses it.

The target is gone. Barnes grits his teeth. Tactical goddamn flexibility. He’s going to have to cross town to Rogers’s apartment. That will require a coffee. Venti.

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The apartment is empty – busted up by his own bullets (flinch) but not being watched by anyone Barnes can see, and he can see better than most. Given the chatter at Starbucks and on the hospital TVs, it’s likely no one is even listening to the bugs the suits almost certainly stuffed the place with. There’s a tripwire across the bedroom door that makes him immediately think “redhead.” One drawer is ajar, and there’s a pair of white socks balled up US Army style on the bed.

Otherwise, the room is pure Rogers, according to the mission brief he still can’t remember: pile of books on the nightstand, notebook draped over the headboard, covers tucked in tight enough to play like a drum.

He takes the notebook from the bed, as well as the one he finds on the coffee table. Useful for intel. Also the apples from the kitchen, because otherwise it’s a waste. He stares at the vast acreage of khaki and old-man plaid in the closet and thinks, “pass.”

FIND, the mission imperative instructs.

Well, obviously. But even a damn tactical genius like Steve needs a lead.

The mission imperative does not take extenuating circumstances into account. LOCATE, it insists. COVER. PROTECT.

The need to find-protect drives Barnes through DC’s streets at a pace that would give a civilian heart palpitations. He has no destination in mind, but his body will not be still. The apartment is empty; the workplace is in shambles.

The sketchbooks and the phone: one of them might give him a clue. He returns in the direction of the familiar territory around the hospital and his quiet corner on the roof where he feels safe enough to sleep. Research and regroup. More cash is necessary.

A bus goes by with Rogers’s face on it. The involuntary sound that leaves his mouth is not a yelp, because secret assassin super cyborg soldiers do not yelp. He does run after the bus, though. Rogers’s big dumb face blown up and plastered on public transportation.

“If I can’t find this guy, I deserve to get tanked.”

But he shudders. The tank is nothing to joke about. It has been just over 3 weeks. His bones are remembering how to be warm.

Anyway, he has a mission.

FIND, the imperative agrees.
Starting, apparently, at the Smithsonian.

---

The museum gives him vertigo: the target’s face is everywhere but no target. Faces and words echo in his head without any known source: the feel of a sniper rifle in his hands, an old one, heavy; the smell of pine trees and snow; wet feet; Rogers saluting. He did not salute while they fought on the vehicle, before the mission reset. Curious.

The centerpiece of the main hall is a group of statues in V formation, faceless, the front figure wearing the outfit Rogers had worn on the vehicle. The figure to the right wears a really good-looking jacket: warm, plenty of pockets, but a bitch to do up all those buttons with cold hands.

Barnes stumbles, his insides feeling like they’ve been scooped out. There’s a little room with benches off to the side, dark. He sits down, then regrets it. There’s a movie screen with Rogers on it in black and white, and a man wearing the same face that stares out of the mirror.

“What the hell is up with his hair?” Barnes thinks.

Then the man moves, and it is spooky how his own neck curves to ape that uplift of the chin, that shake of the head, how his upper lip practices that curl.

Then Rogers smiles at the man, and it’s like watching the sun rise.

OBJECTIVE, the mission imperative screams. FIND. PROTECT.

And the man is wearing his face. The voiceover actor is using that name.

The Asset staggers away from the film, washes up in front of a large glass column also bearing that face, that name. All over again. Nowhere to escape them.

It stares at the face, objectively the same skeletal structure underneath. Same eyebrows, same light-colored eyes. Objectively the same. But not familiar. The Asset views mirrors only for their tactical use. The Asset glares at the face underneath the haze of its reflection in the glass: the reflection is bulkier, bearded. Not quite the same. Not the same.

If not then same, then what. Only mission. It is only mission, and the mission is protect (PROTECT) but the target cannot be found, so the Asset is nothing. The arm clenches and whirrs and there is a 98.2% chance of eventual civilian casualties if the arm breaks the glass with that face in it.

“So handsome,” the woman to the right (too close, only 17 cm away) says to her companion.

“Such a tragedy to think of such a handsome man dead.”

Dead? it thinks.

FAILURE, the mission imperative shrieks, like metal grinding across concrete. DEATH OUTSIDE ACCEPTABLE PARAMETERS.

The Asset has failed its mission. The Asset has no mission. The Asset has nothing but death. The Asset feels the winter of its code name. The Asset fills with snow.

The mission imperative is the howl of cold wind over scoured-bare mountaintops. Not even 24 hours have passed since the Asset lost sight of the target, and already Steven Grant Rogers, Capt.,
US Army, is dead. The metal hand tears through the lining of the jacket, and the Asset no longer cares about civilian casualties, property destruction, or capture. The mission has failed (FAILED), the Asset has failed (FAILURE UNACCEPTABLE), and the world will burn for it until the soldier’s winter has melted into slag and oblivion.

Steve is dead, and the Asset will destroy everything for it.

“Poor Captain America,” the lady says.

The Asset will start with her. It will not shoot the messenger. That is too easy. It will rend the messenger. Flense the messenger. It will grind her into her component atoms.

“He must have been so sad,” she says, “to do without his friend.”

what

“Poor Bucky Barnes,” the lady says.

“Jeanine, you are a sucker for a pretty face,” her friend says.

What?

“Well, I saw the movie at an impressionable age,” Jeanine says. “You know, the classic one, with Paul Newman in that extremely shirtless state. That was the first time I ever got,” her voice drops low, “pants feelings.”

The friend laughs.

“Which haven’t stopped since.”

“Well, not if we stand here staring at the flower of American manhood all day. I mean, just think about Dum Dum Dugan’s mustache pressed up against your thigh!”

What is going on here.

The friend snorts.

“I guess our next stop is to stake out the hospital?”

“I’m sad to report that TMZ said he got discharged yesterday. Poor lonely Steve Rogers has disappeared into the world without us to comfort him.”

“Too bad for him.”

“Too bad for us.”

The women move away, leaving Barnes feeling like someone tossed him through the looking glass, shook him hard, then yanked him back again.

He pulls out the phone. Only one new text this time. “plz brah kp phn just snd pics 2 dle thx.” Whatever the hell that means.

TMZ proves to be some kind of gossip rag. Barnes verifies the report of Rogers’s hospital discharge into the hands of “Natasha Romanov and this unknown cutie. These two would sure make me recuperate, me-yow!” No updates. Nothing on actual non-asshole news sites that Rogers has been spotted.
FIND, the mission imperative blares. FIND. PROTECT.

Barnes takes off his ball cap and scrubs his flesh hand through his hair. The adrenaline letdown has left him wobbly around the knees. Not a failure, yet.

“Yeah,” he mutters. “I know. Find, protect. Give a guy a minute to catch his breath, will ya?”

He stares at the picture in the glass, squinty and duck-faced like a doofy kid. But a doofy kid who in the film made Steve smile like sunrise. He stares at his own reflection, ghostly, to the left of the picture.

“I need a shave,” he says.

He sniffs.

“And a fuckin’ bath.”
Back at the Starbucks near the hospital, the brown-eyed girl from his very first morning stands at the register.

“Face curling,” Barnes thinks, “smile.”

“Hey, friend,” she says, and he almost looks around, but she is staring right at him.

“Got you covered. I remember your order.”

He hands over money, and a word comes out of his mouth like a surprise.

“Thanks.”

He remembers to smile at her. Why ‘friend’? Friend: definition ‘person you like.’

FIND STEVE.

but she had merely sold him three coffees, which does not constitute any relationship beyond transaction.

Civvies. So weird. All soft and smiling, giving out personal information like it can’t be used as a weapon. All these kids have name tags pinned to their chests, for fuck’s sake. And Tyler keeps his home address and bank passcode in the damn phone.

Which asset’s gonna protect all these helpless bozos?

He sits at the table he likes, in the back, to look at Rogers’s notebooks. He discovers that eating apple + drinking mocha is a thing he has an opinion about, and that opinion is negative.

His opinion is positive about the drawings. They make his eyes feel good to look at them. The first notebook, the one from the bed, is full of DC: the Washington Monument, the Capitol Building. Tourists, especially little kids. Toward the middle, where the pages go blank, there are familiar faces. The redhead, legs tucked up under her, with a mug in one hand, staring out the window, looking stupid and troublesome.

He rips that picture out, crumples it, and tosses it into the trash can 1.8 m away. His aim is perfect. Of course.

The next picture shows the flying man leaning against a tree as if in medical distress. The sketch is rough, and written underneath in neat, square letters reads, “Sam Wilson, 58th Rescue Squadron.”

There are more sketches of the redhead, and of flying Sam.

There are drawings of him.

The brain stutters.


Next page: two facial portraits, both of himself. One of the current face, long hair, scruff. One of
the face from the Smithsonian, short hair, curled mouth.

Next page: blank. All remaining pages: blank.

Commence examination of second notebook. Contents: cityscapes, identified New York City, several scenes with unsubstantiated damage. Miscellaneous hand and face studies.

47% of all contents are of him.

All such contents show the version of the face from the Smithsonian exhibit. Smiling, sleeping. Standing in front of an open window, lit cigarette hanging from his lips. Sitting on a fire escape in the rain, scowling.

Accuracy assessment: unknown. Insufficient memory.

Insufficient memory.

Insufficient memory.

The body requires movement. Respiration and heart rate both increased by >10%. He rises. He brings the coffee with him. Sweet/fat/rich quiets the mind, obtains 1.3 seconds of stillness. He exits the shop. Movement required.

Six meters from the shop door, a short, sweaty guy in a terrible shirt steps in front of him and says, “Velveteen.”


The Asset goes still.
My darlings, your howls of outrage were sweet balm to my wicked little heart. I hope this makes up for it.

“Come with me,” the handler says, walking on the right side, hand on the flesh arm.

“What’s that cup? Get rid of it.”

The Asset’s fingers tighten on the cup. Critical materiel.

“Okay, okay. Velveteen.”

They walk 0.4 km, pace 1.3 km/h.

“Velveteen,” the handler says every few steps, “velveteen.”

Every repetition is quiet. It is muscles gone slack and silence in the mind. Command recognized. Comply.


Two locks. Really, actually, only two locks. Probability that the arm would disable them: 900%. Estimated duration of task: 0.5 seconds.

“Velveteen,” the man says.

Location recognized as type RAS: report and supply. Communications equipment currently offline. Handler’s perspiration increased 8%. No Chair.

No Chair.

“Give me that cup.”

The fingers tighten.

“Velveteen. Give it to me.”

Comply.

“Arms in front.”

Assessment: amateur. Comply.

Two zip ties are placed around the wrists. Assessment: idiot.

The handler dials a phone. Recognized inexpensive model, likely burner. He takes a photo of the
face.

“Hello? Hello, I have him. I have the ghost. You know.”

LISTEN

Comply.

The handler whispers.

“The soldier.”

The handler’s respiration increases.

“No, I won’t tell you where I am. I want two hundred grand, cash. You promise that, I’ll bring him to you.

“Yes, that’s right. You don’t need my name. Sending proof now.

“I told you. Two hundred grand. I used the passcode, he’s like a marionette. Where do you want me to meet you? No, later than that, I have to drive in from Pennsylvania. Okay, okay.”

The handler disconnects.

“That’ll throw them off my scent. Now we wait. Right, creepy eyes? Guess you’ll stand there staring all day, dumbass, as long as I keep saying velveteen.”

OVERRIDE

The mission imperative has a tone now. That tone is smug.

Barnes smiles – a slow spreading of his mouth until all his teeth are exposed, and the man’s mouth drops open. He’s twitchy and sweaty and wearing a shirt so cheap-looking Barnes would’ve passed it up in a dumpster.

“Velveteen,” the guy gasps.

OVERRIDE

Barnes breaks the zip ties with one slow wrist movement. The guy lurches for a weapon while Barnes retrieves his coffee and takes a sip.

“Aw, it’s cold,” he says.

The sweaty guy has a pistol basically pointed at him – or at least, shaking sort of in his general direction. Could be the safety is off. Probably not. The guy’s barely able to stand upright: he’s clearly an office drone with just enough knowledge to get in extremely big trouble.

“Hey pal,” he says to the guy in a soft voice. The voice slides naturally out of his throat, a purr that means violence. That means enjoying the pain of knuckles meeting jaw.

“Hey. Do I worry you?”

“Velveteen!”

OVERRIDE
“Doesn’t seem to be working anymore, friend.”

He steps forward, still smiling. The sweaty guy blinks reflexively, and the gun weaves a little dance hither and yon.

“I should worry you.”

He steps closer. Assessment: win.

“I can think of eight different ways to kill you without even spilling my coffee.”

Sweaty guy moans a little. When Barnes steps forward again, the guy actually closes his eyes.

Aw. Poor thing.

Barnes reaches out with the metal arm, slowly, still grinning, and twists the gun until sweaty guy can’t hold it anymore. One swing and the guy is drooling on the cheap linoleum floor.

Coffee tastes good even cold. It’s kittens and rainbows in his mouth. Might be time to branch out at Starbucks.

The phone really is a burner, no sign that it’s SHIELD or HYDRA issue. He crushes it anyhow but is glad to have at least a few minutes in the RAS.

First he duct-tapes the sweaty guy to a chair. Including his mouth. Then he has a nice long stretch. It’s embarrassing that he got made by such a drone, but that velveteen command was like taking a really good nap. He feels ready to get shit done.

LOCATE TARGET

Like that.

The RAS makes Barnes breathe quickly and his feet feel shifty. There’s a whole drawer full of cash (had sweaty guy even looked? assessment: terminally moronic). He stuffs some in his boots, in all his pockets, and in the ratty bag that holds Rogers’s notebooks and apples and a couple extra hats. Another drawer holds beautiful knives, and another gorgeous hand grenades.

Probably not much call for grenades on a protection detail, but everyone needs one more knife. He takes three.

The first cabinet he opens holds food. He stuffs a protein bar in his mouth while he rummages through the tech cabinet. The laptop will have spyware on it, but he can disable that. In the bag it goes with its charger. There’s surveillance equipment – bugs and directional mikes, and even a small set of tools that can be used for basic maintenance on the metal arm. And picking locks. And, you know, punching up through the nose to puncture the brain. In a tight spot, when you don’t mind a mess.

Sweaty guy wakes up just as Barnes opens the gun cabinet and groans for joy. Likelihood that sweaty guy’s moan is joyous: 2%.

There’s even a huge duffel, so he can take the sniper rifle. He almost likes sweaty guy for bringing him here.

LOCATE CAPTAIN ROGERS

“Working on it,” he says.
Resupply is an advantage. He fills the duffel with guns, ammo, surveillance gear, and the rest of the cash.

“Hey pal, you ever have a frappucino?” he asks while he packs. After 1.9 seconds, sweaty guy nods.

“Any good?”

Nod.

“Think I’m gonna try one.”

He wedges protein bars into the corners of the duffel and zips it closed. Only the metal arm can lift the damn thing, making him more unbalanced than ever. It’s gonna kill his back. But it’s time. No more sleepwalking, no more recognizable patterns. Time to go to work. Time to find Rogers

LOCATE

and keep him safe.

PROTECT, the mission imperative purrs.

Before he leaves, Barnes sends two texts to Dale on the banjo phone: one a picture of sweaty guy, tagged ‘HYDRA asshat,’ and the other the building’s address.

He leaves the phone on the table and the door unlocked.
Barnes has a name to go on: Sam Wilson. Within an hour he also has a destination, because no civilians in whatever year this is give a damn that their information is splayed out for anyone to find.

It would’ve taken less time than an hour, but first he had to recover from his brain exploding over the white mocha frappucino. He suddenly hates summer a lot less.

Who hates summer? Corn on the cob, sweating on the fire escape, dames in sundresses. Laying my cold beer against Steve’s back to make him squeal. He squeals like a puppy.

What the hell.

Wilson’s quarters are in a residential neighborhood 0.8 km from the National Mall. Densely populated, moderately affluent. A tough place for hiding spots, and in his current shabby attire, Barnes will attract attention. There is, however, a townhouse for sale diagonally across from Wilson’s back yard. Promising. Barnes stows the giant duffel and takes himself and his pockets full of cash shopping.

This action makes echoes in the brain – it’s clearly a standard mission skill: first, identify cheap, low-quality stores. Change clothes in the dressing room. Leave an extra $20 and the workers will throw out the old clothing. Then proceed to slightly more upscale stores, until the mission-appropriate level is reached. The clothing he buys is all soft and stretchy. The black jeans make his legs look like fence posts and cling to him in a way that’s … nice. They look fuckin’ cool with his boots.

Pharmacies carry grooming supplies. There are a lot of products for hair. He has a lot of hair. It’s confusing. Does he have frizz? Does he need body at the roots? Does he want to look as if he just got out of bed? What is a split end, and is it desirable or not? What is the tactical advantage of coating hair in silicone? Is “Hydralicious” shampoo intended as a contact code?

He leaves that one and chooses a red bottle with a relatively inoffensive scent. Razors he can understand, except the ones that have five freaking blades. Maybe Rogers needs those for his super manly extra-powered beard hair. The brain tosses up an echo –

“Look at you, big man! Shaving your two chin hairs?”

“We can’t all be as fortunate as you, Buck, and look like a gorilla.”

Barnes shakes his head and moves on to shaving cream. “Barbasol” is a word that sounds familiar, and the can is restful to his eye. Up at the front of the pharmacy, he finds a rack full of disposable cell phones for which he can pay for service with cash on an as-needed basis. He buys one similar to the banjo phone.

By dark he has six shopping bags’ worth of supplies. The metal arm breaks open the lockbox on the door handle. He retrieves the key and tosses the lockbox inside. He brings the “for sale” sign inside on his return from retrieving the duffel.

The directional mike from the RAS will have to do until he can break in to bug Wilson’s place. The sound is tinny and faint but audible. Wilson’s giving Rogers a dad-like speech about going to bed early after his time in the hospital. Assessment: approved. Rogers protests, but after 19 minutes the lights go out, even though it’s only 2226. The mike goes silent.
Barnes exhales. Even the mission imperative is quiet, the first task LOCATE having been completed. He closes the curtains all around the condo. He wonders where he learned the word ‘condo’ and whether it has anything to do with prophylactics or large birds.

There is minimal furniture in the place, all of it in soft colors and carefully placed. The electricity and water work. Assessment: excellent base of operations. He stares at the showerhead, and the brain has an echo. The body has a sense-memory of being rocked by a strong jet of cold water. Of being hosed down.

He runs a bath instead, sinks down into blistering-hot water with a sigh. His bones melt a little, and his muscles ache in a pleasant way, unlike wounds or shocks or being strapped down and cut into. He slides down in the tub until only his shoulders, head, and knees stick out. If the tub were 15 cm longer, he could get under water up to his nose.

The surface of the water is covered in grayish scum in 86 seconds. Missions mean dirt, the body knows. Dirt, discomfort, the occasional injury. He’s just spent most of a week reeking of dirty river water and sweat and not minded. But it seems worse to sit in the stuff, wet and naked. The nose wrinkles. Assessment: gross. Empty and refill. But the body hesitates. The scaffolding underneath programming, where the echoes live, resists waste, even the waste of hot water.

Barnes shakes himself. He drains the tub and refills it, sluicing grime off his skin and holding his head under the faucet before he resets the plug and lets heat surround him. The second time, the water turns only a little cloudy. Set time: 26 minutes. He dozes.

The mind makes a picture of a much smaller tub, but deeper, and a bath meaning company, conversation. A rough cloth that leaves skin red and buzzing. The water cold, because Steve got it when it was hot.

Barnes wakes but still feels sleepy, all his muscles gone slack, even in the left shoulder, which always aches. His knees are pale islands risen above heat-pink skin. He washes his hair with the shampoo that is supposed to smell like a “wolf thorn” (“smell like a MAN”), although to his knowledge wolves are mammals and have claws, not thorns. Knots of hair come out as he scrubs; between that and the going-over with the bar soap, the water is opaque grey again, but the body feels good.

Good is subjective. ‘Good’ means nothing, really. It can mean comfortable. It can mean optimal. It can mean not currently subjected to medical torture. But it applies, in this case.

The dusty green towels are soft, not like the rough buzzing that the body remembers. But the scent of shaving cream is another hit to the body, another set of head-pictures. The safety razor is easy and its angle familiar in the hand, but the face remembers the sensation of skin pulled taut, of the upper lip curling under. The hands remember reaching over the top of the head to press the skin before the ear and lift. A handle in the hand more like a knife. Instead he hacks through beard with the little plastic wand.

At the end, something like the face from the Smithsonian stares at him from the mirror, peering through hair drying into dumb-looking waves that make him glad that he had bought hair ties at the pharmacy. He backs away from the mirror. The face makes the brain stutter. But when not looking in the mirror, to have the face clean-shaven feels appropriate.

Time feels. Long. The body, though still relaxed and damp from the bath, feels a weight of years. The brain catalogs wide ankle-length trousers, straight legs with a full break, narrow hips with wide bells at the cuff (good god, they couldn’t have kept him in the tank for that?), and the tight fit of the ones just purchased.
What year is it? Memory is not like intel. It is insufficient. It cannot be trusted.

UPDATE

Oh boy, the mission imperative is back.

The mike is still silent. Local time is 0052, and the neighborhood is dark and quiet. Barnes creeps out the back terrace into Wilson’s back yard. No lights. The back door looks into the kitchen (empty), and Barnes can see an alarm panel blinking. Perimeter check only, then. The other downstairs windows show a living area and a small room with basic computer equipment.

Leaning horizontally against the back of the house he finds a ladder and two cans of paint under a tarp. Barnes grins. The left-hand window is Wilson’s room. The man sleeps diagonally across the biggest bed Barnes has ever seen, one leg kicked out from covers that look as if they’ve had a battle fought among them. The right-hand window shows Rogers in a room much smaller than Wilson’s. The shield leans up against the bed, positioned for optimal access upon waking. Assessment: approved. The body remembers the shield, thudding hard into the metal arm. Stopping the metal arm. It is an acceptable protective device for the target.

A small bag sits on the little desk by the door. Rogers’s shoes are lined up by the closet door, and his clothes are folded neatly on a chair.

Barnes exhales sharply through his nose. He makes the eyes track right and look at Rogers.

Steve is sleeping on his right side, turned away from the window, his gigantic arm curled around a pillow. The sheet has slipped down to his waist; the Barnes can see a pink scar in Steve’s shoulder from the fight on the vehicle.

NOT ACCEPTABLE

No. But the wound is clearly healing clean. The Barnes’s fingers twitch, metal and flesh, to open the window and pull the sheet up to cover Steve better. But the risk is too great. Alarms would wake the sleepers, summon police. Ambient air temperature, 18°C. No risk of illness owing to energy depletion trying to keep warm.

As much effort as it took to place the eyes on Rogers, it takes more to remove them. But to linger means to risk detection, even in the middle of the night. And, Barnes realizes, he’s tired too. He’ll sleep next to the microphone; if anything happens, he can be out the condo and at Wilson’s back door in under 30 seconds. Acceptable.

Back at the condo, he pulls the cushions off the sofa and piles them on the floor near the microphone. Set sleep: 4.5 hours. It’s the best sleep his wobbly brain can remember.
At 0652, the directional mike tosses up the sounds of a body shuffling, a machine engaging action (assessment: coffeemaker; secondary assessment: UGH). Three minutes later, a second set of footfalls and two male grunts. Barnes has been awake for 37 minutes, consumed an apple and two protein bars, and used the rifle’s scope to ensure no sign of (other) surveillance from this side of Wilson’s quarters. Further assessment to be made upon first opportunity.

Wilson and Rogers eat and mumble at one another about sleeping patterns. Rogers reports undisturbed sleep and no increased pain, no pain, Sam, really, “for god’s sake, I’m fine.”

ACQUIRE INFORMATION

Comply. The mission briefing contained the data that the target is known to be squirrely regarding questions about health status. Outside observation required.

Outside observation made possible at 0731, when Rogers enters Wilson’s back yard and proceeds to do a set of fucking calisthenics as if he were not just out of the hospital recovering from gunshot wounds, a beating, and a damn near drowning.

ASSIST

No damn kidding. Is the guy trying to kill himself.

“Man, are you trying to kill yourself?” Wilson says over the mike.

ASSESS: POSSIBLE MISSION ASSIST


Rogers continues performing a basic calisthenics routine per US Army training circa 1943 for 3 more minutes until Wilson essentially stands on him.

“Rogers, I put my ass on the line for you with SHIELD, HYDRA, and your creepy boyfriend – “

what

“What? Sam –“

“But I am not getting in trouble with Natasha on your account. That woman. Is. Terrifying.”

AVOID

Barnes scowls through the scope. Positive assessment of Wilson: decreased 26%. Rogers at least stops going pushups and follows Wilson into the house. Barnes scrolls through ringtones on his new phone (the one called “Bluegrass” is, his ears are sad to note, the banjo sound) while he listens to Rogers harangue flying Sam about how he has super healing, thank you, he is absolutely
fine, and he can’t stay cooped up forever because he has things to do.

“Like what?”

“Like find Bucky.”

Barnes drops the phone. Oh jeez.

“Going on what lead?”

Barnes can hear the scowl on Steve’s face. Comes through real loud on the mike, and the sound that pops out of his own mouth might be called, by someone who wished to be torn into 8 pieces, a ‘cackle.’

“So you were planning on what, running around DC with a gut wound, hoping to just run into the dude?”

“My gut is fine, Sam.”

“You got out of the hospital yester … man, no one needs abs like that. No one who eats like you should have abs like that. It’s not right. You look like an action figure.”

“I have an action figure.”

“You have an attitude, is what you have.”

Assessment of Wilson: increased 13%.

This discussion is at least enough to keep Rogers contained for the day. Barnes inspects and cleans his lovely new guns while he listens to bickering, lunch, a movie, bickering, and a card game in which flying Sam learns that Steven G. Rogers, universal symbol for truth, justice, and the capitalist dog way, is a cheating cheater at cards.

The mission briefing he doesn’t remember knows. You do not play chess, checkers, backgammon, or any variety of card game with Mr. Sure You Can Trust Me, Look I’m Wearing the Flag. Because you will lose. You will lose your cigarette ration, even though he doesn’t smoke. You will lose the precious half a Hershey bar that you have been saving since Nantes. And on one terrible summer night deep in the Austrian woods, you and the Howling Commandos will lose your clothes. In a campsite next to a river. Filled with mosquitoes.

Rogers may need protecting, but you damn sure can’t trust the guy with your pocket change.

Barnes shudders at the onslaught of data newly accessed from the mission briefing. He has pain in the spot between his eyes. The voices over the microphone mean mission going well, mean monitoring level appropriate. Tactically adequate but inadequate on some other level: not defined. Down in the place where the echoes arise. It would be better to be closer to the voices. To be in the same room.

APPROVED

Barnes shakes his head. Refuse. A wider perimeter of surveillance/protection is more appropriate. And there are more guns to clean. And Wilson’s house is locked up tight for the night.
Am I being rude by not responding to every comment? Is that a thing I’m supposed to do? I read and squeal over every precious one.

0615: awaken
refuse

0616: awaken
refuse

0617: awaken
refuse

GET UP

The Barnes opens its eyes minimum physical requirement for sight. Assessment: consciousness undesirable. Identified: decreased energy levels. Pain in the head. Showers are stupid. Protein bars are stupid. Sunlight is stupid. Rogers and Wilson are extra stupid, with their dumb plan to go to Wilson’s place of employment, outside, in all that light, with all that moving.

Ugh, they decide to walk, ugh. So terrible.

At least they walk slowly, which ordinarily makes for annoying surveillance, with all the stopping and loitering, but Barnes is not physically capable of moving quickly. The body is possibly breaking down.

Conjecture: requires freezing. No information has ever been provided about the body’s long-term requirements. Will the body melt. Melting is mission-incompatible. Ability to assess physical alterations: unknown. HYDRA: avoid

AVOID

civilian hospital: mission-incompatible.

CONTACT ROGERS

Refuse. Surveillance and contact incompatible.

Ugh the body is so sweaty ugh, and the walk goes on forever.

Alternate conjecture: sweat indicates possible elevated body temperature, plus fatigue and head pain = illness.

Illness means slowed reflexes, decreased energy levels. Increased reaction time. It means medicine that smells of licorice (assessment: gross), time spent bed-ridden, sitting over a pot of steaming
water with a towel draped over the head.

MISSION INCOMPATIBLE

After 2.1 interminable km under glaring sunlight, they turn a corner and Rogers waves his stupid log-like arms as if any reasonable human could be enthusiastic so early in the morning.

To the left is a low brick building, many-windowed, with a large front entrance bearing a sign declaring it a Veterans Administration Regional Benefit Office. Low bushes surround the building, too small to hide an adult. Inadequate cover for assassination attempts.

To the right is a familiar green and white sign not seen in over 48 hours.

MAINTAIN SURVEILLANCE

Wait a minute.

The mission briefing knows: hot liquids are healthful during illness.

FOLLOW

Hold on.

MONITOR ROGERS

Coffee first, dammit.

The first sip tastes like fireworks over Long Island Sound. The second sip tastes like angel choirs. The third sip tastes like when Steve smiled at the same-face-having-guy in the movie at the Smithsonian.

After half the precious, beautiful venti, energy levels have returned to baseline, the head has no more pain, and everything seems a lot less dumb. Assessment: mission briefing correct. Hot drinks are healthful. Further information needed re: frozen drinks.

RE-ESTABLISH CONTACT

Yeah, okay.

PRIORITY RE-ESTABLISH CONTACT

The imperative pounding in the back of his brain seems. Annoyed.

Barnes shrugs. He’ll have to pass Starbucks again on the way back. Comply, comply, comply.

Rogers and Wilson are just inside the front door, anyhow, shaking hands with a group of people who look ready to either vibrate out of their skins or open their smiling mouths even wider and consume Rogers. Threat assessment: low.

Perimeter check: clear.

On the far side of the building, Barnes sees Wilson and Rogers through a window, standing before a group of people, many of whom wear an expression that the face recognizes wearing. Several of them have prosthetic limbs, though not so advanced as his.

A woman speaks; Barnes watches her face change from the blank Asset expression to anger, to
tears. Rogers turns red when she cries, and his hands flex in a gesture the mission briefing knows as wanting to help, to touch. The briefing downloads information into the brain: the sensation of Rogers’s hand against the neck. It is a double memory, of one hand small and cold, the other large and hot. But both register: comfort, calm, safety.

CONFIRM

Many of the speakers in the room weep. One throws a chair – but away from Steve. There is a high level of emotion in the room, and Barnes is glad not to be there. Not to hear. Emotional outbursts should be avoided. The body knows: outburst = correction. Correction takes many forms, none of them pleasant.

He waits for the mission imperative to confirm with its “AVOID.”

It doesn’t.

He replays the memory of the man throwing the chair. Emotional outburst = correction.

Outburst = correction.

Query: emotion to be avoided.

ALLOWABLE WITHIN MISSION PARAMETERS

Query: outburst = correction.

NO PERSONNEL AUTHORIZED TO ADMINISTER CORRECTION

Huh.

MISSION HEAD DETERMINES APPROPRIATE RESPONSE LEVELS

Query: mission head = Steve?

SELF

What?

SELF

But what if –

SELF


He’d walk around the block a third time, but that feels a little dumb. He re-enters Starbucks and buys another coffee and a grilled cheese sandwich. He sits at a table tucked away up in the front corner by the restroom, by the window overlooking the street and the Veterans Administration building.

This mission has broad parameters. The directive seems straightforward: protect. But there’s no report. No backup. No tactical plan. No arm repair.
No correction for using the tactical flexibility given. No cryo. No Chair. No snotty old man bossing him around. Did snotty old men boss him around? No hoses. No bite guards. No Chair.

No ending.

The joints feel unsteady, and Barnes is glad to be sitting. The rest of a life span is a long time to silently surveil.

CONTACT

Refuse.

CONTACT

Repeat: refuse.

You made me the mission head, pal. I make the decisions. And I decide to eat my damn lunch.

The grilled cheese is amazing. They found a way to make bread crunchy. Crunchy bread: optimal. And they made the cheese gooey. Assessment: superior nutriment. He thinks of the pile of protein bars in the duffel back at the condo, and the face curls in a new way that is not a smile. He thinks, frown.

He has just decided to order another when Wilson and Rogers walk in. Barnes feels all the parts of his face go wide before he remembers that he is a damn secret assassin, thank you, and folds quietly in on himself, making himself smaller, willing himself bland and innocuous.

They don’t stay, but it’s the closest proximity Barnes has been since the hospital. Rogers looks pale. There is a tightness around his eyes that the mission briefing does not recognize. Insufficient information for assessment. But his appearance is less than optimal. Wilson and Rogers are speaking, and Rogers’s smile does not reach his eyes. The guy is not happy.

“I have got to plant some bugs.”

Mission-critical information is missing.

Once, Rogers looks across the shop. Barnes holds his crust up in front of his face like he’s having a fucking beautiful moment with it - which, actually, he sort of just was – and trusts in the power of the hair tie, the hat, and the many-pocketed jacket to deflect and obscure.

They work. Steve’s eyes slide over him without recognition, and the reaction causing Barnes’s pulse rate to increase is definitely relief and definitely not disappointment.

Total time elapsed at Wilson’s place of work that day: 9 hours 15 minutes. Rogers is subdued on the walk back. There is no waving of tree-trunk arms. Wilson claps him on the shoulder twice.

MISSION ASSIST

Maybe. Additional information required.

The conversation through the microphone that night is similarly quiet. Plans are made to repeat the routine the following day.

Barnes curls the face – grins. Tomorrow will be busy.
Infiltrate

Chapter Notes

Here’s a nice long one. The words got a little out of hand.

The next three days are busy: awake at the appointed time, perimeter check, shadow Rogers and Wilson to the soldiers’ center, get coffee, work, return to the center in time for more coffee and to escort Steve and flying Sam home. There are three other coffee options close to Wilson’s habitual route: Barnes does not repeat his mistake at the hospital. Vary routes. Avoid routine. Eat a lot of grilled cheeses.

On day one, he breaks into Wilson’s apartment, pockets stuffed with surveillance equipment. Careful watching that morning, along with the ears’ recording from the directional mike have given him three options for the alarm passcode. The second one works.

Wilson needs a better lock on his back door. It’s ridiculously easy to pick.

The condo is tidy and dust free – anything otherwise would’ve been a cause for suspicion. Barnes has planned where to set his bugs: one in the kitchen, one in the living room. One in the room where Rogers sleeps. These are sturdy little machines, built for long-term use. The fingers know how to put in the numbers that make the phone listen to the bugs.

The phone makes a sound like a hunting horn when it gets a text. It’s hilarious. Too bad no one has the number.

Best of all are the sticky bugs: with a listening radius of less than half a meter, but tough and tiny. Pernicious. They’ll cling to anything, like that redhead. Barnes places one on the strap of the shield, of course.

He lifts the shield in a gesture that the body seems to know. It’s light, but the body has information that it is exceedingly strong: that bullets deflected by it barely jar the holding arm. That if thrown with sufficient force, to catch it will strain even the metal arm’s strength. Huh. He would download that information if he could.

Barnes has a good supply of regular bugs but only 14 of the stickies, with no immediate prospects of obtaining more. Barnes scans the room. Outside the window, the leaves on several deciduous trees are changing color. Note: the date is September 19. Assessment: the weather will soon change, and Rogers will require warm clothing. Warm clothing is necessary to prevent illness in cold weather. The amount of clothing in the closet is much smaller than at Rogers’s apartment – not a sea but still a terrible pond of navy blue and bad plaid.

“Someone needs to tell this guy about the color black.”

CONTACT

To prevent a human fashion disaster? Maybe.

There are two jackets hanging: one navy blue, of course. Sticky bug under the back label of that one. The other is a brown leather jacket that looks familiar to the eyes. Similar, maybe to the ones
in the photos at the Smithsonian. The mind can see Rogers in it, zipped against the wind. He places a sticky bug under the back collar.

Not ideal, but a start.

A loud buzz erupts. Assess: unknown, possible attack. Direction unknown, distance estimated less than 2 m. Possible IED. Possible alarm. Possible cicada. Possible misfired taser. Possible remote-controlled weapon mechanism. Possible malfunctioning household appliance.

In the 1.5 s duration of the buzz and threat assessment, Barnes jumps 0.5 vertically out of his skin and draws two knives. There is a pause of 2 s, then the buzz resumes: a phone left on the table by the bed.

Of course Rogers left his phone behind. Why would he need it? Certainly none of his former SHIELD colleagues would need to contact him with vital information about the international criminal organization that he just pissed off last week. It’s not as if international criminal organizations are vengeful.

Barnes rolls his eyes. This guy. But he pairs the phone. The fingers guess the passcode (0310) on the first try. The call was from a blocked number.

He checks the phone’s photos: some of Wilson, more of the redhead. People in funny suits and a … Soviet robot? The photos are not nearly as interesting as the drawings in the two sketchbooks he took.

He looks around and finds a new sketchbook tucked under the pillow on the bed. There are only a few drawings in it, most of them rough. There’s one of the view out Wilson’s back lawn, including the closed curtains of his own base of operations.

CONTACT

Ignore.

There is a whole page of the face, with many crossings-out, as if the drawing were difficult. The face wears a wide-open expression: large eyes, open mouth. Hair blowing wildly. It makes the lungs struggle to work, makes the jaw ache. Barnes does not like the drawing. The face looks distressed. The expression is one of pain. The expression is. The expression.

It is the moment when the mission objective reset. This is an actual memory in the mind: vertigo, pain, noise. Steve’s face. The strangeness of sensation in the brain that the Asset had thought was frustration at a mission going pear-shaped, but Barnes thinks: echoes. The brain made echoes in reaction to Steve that caused the mission objective to change. The echo of the guy in the museum reset the objective.

OVERRIDE

Yes, override.

SELF

Barnes exhales and scrubs his hand through his hair. If self = echoes, and echoes caused reset, then self caused reset. If echoes = memory, then conclusion: self = Barnes. Not just pick a name that matches the face Barnes, or pick a non-asshat name Barnes, but Barnes Barnes. The human James Buchanan Barnes. Rogers’s Bucky.
MISSION HEAD

“So besides my position and my fucking hypothetical identity, got any other important information you’d like to share?”

NO

This mission. So disorganized. He’d like to punch a hole in the wall, but sadly, mysterious home damage is incompatible with undetected surveillance. Instead he does the worst thing he can think he’d possibly get away with.

He resets Steve’s ringtone. To the banjo.

On his way out, he sets some of the larger bugs around the perimeter and one in Wilson’s car. It’s a good day’s work. Barnes walks back to the center in time to clear the surroundings and buy food before he shadows Wilson and Rogers on their way home.

His reward is an evening of conversation with superior sound quality, none of which is the least bit interesting but all of which is as clear as if he were in the room. Rogers’s voice, talking about dinner and baseball, quiets the mind. Barnes checks his weapons in a sleepy fugue. His nightly perimeter check is more of a perimeter amble.

On day two, after he drops the men off at Wilson’s work, Barnes retrieves the Asset’s tactical gear from its hiding place. The park is filled with criss-crossings of police tape while work crews are pulling the wreckage of the vehicles out of Potomac. Machinery beep in the distance, and he can see three cranes on the far bank. One crane has a large chunk of vehicle hanging from it.

The gear is a mess, and it smells worse than Red Hook in July. Query: what is Red Hook in July? Other than a thing that stinks of garbage and dead fish. And piss. The gear doesn’t smell of piss, at least. By the time he is due to fetch Wilson and Rogers, the gear smells like soap and his hands smell like gun oil. The Asset’s guns have not been harmed by their days living in a tree, plus three pretty little grenades that he is very glad to see. Holy cow, and a pile of knives. A nice big pile of knives.

While Wilson is cooking food, he says,

“You have to stop reading those HYDRA files, man, they just make you angry.”

HYDRA files?

“I just keeping thinking I’ll find something.”

“Find dinner first.”

The fingers know how to get into the laptop, how to disable its spyware. They know that the little curled-up fox at the bottom of the screen brings up enough knowledge to bury a guy in facts. Typing HYDRA into the search box brings up more than 4 million hits. Files dumped by the redhead, who might be slightly less than terrible after all. The amount of information is staggering. Barnes reads late into the night.

HYDRA = super-assholes. Not just personally assholes re: Steve –

AND SELF

– but to pretty much the planet, destabilizing governments, dumping poison in rivers. All to sell
weapons and cow civvies into accepting that the only privacy they have a right to is between their ears.

The body knows: from him they took even that away. He has left 2 weeks, echoes, and whatever the mission briefing deigns to download at the worst possible time, thanks a lot. Hell, without a mission, he’d be wandering the streets, drooling.

The body resists sleep that night: each file compels that the next one be read. But there are links that the fingers hesitate to click on. Place names that sound like echoes. File names that are nearly familiar. And lots of files tagged with Rogers’s name.

This last bunch wakens the mission imperative. Rogers’s workplace was filled with HYDRA. If the files can be believed, half the world’s governments are full of them. And they for damn sure will not let their super soldier go. Thank god he got a little decent surveillance set up. He widens his nightly walk, but it was stupid to feel even a little comfortable. They will definitely come for Steve.

He sleeps a little, late in the night, and is sandy-eyed enough on the escort to Wilson’s workplace that every step between him and Starbucks is 10 steps too long. On the upside, Rogers wears the navy jacket, which is completely hideous but now provides excellent sound quality straight into Barnes’s earbuds.

“I gotta get back to running, Sam, I’m going nuts.”

“Doc has to clear you first.”

Sam you’re my favorite.

SECOND FAVORITE

Rogers growls – a sound that Barnes knows in his bones, though the briefing doesn’t give him anything more detailed.

“Hey wait. Who’s that woman at the center? Eliza? You called her ‘doc.’”

“I could tell you she’s a PhD.”

“Only if you feel comfortable lying to Captain America.”

“You always gotta play the Cap card.”

“I’m a homeless fugitive. I don’t have any other cards to play.”

“Sure you don’t, Baby Blues.”

“Well yeah, but those aren’t going to work on you.”

“Shows what you know.”

“Why Sam Wilson I never!”

Barnes briefly considers dismantling Sam. Rogers shoves Wilson, who shoves back, and Barnes considers dismantling the both of them. They don’t even look both ways crossing the street.

“But hey, Eliza is a doctor, right?”
Wilson laughs.

“Nonverbal cues are not your forte, my friend.”

“Nope, never were. Consequence of spending most of my life so far half-blind and a little hard of hearing.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

Huh. Confirm.

“You must feel like a miracle every morning.”

Rogers’s head swivels toward Wilson, who is staring up at the deep-blue sky. The set of Rogers’s shoulders is familiar to the mission briefing. It says: lie. Confirm: Rogers is still unhappy. Mission-incompatible.

“You bet.”

“Doc Eliza will check you out. And then you can get back to making me look like the kid no one wants on their team.”

No, not running. Rogers don’t do this to me.

“Aw, don’t worry, Sam. I used to be that kid, and now look at me.”

“Nice of you to give me some hope.”

“I’m a really nice guy.”

And finally they go inside the damn center so Rogers can get some quack to pronounce him fit for (a) running (b) outside (c) in the open (d) a week after a gut shot. Ugh. He’s going to have to buy running shoes. The boots will only slow him down.

But first he has reading to do.

The reading is … not great. The reading is frankly horrible. Barnes starts in on the links tagged with Rogers’s name, and it’s a parade of images and text that make the mission imperative shriek like an insane cat. The man has literally no sense of self-preservation. Mission difficulty: increased 9000%.

There are videos. There are videos of Rogers frozen in a block of ice, with lab coats milling around him, that make the body unable to sit down. The body hovers over the edge of the chair, and if one of those goddamn assfaces even pretended to touch him while he was out, that laptop was getting pounded into shrapnel, no matter that the video was timestamped two years previously.

The lab coats’ names are listed in the video tags. Lucky for them, they treated Rogers with deference and care. And it is actually hilarious to watch a bunch of wheezy dopes strip and re-dress a giant, floppy naked guy.

There are extensive videos of Rogers in New York City with the funny-suited people from his phone, fighting what-the-hell-are-those. Jumping into the path of laser beams. Throwing the shield so fast it would be a blur to non-enhanced eyes and with a force sufficient to lay the ugly bastards down.
Barnes does not recognize that fighting style from the vehicle. There, Rogers had been hesitant, defensive. Had said, ‘don’t make me do this.’ That is a memory. That is a thing the mind can replay: ‘don’t make me do this.’ The mind had thought, ‘Nice fucking try, pal.’ Even though the body hesitated, all but the metal arm recoiling from the task of stripping all the life out of those eyes. That thing underneath the programming that the mission imperative calls ‘self,’

SELF

that is maybe-actually Barnes.

SELF

But if Rogers had fought on the vehicle like he fought in New York. If the body had been hesitant and Rogers had not been, the Asset would not have succeeded. That Rogers - focused, brutal - is the only thing Barnes has seen that could match the Asset and the arm.

Sparring with him would be so fun.

CONTACT

Ignore.

Another actual memory: the mission briefing in the bank, objective: kill Steven Grant Rogers. It had been garbage. After 15 seconds watching Rogers on the vehicle, the Asset had known it needed twice as much backup, air support, maybe a freaking tank.

They had sent him up against all that strength, crazy geometry shield bullshit, flying Sam, and that redhead, alone. Might as well have sent him in to be slaughtered.

He scowls while tiny screen Steve bashes in the face of a Thing, then whirls around to cover the redhead.

Maybe actually slaughter. Maybe the Asset wasn’t supposed to survive.

Too bad so sad, jerks.

The videos make him angry. That is an emotion, identifiable. Angry. One of the couch cushions is a pile of shreds and fluff, thanks to the arm. Four million hits. So many files. Such far reach. They will come for Rogers, no doubt. And Rogers rarely uses the shield to, you know, shield himself. He never, ever watches his own left flank.

By the time Barnes leaves the computer to walk to the center and shadow his charges home, every tree looks like a hiding place and every rooftop fit for a sniper. The sky has clouded over during the afternoon, and the air feels heavy. Barnes dislikes this air, the sense that it has too much weight, too much charge in it. A weapon waiting to be fired. A block from Wilson’s house, rain starts to fall, and thunder rolls in the distance.

Over the course of the evening, the weather worsens. The storm is loud and furious. It makes the chest feel tight in a way that is like fighting. It is interesting to count the time between lightning flash and thunder and estimate the distance, though the mind doesn’t remember where it learned that trick. The times get shorter and shorter, until bolts are striking close by. Rain sheets down hard enough to blur sight lines.

Rogers had better damn well stay indoors.
“Wow, this is really something,” Rogers says in his ear.

The movement Barnes makes does not count as a jump. A jerk, maybe. A subtle, extremely cool-looking flinch. Pay attention, no more counting.

“I hope the power doesn’t go out,” Wilson says.

The power goes out.


Rogers laughs at him.

“Tell me you have candles, soldier.”

Barnes can hear Wilson’s snort.

“I do not have candles. This is the modern age. I have LED lanterns.”

They make little dots of light in Wilson’s kitchen, but not enough to permit observation. Barnes is blind. The storm increases in intensity abruptly: lightning flickers like a strobe, and the sound of thunder is a persistent, undulating rumble punctuated by the crack of nearby strikes. All the neighbors are hiding in their own darkness. The noise would mask gunfire.

Barnes thinks, ‘if I were going to make a move, it would be now.’

There’s no point in even trying to shield the body from the rain. Even a hat would be soaked through in under a minute. Ugh. The rain is freezing. The wind is freezing. The metal arm clenches - the body dislikes this cold, this wet, the sting of drops too much like the hose. He would like to hit something. Repeatedly. And break it. Should’ve worn a damn hat anyway, to keep some of the water off his fucking face. It makes the body think it can’t breathe. Which he clearly can, because he can hear himself growling.

Assessment: stay out of the goddamn rain.

He creeps up right against the house. Wilson and Rogers are now placing the bluish lights around the living room. Just a meter away.

CONTACT

Ign-

A broad bolt of lightning hits nearby, lighting up the surroundings for nearly a full second. Rogers whips around toward the window and looks Barnes right in the face.

Shit shit shit.

“Oh my god,” he hears through his earbuds.

In the post-bolt darkness, Barnes ducks down, practically on the ground to the side of the back door, out of sight. The heart pounds so hard it might break out of the chest.

Shit shit shit. He scuttles backward across the ground, keeping low, watching while thinking, ‘get away, get away, get away.’

“Steve, what is it?” Wilson asks.
“Just outside the window. I thought it was.”

As Barnes goes up and over the back wall, he looks back to see Rogers lunge for the door. As he drops to the other side, Rogers’s shout is doubled, both earpiece and air,

“Bucky!”

Shit shit shit.

“Bucky!”

CONTACT

Refuse!

“Bucky!”

CONTACT

Shut up, for fuck’s sake.

“How did he look, Steve?” Wilson’s voice is flat and calm.

What.

“What?”

“How did he look. Outside the window.”

“Why does that matter? I need to go, Sam, he’s out there.”

“Outside my window in DC. In the rain.”

“Sam.”

“Come on, man. You think I don’t know? You think I don’t still see Riley out of the corner of my eye? Tell me how he looked, Cap.”

Barnes is back indoors, lights off, dripping wet and breathing hard. If he could nail the earbud into his ear right now, he would.

“He looked. He looked good, Sam.”

Oh, hey now.

“Good how?”

“He looked like himself.”

“Not like we saw him, all dead-eyed and serial killer--looking?”

“No.”

“Hair in his face, nineteen guns hanging off him?”

Just three, actually. And five knives. And the ice pick from the condo.
“No, he looked like -”

“Like you remember him.”

He can hear Steve’s sigh even over the sound of the rain.

“Yeah.”

Assessment: incorrect. The hair is markedly different, even pulled back. The face is slightly older and more angular. The body is larger. Potential confounders: low light, surprise.

“So you’re saying I made it up.”

“I’m saying you see what you want to see. Maybe you saw your own reflection -”

ACCURATE

What?

“- in the glass. Maybe it was just your eyes playing tricks with the lightning. It’s all completely normal.”

Normal and stupid. Rogers would never fall for such crap.

“That sounds ridiculous, Sam.”

Told you.

“More ridiculous than a brainwashed cyborg assassin -”

TECHNICALLY ACCURATE

Hey!

“- who tried to kill you last week showing up in my back yard for two seconds and then leaving again?”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I hope I’m right.”

“But I could’ve sworn -”

“I know, man. You still think he’s the kind you save.”

“I will always think that, Sam.”

“No matter what you find?”

“No matter what.”

Find what where now?

“Well I hope you won’t go looking until you have some kind of lead.”

“I’ll see what Natasha digs up.”
What? No, Steve, not that girl.

“So I don’t need to worry about you disappearing on me?”

“Promise.”

“Promise what, exactly?”

“That when I go looking I’ll tell you first.”

No. There is no going looking, Rogers. Ugh this mission. It’s like dancing, and the briefing knows that Steve is a terrible dancer.

CONTACT

Uuuuuuuuuugh.
Even when I'm on vacation, Grumpy Bucky won't leave me alone. Hooray!

The body resists sleep. The body aches from cold and adrenaline, but it resists sleep. The mind replays the image of Rogers's face on the other side of the glass, mouth and eyes wide.

And don't even try your damn 'contact,' asshole.

CONTACT
I hate you.

Set sleep: 4.5 hours.
Set sleep: 4 hours.
Set sleep: 3.5 hours.
Set sleep: 3 hours.

The body's agitation continues after waking. Barnes steps outside for a morning check just after dawn. After the storm, the air is 15 degrees cooler than the previous day. Pink-lit clouds hang in the sky. Aesthetic assessment: pretty. Coolness makes the body want to stretch, broaden. The lungs are greedy for this air. The body relaxes. Perimeter clear.

"Rough night?" flying Sam asks at 0648.

Barnes has a line of sight through the side kitchen window. Wilson's neighbors are neglectful gardeners: their hedge is over-tall and scraggly. Excellent for close surveillance. This is a good discovery. Rogers's hair sticks up in all directions, and there are dark circles under his eyes. He looks like crap.

ASSIST
Assessing.

"Yeah. I just can't stop thinking about what I - thought - I saw."

Wilson grabs Rogers's shoulder in a gesture recognized as comfort. The flesh hand clenches in a copy of the gesture.

"I know. It shakes you down to your bones."

"It's a lot of what-ifs, Sam."

"Those things'll kill you."

AVOID
Comply.

"I know, but -"

"But nothing. They will literally kill you."

MISSION INCOMPATIBLE

Comply.

"So you have to let them go, man. They're poison. You can only deal with the things in front of you."

"I should've gone after him, Sam."

And there's the mission briefing, shoving a bunch of fragmented intel into his brain, none of which makes any sense: a fall from a great height, a train, mountainous terrain, a set of identifiable emotions: fear, regret. Assessment: minimal intel, rudimentary tech, inhospitable conditions. Probability of mission success, <20%.

Steve you should have looked for me no matter what.


"How were you supposed to know, man?"

AFFIRM

Affirm.

"I wasn't. My brain knows that. My heart never will."

"I know, man."

"I know you do."

"Skipping the center today?"

"Yeah. Gotta see if I can get to my apartment without being shot up by anyone -"

AVOID

Confirm.

"- and get my dress blues for Nick's funeral."

"That's gonna be weird."

"No kidding."

"Well, at least you naturally look like your dog just got run over."

"Shut up, Sam."

"Roger that."
"They teach you that at the VA? Psychological healing through obnoxiousness?"

"I got a special certificate in pain in the ass."

"I bet you did."

Wilson leaves, and Rogers stares out the back window for 4.8 minutes before going upstairs. He emerges from the front door 11.6 minutes later.

Barnes emerges from the hedge.

He retreats back into the hedge and disentangles his hair. Set reminder: pack hair ties in pockets. Ow.

Rogers walks with his hands shoved into the horrible navy jacket, horrible navy hat on his giant head. Head down, slow pace.

Information needed: why is Rogers so unhappy? Possibility: concern about likely HYDRA attacks. Possible loss of colleagues during the fight. Possible concern for money, given lack of employment. Lack of employment means worry: about rent, about the grocery bill, how to pay for medicine during illness, heating oil in cold weather.

Barnes calculates his rate of spending vs. the money he has in the giant duffel. Current expenses consist of coffee and grilled cheese. Dammit, and running clothes. Set task: break into Wilson's apartment and leave cash for Rogers. Lessen worry.

APPROVED

Comply.

The body steps lighter, with a good, simple task forthcoming. Rogers, however, continues slumping down the street, looking at the ground. A low tree branch slopes across the sidewalk, at head height, half a block away.

Look up, Rogers.

Watch where you're going.

C'mon, pal, look up.

ASSIST

Come on, man, you're going to give yourself a concussion.

Rogers keeps staring at the ground, as if the branch were not waiting to rearrange his brain into a new, stupider configuration.

Rogers, for shit's sake.

Barnes has one of the Asset's grenades tucked in a pocket. But that would attract attention, as would a gunshot.

ASSIST

I'm trying!
One residence has small, oblong stones surrounding their mailbox.

Timing critical.

Injury imminent.

Barnes pitches one of the stones at the offending tree. The stone hits the branch with a solid *pock*, and Rogers raises his head, shuffles, then ducks under the branch.

Injury avoided.

Mission sub-objective: achieved.

At the apartment building, Rogers demonstrates two behaviors that Barnes had observed in the online videos: 1. total lack of self-preservation, and 2. never checking his left flank. He enters the building without checking the perimeter.

*He enters the building without checking the perimeter.*

Mission, I swear to Lenin, you and I are the only things going for this guy.

CONFIRM

Because of course HYDRA has someone watching the building. Barnes sees the guy on the first quadrant of the sweep: up on the roof of the next building over, obvious as daylight.

Halfway up that building's fire escape, the banjo sound crashes into his ears at the same time the phone buzzes in his pocket.

"What the hell?" Rogers yells into his ear.

Barnes spends 0.9 seconds in free fall before the metal arm catches a railing. God *damn*, but he had forgotten how annoying that banjo is.

By the sixth appalling banjo riff, Barnes is climbing again and Rogers has realized that his phone is ringing.

Tactical error. Should've anticipated that 1. a bugged target carrying 2. a paired phone would mean having to hear that damn sound again. Maybe Steve will change the ringtone.

Maybe a white mocha will fall from the sky. Right ... now. Damn.

Rogers answers the call.

"Who is this?"

"Who do you want me to be?"

Aw man, that Romanoff girl. What's she calling him for?

"I wouldn't mind if you were a person who was here," Steve says, "I have a couple things I want to talk to you about."

The HYDRA sniper is a little too focused on his target. Barnes is (extremely) good, but he's not silent. Yet the sniper doesn't move when Barnes climbs onto the roof.
"You'll be at the funeral, right?" Romanoff drawls into his ear.

"Yeah, but I hardly think -"

The sniper tenses. It's a familiar motion. The body knows the movement as a precursor to firing.

PROTECT

You got it, pal.

He scrapes his foot along the roof's surface, and the sniper turns at the sound.

"No, I know," Romanoff says, "Too many people, too much potential for awkward questions."

Barnes raises the metal arm and wiggles the fingers. The sniper's mouth goes wide. The rifle barrel is pointed off to the side. Assessment: this guy knows his business. He won't risk spooking Rogers and missing his chance.

"Hey friend, I bet there's a bounty on my head," Barnes says.

He draws a knife (one of four) very slowly.

"Am I worth more dead or alive?"

"Dead's easier," the guy says. "Not like they can't bring you back again, right?"

Asshole.

"But maybe you'll want a quiet moment at the grave of your friend later," Romanoff says.

The sniper moves. Pretty fast, for a standard-model human.

"Say, the next day, around three?"

It feels good to fight. The body knows this dance. And the mission exults in eliminating this threat.


The dumb ass sniper tries to stab the metal arm.

"Shit," he says.

"Yeah," Barnes says.

"I found something," Romanoff says, and disconnects the line.

The metal arm connects with the sniper's temple, and the guy drops like a sack of skulls.

Calculation: kill? Advantage: one less jerkwad in the world. Disadvantage: any possible intel lost. Not that Barnes has the time to both interrogate and protect Captain Deathwish. But Rogers might like to do the honors.

GOOD JOB

Hey, thanks.
"Where the hell are my sketchbooks?" Rogers says to his empty apartment and his super-excellent eavesdropping protector.

It's a bitch and a half getting back down to street level, but Barnes makes it in time and is hiding in the stairwell of the garden apartment across the street when Rogers emerges, a garment bag in hand.

"What the -"

Rogers frowns at the front stoop, then looks up the block, down the block. Barnes has to cover his grin with the flesh hand to stop from laughing at Steve's hilarious confusion. Steve prods the guy with his foot. He peers up the street and down again. It is so great. He pulls out his phone.

"9-1-1 operator, what is your emergency?"

"Ma'am, this is Steve Rogers. Yes ma'am, that one. I appear to have an unconscious HYDRA operative on my front stoop. Yes ma'am. Tied up with his own jacket. There is a gun, ma'am, but its barrel is currently at a 90-degree angle. I guess I need ... the FBI? No ma'am, I have no earthly idea."

So great.
Active Duty

Chapter Notes

Get to Know Your Author:

1. Owlet drinks tea, not coffee.
2. Owlet actually rather likes the sound of the banjo, the World's Happiest Instrument™.
3. Grilled cheese is in fact a perfect food.

The funeral the next day, for one Col. Nicholas J. Fury, is a nightmare.

1. Rogers wears none of the bugged clothing, leaving Barnes dependent on visuals.
2. Even though Wilson and Rogers mention “the church” seven times while dressing, they never actually say which one.
3. Being 2 days down on coffee means that Barnes chases Wilson’s car 3.8 km, loses it, and stands panting on a street corner for 2 full minutes before he grows half a brain cell and looks up the service on the phone. He gets two venti frappucinos at the next Starbucks he passes, just to kickstart his mental processes.
4. National Cathedral is infested with civilian security, any or all of whom could be (a) incompetent, (b) HYDRA, or (c) both (the most likely option).

At least one of them is HYDRA: a wiry guy in the choir loft, wearing a choir robe and carrying a case full of creepy-looking gadgets and syringes. They fight silently, the guy trying to inject Barnes with his evildoer drugs, Barnes trying to crush a vital organ or three. The diciest moment is when the guy whispers “velveteen” at him and Barnes has to choke back a very masculine laugh (not a giggle). The mission imperative doesn’t even bother with an override. Barnes dumps the guy out the side door as the service breaks up.

The cemetery is worse: there is hugging. So much hugging. Everyone wants to put their hands all over Rogers, and after 10 minutes Barnes’s eyelids are twitching so hard he can feel the muscles. In his eyelids. Why do they keep hugging him. It’s the first time Barnes is glad to see the redhead – she at least is (probably) not going to pull out a knife and stab Rogers. She might even intervene if someone else does so. Barnes snaps pictures of all the octopus-armed hugging assholes in case they need dismembering later.

Then he finds the sharpshooter in a tree and has to take that guy out. And the woman with a bunker’s worth of surveillance hanging out behind one big family tomb. She squeaks a passcode at him - спи, малютка – and the world briefly goes black as he feels his body slump down.

OVERRIDE

Thanks, pal.

She gets trussed up like a chicken dinner, but he keeps as much of her equipment as he can fit in one hand case. Her directional mike is much better than the one in his condo. It’s a relief to point the thing at Rogers and finally hear a little of what’s going on.
It’s mostly boring civilian funeral stuff, but Rogers is acting squirrelly. He responds to ‘sorry for your loss’ with ‘uh’ and keeps trying to smooth his hair to one side, except that it has already been smashed sideways and flat by his cover. This is different from unhappy. Assessment: this is Rogers being dishonest.

What trouble are you gonna get me into now?

The sad excuses for security find Barnes’s recent supplier of extra surveillance equipment and lose their tiny minds. They squeak into their cute wrist pieces and grab their ears while they swarm like bees. They find the unconscious sniper (not too hard, given that Barnes laid him out in the middle of a sunny spot) and practically vibrate themselves into the next dimension.

Rogers and his little crowd roll their eyes at the milling suits and go through another round of hugging. It is too much touching. Does Rogers not know about contact poisons. Barnes grits his teeth at the thought of how many surveillance devices Rogers might now currently be wearing. The dress uniform might need to be burned.

Finally they drive back to Wilson’s house (ugh, so much walking, and the bus is even worse). But the overheard conversation is the highlight of the day.

“Hey Sam, did you change my ringtone?”

“Did I what?”

“On my phone. Did you change my ringtone?”

“No, man, why would I do that?”

“Huh. I don’t know how it got changed. It’s a banjo now."

Barnes snickers.

“I kind of like it.”

What.

“It’s cheerful.”

On second thought, maybe that’s more of a lowlight.

This deviation from routine reveals about four hundred flaws in the current surveillance protocols. He needs contingencies, backup plans. A vehicle. To lock Rogers in a room.

CONTACT

A muzzle for the mission imperative.

He has earned his night’s sleep. Yeesh.

Morning is better. Barnes loves the hair-eating hedge. It is a tangible emotion, complete with physical responses consisting of relaxation and the urge to smile. The hedge is great (once the hair is bound tightly back). The hedge makes for terrific surveillance. And there’s a little fork between two branches that provides a stable fit for a coffee cup.
Barnes is standing in the wonderful hedge, chewing on the totally amazing future invention that is grilled cheese *with egg and ham on it* (seriously: why do these people still have wars) and watching Rogers and Wilson crunch their way through bowls of sad, cold, not-breakfast-grilled-cheese like a couple of chumps.

This moment of glory is interrupted by the banjo and his own phone buzzing in his pocket. The ruination of the glorious moment is tempered by the way Wilson’s face cracks wide open and he doubles over with silent laughter while Rogers waves at him, fumbles with the phone, and hisses for Wilson to shut up.

That Wilson is not too bad.

**AFFIRM**

“Captain Rogers, we’ve been unable to get anything substantive from the HYDRA agent you found, but he mentioned you, and I thought you’d want to know.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘tell the Captain to enjoy breathing while he can, because the ghost is haunting him’.”

Now there’s a guy who can’t interpret the obvious.

Rogers makes a weird choking noise.

**ASSIST**

Hold on.

“What else?”

“No sir, but we’ll let you know.”

This hedge, so great. Rogers is practically *quivering*, and Wilson is in full-on dad mode. It’s better than the pictures.

“You gotta tell me what that was,” Wilson says.

Rogers stares at his phone like it’s a bomb.

“The FBI.”

“They got something from that HYDRA dude?”

“He said. He said to enjoy breathing while I can because the ghost is haunting me.”

“The ghost?”

“Bucky, Sam. It’s Bucky. It’s gotta be!”

“Coming after you?”

“That’s what he said, but …”

“But. What.”

“Sam. What if he’s the one who put the guy there?”
Finally, a little credit.

“You mean trussed the dude up and left him on your doorstep.”

“With a destroyed sniper rifle.”

“With a destroyed sniper rifle. Because that’s the part that makes it not-creepy.”

Then Barnes has to grab the branches of the hedge and hold on for dear life, because Rogers smiles and the mission imperative has found a way to control his legs. It’s not quite the smile like sunrise, but it’s close enough to make the brain go all wobbly.

“He brought you a HYDRA operative like a cat bringing you a dead mouse.”

“Looks like it. Cemetery too, maybe.”

Wilson has a scowl. Nothing like Barnes’s own scowl, but still, not too bad.

“I did see him outside, Sam. He’s here.”

“Still not saying you’re right about him.”

“That’s okay, I’ve got time.”

Rogers crosses his tree-trunk arms and grins out the kitchen window, looking about as smug as the mission imperative ever sounds.

Great.

(Okay. A little bit actually great.)

Then it’s back to Arlington for the second time in 2 days. At least Barnes knows it’s coming this time. Also, with a brain bolstered by coffee and sandwich, he remembers that Wilson owns a bicycle. It’s a stupid bicycle, with nubby tires and straight handlebars, but it beats walking. And Rogers behaves by wearing the leather jacket.

Oh boy the redhead. And the dead guy is standing at his own grave. That’d be weird to civvies probably, but Barnes was apparently born in 1917, so enh.

‘I might fake my death too,’ he thinks, ‘if it turned out I was running Secretly HYDRA In Every Last Department. Embarrassing.’

They do a bunch of ‘I’m a cool spy’ posturing, until the redhead hands Rogers a file, then kisses him.

AVOID

No kissing, Rogers. That is so far out of line. Naked fun times are disallowed without a complete background check, three character references, and a thorough body-cavity search, pal.

CONTACT

Next time anybody’s mouth gets within a half-mile of that guy, you’d better believe it.
Any strides the redhead may have made in Barnes’s estimation were wounded by the kiss. They are killed off by Rogers’s reaction to the file.

He stays up all night. He reads the file from beginning to end, gets up to pace around Wilson’s living room, then sits with his head in his hands for 18 minutes.

He reads the file a second time, much more slowly, his giant face contorted, sometimes angry, sometimes stricken. Once, Rogers weeps, grasping at his hair, shoulders shaking. The sounds make Barnes’s knees feel unstable.

That’s the point at which Barnes leaves off sitting in the condo with the scope and wriggles his way into the hedge.

ASSIST

ASSIST

blares between his ears, and it’s giving him a headache.

“Hey, pal,” he whispers to the glass, “Steve, hey. You’ll be all right.”

What is in that file.

He is going to pull the redhead’s arms off.

At 0426, Rogers has finished his second read-through of the file. He washes his face at the kitchen sink. He drinks a glass of orange juice – well done, Rogers, hydration and electrolytes are important in times of physical stress.

When Rogers sits back down on the sofa, he flips open the file and touches something in the bottom right corner of the inside cover. Then he sits back and stares, not even moving, until dawn.

Barnes is going to pull the redhead’s arms off very, very slowly.

Wilson creeps downstairs at 0659 and stares at Rogers.

Here’s your chance for mission assist, friend. You’d better come through.

“Suit up, Captain,” Wilson says.

“What?”
“It’s my house, I’m the boss. Suit up. We’re going for a run.”

The eyes are drawn to the file as soon as they leave the room. He should follow and surveil –

SURVEIL –

but. The file is important. The file has injured the target.

Risk assessment: no current indication that HYDRA has identified Rogers’s location (because they are obviously a bunch of morons). And Wilson will accompany for support and monitoring.

Barnes wants that file.

ACCEPT

Set reminder: buy some damn running gear. Ugh.

Rogers and Wilson leave. Barnes gives them 7 minutes to forget keys or break a shoelace, then hops back to the condo for some cash for Steve. Three grand ought to keep him going for a little bit.

He breaks into Wilson’s still-ridiculously-easy-to-open back door and sneaks past the coffee table with the file on it like it’s on fire. Rogers’s clothes are in a pile on the floor: per the mission briefing, a sign of emotional distress. The sketchbook has only one new drawing in it: a rough cartoon of the HYDRA guy tied up in front of the apartment building. Barnes grins. It’s funny.

He stuffs the cash into a side pocket of the bag in Rogers’s closet. It would be more hilarious to just leave the stack of bills sitting on the dresser, but even Steve might start putting clues together at that point. The close surveillance of the condo is too valuable to risk. He pats the duffel. Submission: achieved. Target supplied with sufficient funds for short-term needs. If it weren’t for the injury from the file, Rogers’s unhappiness might be solved. Fuckin’ Romanoff.

Back downstairs, he flips open the file and sees the face, twice: one small photo of Rogers’s Bucky during WWII, and the current face/hair: blue, still.

The body remembers cold. The brain has thought ‘cryo,’ has thought of cold. But the photo triggers a download, and the flesh remembers the bite of freezing, stiffness and ache. Remembers how thawing meant a bite of heat. Remembers the jets of cold water. Standing naked in a room full of clothed men.

The knees do not want to hold weight. The stomach wishes to empty itself. The eyes want to turn away but also want to look. There are so many pages. Many words, like surgery, shock, procedure, failure, injury. Many photos of the body surrounded by/attached to wires, machines, sharp things, chains.

Later in the file are photos of bodies, of destroyed buildings. Words like success, elimination, undetected. The brain aches, the ears hear a sound like roaring that is not objectively present. It is the sensation of the mission briefing about to download information, but trebled, quadrupled from earlier loads.

Refuse.

Please let me refuse.

Please.
Four breaths. Thirty-two heartbeats.

CONFIRM

Time has passed, and Barnes cannot assess how much. Thirty minutes? More? Wilson and Rogers could return at any moment, and he – can’t. He uses the phone to take pictures of each page in the file, for further study later.

It is only 7.3 minutes after Barnes has returned to the condo that he hears Rogers and Wilson through the microphones, back from their run. He has washed his face twelve times and still feels queasy and unclean. One of the breaths on the mike is wheezy. The body launches itself across the condo, still dripping, even before the brain can engage.

But the scope shows the wheezer to be Wilson. All clear. Rogers, although bright red and drenched, wears a less-hunted expression than earlier, even if his sadness is evident when he looks at the file on the coffee table.

Wilson clings to the kitchen counter for a long time after Rogers goes upstairs. Then he gulps two glasses of water. He is still lying on the floor, chest heaving, when Rogers emerges again, clean and dressed.

“Are you okay?”


“Sorry.”

“S’okay. Expected it.”

“I’m going out.”

Shit I’m damp and half-naked.

“Gimme a minute, I’ll get up.”

“No, Sam. Thanks. You – drink some water. I’ll be back later.”

“You’ll be back?”

“Promise I’ll be back.”

Barnes doubles baseline speed and is in time to catch up with Rogers when he jogs to the end of the block, still tugging his jacket in place. They walk slowly, both of them with caps pulled low and hands in jacket pockets, like a matched set.

CONFIRM

Barnes is so focused on Rogers that he doesn’t realize their destination until they’re back at Arlington for the third time in as many days. It’s a long walk – the sun is high is the sky, and Barnes feels. He feels tired.

Rogers walks past Fury’s fake grave toward the interior of the cemetery and climbs a small hill. At the top is a large granite carving, approximately 4 m tall, topped with the shield and ‘STEVEN G. ROGERS – CAPTAIN AMERICA’ carved on it.

Rogers walks to the stone to its right, which is a plain marker bearing the name James Buchanan
Barnes.

Barnes grips the obelisk he’s crouching behind, and the metal fingers gouge the stone. Even here, Steve’s Bucky was on his left flank.

“How did we get here, Buck?” Rogers says in his ear.

Hell if I know, pal.

Rogers sits down with his back against the headstone.

“I never wanted to come here before. It didn’t seem right, all this pomp and circumstance, when I thought your bones were scattered in the Alps. But it’s nice. Peaceful.”

Assessing. Broad expanses of grass and white or gray markers. Quiet broken only by birdsong. The sky is very blue, with fat white clouds that only occasionally cover the sun. Beyond Rogers’s monument is a large tree whose leaves are just beginning to go orange. Peaceful: confirm.

“I’m so sorry, Buck,” Rogers says after 27 minutes.

“If I had known, nothing would’ve stopped me from finding you. Remember the Iliad, from high school? First poetry you convinced me was actually good. I would’ve burned the world down to find you. Bucky.”

Steve. Confirm.

(Set task: research “Iliad.”)

“I’m so sorry.”

FORGIVE

Confirm, of course. Jesus.

“Where are you, buddy?”

Fifteen meters southwest.

“What they did to you, Buck. What they made you do.”

Nobody’s making me do shit now. This mission is mine.

After 6 minutes, Rogers draws his big dumb hand across his enormous face.

“I’m gonna find you, Bucky. I’m gonna get you back.”

Jeez. Ugh.

The long walk back takes up the rest of the afternoon. Barnes’s perimeter sweep is slow. The legs feel their weight. The metal arm hangs heavy. Its weight drags at the chest.

He plugs the phone into the laptop, and the pages from the file almost make him lose his appetite for the grilled cheese. He learns how he was made. And unmade. Over and over unmade. He learns that the body did indeed belong to Steve’s Bucky.

SELF
Confirm.

There are pages of missions, after all the pages of science horrors. Lists of victims, governments toppled. And always, at the front, the face frozen, until the bones remember that cold and the body shivers.

The body shivers and the mind rejects. The brain could download information: reports from the eyes, sensations from the skin.

Refuse.
CONFIRM
The mind could count all the victims.
Refuse.
CONFIRM
The mind could replay the sounds of each killing.
Refuse.
CONFIRM
The body could feel the hose, the chains, the saw, the freezing, the chair.
The body could feel the chair.
It could feel.
It could.
Refuse.
refuse
…
refuse
…
PROTECT ROGERS
…
confirm
MISSION PRIORITY ROGERS’S SAFETY
…
Confirm.
REMAIN WITHIN PARAMETERS
Comply.

Barnes rises. A third pillow has gone to upholstery heaven, courtesy of the metal arm. Barnes lets the body propel itself: it goes into the bathroom and runs a tub full of blistering-hot water that causes the mouth to hiss and the skin to redden.

The body sinks down, and heat leaches its way in, millimeter by millimeter, until the memory of cold is cordoned away in the mind. The body has relearned warm. The shoulders loosen, easing the ache of the metal arm.

Barnes sighs: one deep breath of air that takes with it the pictures crowded up against one another behind the eyes.

They are *his* eyes. His feet. His legs, his hair, his sweaty fucking balls.

“My goddamn arm.”

The Asset-that-was belonged to HYDRA. It was a machine in flesh, always calculating but never choosing.

CONFIRM

Every flicker of choosing was countered by the chair. Until Steve made a space for choice: kill him or change.

RESET

And the kernel of self that remained across 70 years of suppression answered.

PROTECT

Comply.

SELF

Uh, clarify?

PROTECT ROGERS PROTECT MISSION HEAD

A sound breaks out of Barnes’s mouth. Assess: laughter? He ducks his head under the water to wash away the tears and snot that have leaked out of it while he processed all of this information.

His body is wobbly from exhaustion and heat, but it no longer aches.

Comply.

First on the laptop, then on the phone, he selects the folder with the Asset’s file and chooses ‘delete.’

Comply.
Barnes wakes a median of every 121 minutes overnight. The mind – his mind – dreams. He does not remember dreaming previously. He wakes in a sweat at 1148 with the flavor of rubber in his mouth and lightning flashing behind his eyes. He wakes at 0132 shivering, with a sensation of being closed in and the scent of blood. He wakes at 0316 with a jerk from a dream about falling. He wakes at 0542 from a long, complicated series of images of Rogers, in which Rogers says, ‘I got it, Buck, I don’t need any help.’ Barnes’s face is cold when he wakes from that one: it’s wet.

The sun isn’t up, and the surveillance is all quiet, but Barnes exercises his new prerogative to choose and gives up trying to sleep any more. The (his) metal arm is running a little slow after more than a week without maintenance. He pulls out his little packet of tools to tune it up.

Assessment: dreams are inefficient. They decrease sleep efficacy. And dream-Rogers is as much of a pain in the ass as awake-Rogers. Don’t need any help. Don’t need any help my icy, frozen ass. Can’t even go to a funeral without two assassins on your tail and half the city putting their hands all over you. Never look at your left flank, start working for an international bad-guy outfit without even checking them first. March into buildings like a civvie. Probably don’t even eat properly. Winter’s coming, do you own a good coat?

Jerk. Don’t even tell me you don’t need my help. You’re getting my help, asshole. Whether you want it or not.

And then. And then, at 0724, when Barnes hasn’t even finished his perimeter walk yet – has only had two sips of coffee, for Marx’s sake – Rogers says to Wilson,

“I have to go find him, Sam.”

No, you have to fucking stay put, Steve.

“Starting where, man? You have no leads.”

“I don’t know. But I gotta do something, I’m going crazy around here.”

Pretty sure anybody who runs planes into the ocean and fights ugly damn space creatures with a dinner plate already has a lock on crazy there, pal.

“Don’t be stupid. Go for a run. Come with me to the center and do some good in the world. But don’t go flying off in circles.”

“That’s not –“

“Come on, Steve. Three tied-up HYDRA agents in three days. It’s not just your boy out there. Do you even have a weapon?”

“Um. I have a handgun?”

Are you kidding me.

“Any bullets in it?”

“One clip.”

What.
“One full clip?”

“Mostly.”

No, I take it back, dream-Rogers. You are way less obnoxious.

“What happened to expert tactical planning guy?”

Barnes, now in the hedge, sees Rogers heave a sigh worthy of an exasperated grizzly.

“I need information for a plan.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, what.”

“Yeah, a plan is way better than sprinting around the nation’s capitol yelling ‘Bucky! Bucky! Where are you?’”

“Not sure I was planning to yell like Scarlett O’Hara, but thanks for that image.”

Confirm. Thanks, flying Sam.

“Maybe Natasha will find a lead for you.”

“And in the meantime I’m supposed to sit here?”

Yes.

“I’m not telling you to do nothing. I’m telling you to be smart.”

Ha, fat chance.

To give Rogers a little credit, he does try. He spends a couple of days back at the calm routine of workout + VA center. (Now with bonus pre-dawn runs. Eighty dollars Barnes spends on a pair of running shoes constructed like foam blocks. Barnes has a few [negative] opinions about this but figures that a guy growling about capitalist tyranny might be memorable to the little girl at Foot Locker who sells him the shoes. Memorable is mission-noncompliant.)

Unfortunately, the local HYDRA contingent finally catches on. In the next 5 days, Barnes leaves seven deactivated bad guys scattered in Rogers’s path: four from around Wilson’s house (one dead: oops) and three at the VA. He feels kind of bad about the ones from the VA – they really upset the vets. Chalk it up as reason no. 9,602 that HYDRA are total assholes.

Each struggling/floppy body winds Rogers up a little more until he’s bouncing around the living room like a wild animal, yelling at poor old Wilson. Rogers needs someone to throw him down and sit on him –

CONTACT

-but even Barnes probably couldn’t hold him down.

“I don’t care, I’m going after him,” Rogers says for about the thirtieth time.
And punches a hole in Wilson’s wall. For shit’s sake, Steve.

At least that startles Rogers enough to briefly pull his gigantic head from his weirdly tiny ass and behave for a couple more days. Barnes helps out by dropping the next few HYDRA jerks off at the local fire house. (It’s closer than the police station.) But then of course they have to go and call the FBI, who calls Rogers and gets him riled up again. Wilson’s smart, though: he makes Rogers promise not to go anywhere until the hole in the wall is fixed AND repainted.

‘Goddamn, they’re like roaches,’ Barnes thinks one morning as yet another goon tries to sneak up on Wilson’s building, only to find that things lurk in the hedge more dangerous than hair-eating twigs.

It’s a woman this time, not nearly as impressive as the redhead (not that he will ever admit that aloud) with a fair number of sharp objects about her and very wriggly.

“Man, the wind is really kicking up out there,” Wilson says, staring in the general direction of the hedge.

Crap. Will you go to sleep, lady.

Finally she goes limp, and Barnes does his routine of bind wrists, bind ankles, preemptive gag. But where to put her so she won’t rattle Steve?

Maybe I will start dumping them in the river.

Maybe I’ll send ‘em to Dale. Ha!
So it’s a lot of running circles around the National Mall like a moron, standing in the hedge, and taking people with little octopus badges on their jackets and holding them by the throat until they pass out. Barnes clings to the tiny bits of joy he purchases from Starbucks. Rogers is still stomping around Wilson’s condo like somebody spit in his coffee.

Wait. Does he even drink coffee? Barnes has only ever seen Rogers in Starbucks that one time. Barnes remembers (oh yeah, pal, 4 whole weeks of personal memories, available for recall at any moment) the headache and sluggishness when coffee was needed. Assessment: Rogers needs coffee to combat his grumpiness.

Wilson makes coffee every day. Why do you not drink it Steve. What is your problem.

Being in the middle of a totally dumb conundrum with an obvious solution (drink coffee = cheer up: it’s demonstrably true) makes it the perfect time for Rogers to get a phone call from the redhead. Because she has terrific timing like that.

“Steve,” she says in a voice that makes Steve go still and Barnes’s guts drop into his ankles, “I found where they were holding him. Washington National Building, 14th and F.”

Rogers is visibly shaking.

No way, Rogers. No.

AVOID

Damn straight, avoid. If the file upset him, there is no way he’s getting a look at the tank. Or the chair. Viewing equipment will result in emotional pain. Mission non-compatible.

PROTECT

Comply.

Except. With Rogers there is always some ‘except.’ He’s running at top speed around the condo, yelling at Wilson to get directions, and he’s going to be out the door in under 2 minutes.

No. How do you stop this guy?

CONTACT

Besides that.

If only there were an unconscious HYDRA agent stored in the hedge. He could stick them outside Wilson’s door and hope Rogers trips over them.

Next best thing: on the way back to his base, Barnes slips into Wilson’s garage and slits one of the car’s rear tires.

That buys him long enough for his tactical programming to kick in. He’s suited up and headed south on Wilson’s purloined bicycle while Wilson and Rogers are still in the garage vying to see whether you learn more curses in the Air Force or the Army.

Amateurs. If they really wanted to get down and filthy, they’d learn Russian.
“You can borrow my bike,” Wilson says.

Snicker. Thanks.

“It’s right over … goddammit.”

“Here.”

“You just picked up my car.”

“Change. The tire.”

“You just picked up my car!”

“Just the back end. Hurry up.”

And that’s enough time to get Barnes (slightly out of breath) to Lower Senate Park, which is crawling with totally obvious dark-suited frowning people wearing earwigs. Perfect.

He drops the bike, jacket, and hat and jogs 100 m away from them. He shakes out his hair, draws a gun, and steps out from the shade. He doesn’t even have to remind himself to glare – the damn sun is in his eyes. Also, he hasn’t worn the tactical vest in weeks. Compared with the soft shirts he’s been wearing, it is really, really uncomfortable. It weighs a fucking ton.

Barnes stands squinting in the sun for a full 76 seconds before someone stops and points. He waits until a couple of the suits notice, then takes off running. Zigzag path back into trees, and he is back in the jacket and hat, gun stowed, pedaling slowly away before his phone buzzes with Rogers’s incoming call.

“The police scanners are going crazy,” a woman’s voice says, “male suspect with a gun in Lower Senate Park, long dark hair, black clothing, metal arm.”

“Change of plans, Sam.”

Success feels so good.

He doesn’t want to go to the bank. Just looking at the building makes his jaw ache, and the sweat he’s coated in is not from the ride over. It would be better to walk away. To choose ‘delete’ like with the file, close that door in his mind.

But Rogers won’t stay away for long, and he cannot see it. To see will hurt him.

PROTECT

Comply.

Ugh, the smell of the building makes him nauseated. And it’s creepy how he knows the way – knows to take the stairs up and then hit the last elevator on the left to get to the basement.

It’s dark and seemingly deserted, chairs tipped over and papers strewn. HYDRA fake-bank drones scattering at the first opportunity. Crybaby little shits.

But the basement hall light is on. The grey of the hallway makes his teeth chatter. every step forward is an act of will. Every step forward is for Steve. He can go in that room and tear it to pieces. It’s the mission. He can. He will.
Oh for fuck’s sake, there’s the redhead.

84 seconds.

“Not lowering my gun first.”

She blinks, like she’d thought they froze out his voice box or something. She holsters her pistol. Barnes does the same. But he’s not getting any closer to her than he has to. She’s a pretty cool customer, though. Barnes is glaring so hard his temples hurt and she just looks bored.

Set task: cultivate an expression like that.

There’s no time to stare at her all day, even though staring at her gives him something to look at other than the chair. The chair is a big, pulsing knot of darkness in his peripheral vision.

The eyes.

No, goddammit, his eyes.

Do not want to look at it.

Start small, then.

He steps to one side and rips apart a couple of monitors and IV stands. Romanoff stands still and watches. When Barnes edges closer (warily) to dismantle another monitor and computer, she edges away from him. They circle the perimeter of the room this way, until the floor crackles with small pieces of plastic and metal and there’s left only the alcove with the tank in it and the chair. She’s standing by the alcove. He waves her aside and she actually moves.

Barnes doesn’t want to go into that small space with Romanoff at his back.

He doesn’t want to go into that space at all.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

Assessment: no vocal markers of aggression. She just sounds curious.

“Tearing it down.”

“Why?”

He looks at her. She’s wearing civilian clothes, mostly black, but the gun she had pointed at him 6 minutes ago is not the only one on her person. The mission briefing won’t give him any more detail than “trouble,” which indicates 92% probability that she has other weapons, possibly strange ones, hidden on her as well. She’s balanced on one foot, ready to move, but watching with steady eyes and a cocked head.

On one hand, (1) he hates her and (2) she gave Rogers the file that hurt him. On the other hand, she’s clearly on Rogers’s side.

Possible mission assist?

RELUCTANT CONFIRM

That doesn’t mean she should know about his close surveillance.

“In case Rogers finds this place,” he says, and steps into the alcove.

The tank. The hose. The chains set into the floor, for when he was. When he was.

PROTECT

He grinds his teeth together so hard they creak. Comply.

For when those torturing bastards felt like chaining him. For no fucking logical reason at all.

He rips the chains out of the floor, wraps them around his metal fist, and pounds the hell out of the tank. The glass shatters at the second blow. They watched him through that glass. Thought of him like their robot, their experiment. Once the chains have torn open a hole, Barnes goes at it with his metal arm, ripping and punching. The tank shreds under his fists. He’ll never go in it again.

When all that remains of the tank is its curved back, Barnes grabs it with both hands and rips the whole thing from the wall, twists the intake pipes into a crumpled mess. For good measure, he rips out the hose, too.

“What do you call yourself?” the redhead asks.

He turns to look at her and registers his increased respiration and heartbeat. The room around him is a wreck of metal. Romanoff’s face wears the faintest hint of surprise. The tank is gone. It’s gone.

“Barnes,” he says, then hopes that’s not a tactical error.

"Why's it so important that Steve not see, Barnes?"

Her voice is so quiet that many people might mistake it for gentle. Barnes growls at her. Finish the task. Stay on point.

He stomps over to the chair. His guts want to turn themselves inside out. There’s a small person inside his head, maybe the Bucky-person, who wants to run from this, to find a dark corner to hunker down in and cover his head. This chair is the nexus of his unmaking. The leather of the seat is mottled with stains. Fucking animals.

No. Worst an animal gets is a cat toying with a mouse. These were monsters, pulling out his self and leaving him with nothing but pain, orders, and the ache of something missing. Bunch of megalomaniacs, trying to shape the world as they saw fit, like they were smarter than all the people working their asses off day in and day out, putting food on the table, creating art, making families tied by blood or not.

Choosing who got to live or die like they thought they were gods. Craven, cowardly bullshit, never getting their own hands dirty, always holding themselves above and daring to feel contempt for all the decent people they were lying to.

Fucking Nazi assholes who never could leave well enough alone, meddling and fiddling, trying to make people into things. Lying to people the whole time. Pretending to help the world while they injured it. Lying to Steve. Using Steve like a pawn, just like they did to him. Assholes. Motherfuckers.

Barnes reaches out, and his hand clasps on air. He blinks and sees that the chair is rubble. The chair is rubble, his throat is sore, and his face is wet. Weird.
Romanoff is standing within arm’s reach.

“Don’t you fucking touch me.”

“I won’t,” she says, and steps back.

“Barnes,” Romanoff says, “why is it so important that Steve didn’t see?”

“It would injure him.”

She frowns.

“Injure Steve?”

“Yes. Based on his reaction to the file you gave him –“

He glares at her, and she smiles at him, because she is a brat.

“-likelihood 89% that seeing the equipment would cause him significant emotional distress.”

“Why do you care?”

Barnes rubs his eyes.

“I have a mission.”

Huh. The way she shifts her weight. That’s a tell. Dream on, lady. The only one I might be a danger to is you.

“Protect.”

That makes her step back.

“What?”

“Protect Rogers.”

Respiration slows to baseline, with accompanying re-engaged brain function. Oh no. Oh no Barnes, you stupid jerk.

“You can’t tell him.”

Romanoff raises her hands.

“No.”

She squints at him.

“Why don’t you tell him?”

CONTACT

Are you in league with each other.

“Surveillance is not compatible with close contact.”

Is she laughing.
“I don’t know, seems like you could do some pretty thorough assessment in close quarters,” she says.

She’s trouble and confusing.

“Well I’m the mission head, and I say not.”

Now she’s definitely laughing. It’s super annoying. He surges forward and crowds her against the wall. There’s her temper.

“Don’t you tell him.”

Anger bleeds out of her eyes, and she gazes at him with a quiet expression on her face.

MISSION ASSIST

Ugh.

“Okay,” she says, “secret’s safe with me.”

He steps back, and she grins at him.

“I’m really good at secrets.”

Barnes actually believes that one.

“Get out of here,” she says, “turns out Steve is on his way.”

Barnes runs as if he didn’t know. He puts his earbud back in, having let it fall out during his destruction free-for-all like he’s some kind of child. He pedals back to his condo with the soundtrack of Wilson and Steve arriving at the bank and saying things like ‘buh,’ ‘what,’ and ‘how’ about the carnage.

Romanoff backs him up. What the hell even is her mission? She makes no sense. But she tells Wilson and Rogers that she found the place a mess, and she never mentions him once. Rogers tells her about the magical appearance of Bucky in a park so weird, just minutes too late, hope that he can be salvaged, blah blah.

Romanoff says, “Wow, Steve. If only you’d gotten there sooner.”

This mission is nuts. He’d like to think that with the file and the bank vault put away, things will quiet down into a nice routine again. But now that he knows his own history, it’s for damn sure he doesn’t have that kind of luck.
After the twenty-first HYDRA mook left tied up and wriggling in Wilson’s yard, Rogers undergoes a reset. Barnes is in the hedge when it happens, midway through a miracle sandwich (egg, cheese, spinach and mushrooms: vegetables are allowed on sandwiches! the future is great).

Rogers barrels out the front door and stands over the struggling little man (a dirty fighter – Barnes will have to stitch up his left thigh and buy a new pair of jeans, thanks asshole). Rogers stares down at the man, and Barnes can see the reset in the lines of Rogers’s body. All the tension runs out of it. Rogers stands straighter, until his feet are planted solid. He lifts his chin, and when he swivels his head around, Barnes sees that Rogers’s face no longer wears the expression of wide eyes and open mouth of the past few weeks. Now his face is all straight lines: narrowed eyes, compressed lips. The guy looks highly annoyed.

This could be bad.

Could be, nothing. It is so bad.

“This can’t continue, Sam,” Rogers says after he disconnects from the police, before they’ve even come to pick up the guy from the front yard. A couple of neighbors are out there taking pictures.

“It’s not fair to put your home in danger like this.”

“We have talked about this, Steve. You know I’m in for whatever.”

“And it’s not fair to the folks at the center.”

AFFIRM

Affirm.

“Okay, that I’ll grant you. But do you really think they’d stop coming here if you leave? They still know I’m your friend.”

“I know, Sam, and I’m sorry. No – I know, I’m not pretending you didn’t volunteer. I’m really grateful, Sam, but I can still be sorry about it.”

“You know I’d do it all again.”

“I know.”

Seriously, Rogers. This thing you have for hugging has got to stop.

“Where are you thinking of going?”

“New York.”

What.

“I figure Stark’s resources might help me figure out how to actually flush out HYDRA instead of just happening across one or two at a time.”

“Dropped in the yard like a gift.”
“Right. He might help with that too.”

Rogers is that a growl. What’s your problem, pal? You’d rather I let them come after you? Ungrateful.

“They always wanted me to get at my blood. I figure the attacks on you and the center will at least drop off if I leave.”

“Maybe.”

“And maybe a protection detail for you?”

“I can handle myself.”

“I know, Sam, but for a little while? The center too. Just to make me feel better.”

“Yeah, man. Okay. All right.”

“Thanks.”

Stop hugging for fuck’s sake it’s called personal space respect it.

“I’m gonna miss having you around, you know, Rogers? Though I guess it’ll be nice to finally be able to bring a lady around again.’

“What? Oh my god, Sam, why didn’t you say something? I could have … yeah, fine. Shut up.”

“Twitchiest house guest ever. Your mama must’ve been fierce.”

“She was.”

CONFIRM

Huh.

Rogers spends 46 minutes on the phone with someone named Stark, who speaks at a volume and speed that defy belief. While the man babbles about construction and something about his house in California falling into the ocean, Barnes confirms him on the internet to be (a) the Soviet robot from Rogers’s team and (b) the son of one of the Asset’s targets.

Now this is why we maintain distance surveillance. Think of that awkward conversation.

…

You know I’m right.

…

CONFIRM

Damn straight, confirm.

Stark is annoying as shit and seems to never need to breathe, but he calls Rogers hilarious names: grandpa, Capsicle, Rocket Pop. Since he’s on the internet anyway, Barnes looks up the last one. Even the ice cream of the future is amazing. And it really does look like Steve in his Captain America suit. Funny. Also potentially delicious. Future raspberries are apparently blue. Neat.
“Your floor’s not done yet, but I can prioritize construction and have it ready for you in let’s say a week.”

“My floor?”

Agreement: his floor?

“Yeah, in Avengers Tower. Did I tell you it’s Avengers Tower now? I totally named it after us. Thought since we’re a team, we needed a headquarters. Everyone gets a floor. Except me, I get three.”

“Tony, I’m not going to live in your building.”

“Come on, Cap! It’s really nice. Totally secure, grocery delivery, the world’s most amazing gym. All your best friends living close by –“

INCORRECT

Confirm.

“-it’ll be like a permanent sleepover.”

“It’s really great of you, but I’m not going to live in your building.”

“Oh yeah, tell me where you think would be better and I’ll tell you why you’re wrong.”

“I want to go home, Tony. To Brooklyn.”

“Oh. Oh. Yeah. Okay. Um. Okay. You want me to have someone help you find a place?”

“Sure, that would be great. Thank you.”

“No problem. But you have to come see your floor.”

“Promise.”

Moving to New York. Terrific. And Stark’s “someone” is a terrifyingly efficient woman who finds a one-bedroom loft apartment in Vinegar Hill in only 4 days. Of course Barnes has spent those 4 days chasing bad guys hither and yon, so he’s barely had time to mutter two curses about the logistics of moving. Ugh.

Even his sub-missions are TARFU. Rogers finally (finally!) finds the money in his bag, makes some quip about the goddamn redhead putting it there (*spit*), and gives it to Wilson for the freaking VA center.

“This is over a thousand dollars, man, I can’t take this.”

“It’s three thousand dollars. But sure you can. I’ve got 70 years of back Army pay sitting in my bank account, and it’s not like SHIELD paid minimum wage.”

What the hell 70 years of back pay. If you are not broke why are you so unhappy Steve.

Jeez. All that time spent with a counselor, you’d think he would talk about his feelings.

CONFIRM
Confirm.

There is a party at the center, which is so full of hugging that Barnes gets a cramp in his face from flinching. A piece of the giant cake would probably help, but no one brings cake to amazing bodyguards secretly sitting up in a tree across the street.

Who are not going to initiate contact don’t even start.

CONTACT

Shut up.

On the morning he leaves, Rogers stands outside in Wilson’s back yard, staring around at the fence, the wonderful hedge, the sky. He still wears that troublemaker’s scowl.

“Well, back to New York,” he says to the air and his hidden eavesdropper.

Set task: monitor Rogers’s self-conversations. Could be a sign of emotional distress.

CONFIRM

Confirm. Wait -

“Hope I like it at Bridge and Water, apartment 3D,” Rogers adds, staring into his juice glass.

Who cares about liking it. You’d better damn well hope it’s safe, pal.

Stark sends a private jet for Rogers. A blonde woman and Wilson send Rogers off with yet more goddamn hugging, while Barnes crouches under a bush on the other side of a chain-link fence at the US capitol’s main airport. Which is apparently named after some marginal actor who made a bunch of movies about the war instead of actually fighting in it, because Americans are generally bonkers, as exemplified by their national hero.

Barnes stares through the scope as Rogers climbs the tiny staircase onto the little jet and flies away.

Dammit.
Okay, y'all. Before we get back to Bucky, time for some SRS BZNSS. This past winter, I had a real crisis of heart, feeling like my original fiction was not getting any traction and possibly completely pointless. I was a tangled-up ball of dejection.

Then April came along and Bucky Barnes ate my brain. I figured, "what the heck? writing fic might be fun and good."

It *has* been fun and good. It would've been fun and good if no one had read it.

But you have read it. You are reading like whoa. I am so thankful. Your comments and kudos have been a kick in my pants and a bolster to my spirit.

Thank you, every one of you. THANK YOU. You have honestly helped me, at a time when I needed it. *floaty pink hearts*

Barnes watches the little jet taxi down the runway.

Dammit, Rogers. Set task: research optimal travel methods to New York.

The plane’s wheels lift into the air. Barnes uncurls from the bush he’s been hiding in. First, back to –

LOCATE

Yeah, okay.

Back to the -

LOCATE

Working on it.

Back to –

LOCATE

Comply, dammit, I have to –

LOCATE

Yes, you said –

LOCATE

The mission imperative shrieks its litany all the way back to the condo. By then, pain has taken over his right eyeball and the entire upper right quadrant of his head. The crashing noise crowds out thought. His right hand trembles.
The task of reckoning travel options ought to last 23 minutes but takes 50: he keeps having to stop and shake his head like a dog. Flying seems too complicated when you don’t have a magic gazillionaire sending planes for you: there are endless regulations about the number of bags and size of shampoo bottles allowed. Also some nonsense about removing shoes. If it weren’t for the internal screech, Barnes would like to read the sociological data equating bare feet with heightened security, because that sounds ridiculous.

The phone buzzes: Rogers has landed at Teterboro. He texts Wilson regarding his safe arrival. Then, “headed to Brooklyn. Kind of nervous.”


LOCATE

No shit, asshole.

PRIORITY LOCATE

Each order is now accompanied by a throb that gives Barnes sympathy for every mark the Asset ever stabbed in the eye. And a little envy that at least they got to die.

In a desperation move, he smacks himself in the head. Sadly, even thoroughly programmed humans are unlike recalcitrant machinery and cannot be reset by a good thunk.

Unfair. Also: ow.

“It’ll work,” Wilson texts back to Rogers. “Especially if I’m right and it’s a terrible idea.”

What will work, Rogers. Please do not tell me that you have a plan for anything other than quietly sitting behind a well-secured door. No planning, Steve. No planning.

Help me, heroes of the Revolution. Situation critical.

He chooses the train for the single reason that there’s a fast version that arrives more than 2 hours faster than buses. Then, cleanup: wipe down all surfaces in the condo. He leaves the three shredded pillows in a pile on the kitchen table, along with $40. He puts the “for sale” sign back out in the yard. He slinks through the hedge (goodbye hedge, you’ve been a pal) and rests Wilson’s bicycle up against the side of the house. After 33 grueling, anxious minutes of gathering and cleaning, he has one giant duffel full of weapons, cash, and his few items of clothing and one bag containing his laptop and Rogers’s sketchbooks. They’re easy to haul up onto the local bus for the train station.

By the time he swings down off the bus at Union Station, his headache has him ready to pull the walls down. It’s all he can do not to growl at the ticket agent for taking 29 seconds longer than is necessary to take his cash and print out a ticket. He is successful at not dismembering every jackass yelling into a cell phone because there is coffee at the train station. Beautiful, beautiful coffee. Extra whip calms even the mission imperative. For 2.1 minutes.

The train is not optimal. It is an enclosed metal tube. It is an enclosed metal tube filled with people. Likelihood that any of them are active HYDRA agents: low. But they jostle him on the platform. There has been no touching that he didn’t choose since the reset. Granted, most of that has been violence, but he chose it. These people, bumping into him as if they don’t even notice. None of them realize that they are one slip of control away from being separated from their arms. Or from their breath.

They jostle him during boarding, and they don’t keep their goddamn elbows within the area of
their seats. If five fellow passengers are struck more forcefully than necessary by the large duffel as he passes, well. It’s his job to find and protect Rogers. Not to be nice.

The confined space – rounded metal and windows – is too tank-like for comfort. And then he has to go and share it. The train keeps its ventilation set at deep-freeze (thanks, that helps so much), but his body is clammy with sweat. Each car holds an average of 45 people, 89% of whom are engaged with electronics, 62% of whom are speaking into their phones. The conversations overlap into confusion. The seats provide only 11 cm of space between them.

He walks two cars forward and stands in the aisle, staring at an empty aisle seat. The person sitting in the window seat is nodding his head along with unheard music while watching a video on a tablet, texting on a phone, eating a large bag of something called “Doritos,” and just barely not knocking over a can of drink named for monsters.

Barnes walks on.

At the very front, the car has a sign proclaiming it the “quiet car.” Quiet is the only thing – other than 1. locating Rogers, 2. locking Rogers in a windowless room, and 3. keeping HYDRA and all other assorted villains away from the door – that sounds appealing at the moment. No jostling. No touching. Just peace, like in the condo. To sit and drink his coffee, while the miles clack down to New York.

For once, a thing is what it says. The quiet car is crowded but silent. There is an aisle seat at the very front, with space in the rack above for his duffel. The main in the window seat is asleep. Barnes drops into the seat. He has coffee and 3.5 hours to go.

LOCATE

Comply. In 3.5 hours.

And, miracle of miracles, the mission imperative shuts the hell up. In the silence of the train car, Barnes drinks his coffee and pages through Rogers’s sketchbooks. The pain in his head is receding already. The muscles in his neck release. The drawings of New York are familiar only in abstract, like a briefing that consists only of photos. Information lacking whether the drawings reflect the current cityscape. Online videos have suggested that between time passing and the space-lizard-thing invasion, the city has changed a great deal since Rogers’s Bucky saw it. Updated information required. Heh, updated information incoming. But the drawings calm his mind. Though none of them depict the mission, they were made by him. They are a point of contact until surveillance is re-established.

Barnes has examined the sketchbooks often enough that 52 minutes is sufficient to solidify every depiction in short-term memory. Still 2 hours to go. How long is standard for conversion from short-term memory to long?

Barnes reads an article on memory on his phone, which writes a great deal about spectacles and has nothing to say about brains recovering from decades of manipulation. The articles takes only 136 seconds to read. Sigh. It tells him nothing practical. His vision is adequate for the mission. He has no need to purchase corrective eyewear, much less remember where he last placed it.

He shoves the sketchbooks back into his tattered, filthy bag. Given the projected length of the assignment (decades, possibly indefinite), provisions need to be made to eventually replenish the cash supply. Squalor is okay for the medium term, but dirt corrodes. He’ll need a new bag eventually. New clothes. A place to sleep that’s close enough to monitor the sticky bug signal but still indoors.
Ugh. Relocating is obnoxious. Thanks a lot Steve.

The trees change color as the train travels north, from mostly green to mostly bright to a mix of red/orange/yellow and brown. It looks. Pretty.

The drawings in the sketchbooks are only pencil, shades of grey on paper. Query: does Rogers make pictures in colors. If so, suggested topic: autumn trees.

North means cold. His body knows cold as punishment. By contrast, heat is uncomfortable. Previous missions meant time spent in adverse conditions. Barnes deleted the information from the file, but he still read it. He knows he spent time in the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan, time in the desert of Kuwait. New York in winter can’t be so bad. Even if the mission briefing downloads a sensation of throbbing feet and a runny nose. It’s possible that Rogers’s Bucky was kind of a wimp.

Barnes watches the cities rise, recede, and rise again, until the train rounds a bend, and the horizon shows a tangle of grey uprights. This is New York City. The smudge to the right on the horizon could be Brooklyn.

Far in this body’s past, below any place where he can remember it, he once called this place home.
Winter “Asset” Barnes (formerly Soldier) does not like New York.

It is loud.

It is crowded.

It smells terrible.

Penn Station is enormous: the sounds of the crowd echo through the huge space, compounded by tinny recorded announcements. More people touch him with their elbows and bags. Two people step on his feet. And all – most – er, some – of his knives are packed away in the duffel, out of immediate reach.

Stabbing civilians is mission-noncompliant.

Breaking civilians’ limbs is mission-noncompliant.

Screaming at civilians is mission-noncompliant.

Frightening civilians is … on the verge of acceptable.

Except that no one seems much bothered by his snarl. Six people snarl back. It is. Disconcerting.

Outside, the sidewalk is equally crowded. People are hemmed in by doorways on one side and street-trees/piles of garbage on the other, moving in a fast-paced flow. One hapless moron is trying to walk west among the east-bound crowd; it looks as if he's trying to swim, arms flung out while New Yorkers curse at him. One little old lady swings her purse and catches the guy right in the gut. He might actually like these people if there weren’t so many of them.

It’s only a couple of blocks to Sixth Avenue, but by that point Barnes is almost glad to escape underground.

He finds the subway to be no improvement. Routes of egress are blocked by crowds. Signage is unclear. Everyone seems annoyed by the size of his bag, and seventeen people comment on it. Respiration increased 8%. Recognized: adrenalin spike. Where the hell is the F train.

After 12 minutes, Barnes sees a train with the letter F on its sign pulling into the station. He sprints toward the platform, knocking five persons out of the way and matching them curse for curse, even the one in Polish. Because he apparently knows Polish.

The subway car is also crowded, loud, and smelly, with no way to exit cleanly. It rattles through the dark for two stops before Barnes realized that he is on a northbound train.

Oh, fuck me.

DENIED

Sigh.

He exits the car at the next station and circles around for the southbound platform. A group of young men are playing paint buckets like drums. Their hands move with impressive speed, and the bowl in front of them is half-full of bills and coins. But the sound echoes in the already-loud station
until all of the sound waves make a mess of themselves and pain flares up again behind his right eye.

The train takes 8 minutes to arrive. For the first 4 minutes, Barnes concentrates on tuning out the drumming and conversations around him. For the next 2 minutes, he stares at his phone but is unable to will it to find a signal underground. For the final 2 minutes, Barnes is convinced that the southbound train will never come, that he will have to walk to the East River through that endless crowd, and that he will then have to swim to Brooklyn. And it will all take so long that surely Rogers will do something colossally dumb and be dead by the time Barnes arrives.

The train pulls in, just in time to save him from puking his guts all over the track and knocking a few civilians over on his way to run the length of Manhattan.

His legs are too twitchy for sitting. He stands pressed against the car’s wall, duffel behind his legs, leaning against the scratched-up, useless window. Looking out opposite at darkness and the odd bare light bulb makes his jaw ache. There is no way to make the travel good, underground, in the dark, with no escape. There is no music on his phone to provide distraction from the loud rattling or the smell of large amounts of very old urine.

There are sixty-three adults on the car and twelve children. One child is a mere infant. One sits in a huge wheeled stroller, even though it is clearly old enough to walk. One is in that indeterminate age between eight and twelve; she clutches the sleeve of the man sitting next to her, red-eyed and clearly ill. Nine are young teenagers. It is Tuesday, 3:08 pm. Why are they not in school.

Fourteen of the adults are elderly. The forty-six remaining are of working age. Twenty-nine female, twenty male. Eleven of the males have long, scraggly beards and are wearing trousers even skinner than his black jeans, which Barnes would not have thought possible. One of these has his hair drawn up in a little ball at the back of his head. Barnes reaches up with his flesh hand and feels the tail of hair hanging below his cap. It might be enough to make a little ball. Hair is complicated.

The train lurches, and his metal hand crumples the flimsy aluminum pole he’s holding onto. No one else in the care looks up – not even the toddler.

Take three breaths.

The tunnel outside the window is very dark, and there have been no stops for 6 minutes. The tunnel is dark. The car is small and crowded. The air inside it has been breathed by all these people, who are sitting too close. It is loud with phone conversations, rattling, and music audible even through headphones. Do they not realize the damage they do to their hearing.

It is too loud. Too crowded. Too many fluorescent lights make the darkness outside the car seem more black. The old woman in the green hat is staring. Increased heart rate. The metal pole is nearly broken in half. Increased perspiration. People are looking at him. Mission-noncompliant. Increased respiration. The train car has subjectively decreased in size. There are weapons in the duffel. He can shoot a hole in the wall, he can shoot –

The tunnel outside lightens, and the train slows as it comes into a station. Barnes’s ears are too full of the sound of rushing blood to hear the announcement, but he sees a sign: York Street. He bolts.

The station is still underground, still harshly lit, still loud and crowded. But there is space to breathe, to move. There are exit signs.

He climbs eighty-two stairs up to street level, until the duffel feels heavy even to his metal arm. But each step up is a slower heartbeat, a calmer breath. At the top of the stairs, he stands with his
face lifted to the sky and breathes until his skin no longer feels like it’s going to detach and flee.

He looks around – the streets are less crowded, the buildings smaller. There are fewer honking cars. He calls up the map on his phone with the little blue pulsing dot and follows a route northeast. Spindly trees line the sidewalks. The buildings are older: boxy row houses with storefronts on the ground floor, warehouse conversions. He turns onto Bridge.

A girl rides by on a pale blue bicycle, wearing a dress, a cardigan, and a scarf over her hair. For a moment, the world tips sideways, and Barnes hears music, feels lighter on his left side. The mission briefing downloads – he remembers – an autumn day, a bicycle bell.

He can smell the river on the air. Can hear people talking through their open windows, a child begging to be let outside. A corner shop has boxes out front piled with fruit. This is Brooklyn. He doesn’t hate it. There was a Starbucks three blocks from the train station. Near his destination is a shop called Pronoun – a stupid name, but the scent coming from the open door is definitely coffee, so who cares.

The building at Bridge and Water is clearly a former warehouse, red brick with green trim, windows everywhere. Looks nice, but a hazard unless Rogers can be compelled to replace his windows with bulletproof glass.

Rogers! Barnes you moron.

He plugs his earbuds into his ears.

“- a lot of money for just a sofa.”

Barnes drops the duffel to the ground and sits on it. His knees have stopped working for the moment. Guns are not such a comfortable seat.

“Yeah, I guess,” Rogers says to the woman speaking to him, who is not Rogers and is therefore uninteresting.

MISSION

The mission imperative sounds almost like a sigh.

PROTECT

Comply.

Get up, Barnes, you’re back on duty.

Barnes stands across the street from Rogers’s building, staring at windows, trying to determine which unit is 3D. The surveillance signal is strong. Rogers is close by.

“It is good to be back,” Rogers says, “I thought, after the invasion, that I wanted to be as far away from here as possible. But things are different now.”

“Because of HYDRA,” the woman says.

“You bet.”

LIE

Confirm.
What are you up to Rogers.

A truck horn sounds. Barnes hears it in both the earbud and real-time. He steps away from the curb, toward the buildings at his back. The shoe store has an awning, providing shade. Next to the store is a stairway down to a garden apartment – he retreats, but not so far that he can’t crane his head around.

Rogers emerges from a storefront half a block away, accompanied by a young woman in severe-looking glasses and carrying a portfolio. Rogers is wearing the leather jacket, good job.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay at the tower tonight,” the woman says, “given that you have no furniture.”

Rogers laughs, and Barnes has to sit down on the cement stairs. His knees may be defective.

APPROVED

Confirm.

“Indoors on a wood floor is better than a lot of places I’ve had to sleep.”

The mission briefing - the memory details:

- a snowy mountain pass with no tents
- anywhere next to Dugan (snoring)
- a mud-filled ditch
- a mattress dating from approximately the time of the Pyramids, both poking out straw and filled with fleas

Confirm. Almost puts the tank into perspective.

“I’ll be fine,” Rogers says, “can’t make it a home without living in it.”

They walk to the north side of the building at Bridge and Water to enter. Barnes remembers to stop creeping around as if he were in the hedge and walk like a normal person.

He loiters on the north side of the building, and 4 minutes of staring are rewarded by a view of Rogers standing in one of the large windows right at the northwest corner. Not much of a view – buildings, mostly, and the cranes of the dockyard still further northwest.

Barnes spins to examine the building at his back. It is not beautiful: it is, improbably, pea green on the east side and pink on the north. He’s afraid to look at the other sides, but it’s logical to assume that they are orange and purple. Ugh.

The building to the north is similar red brick to Rogers’s building, but faded and shabby, not yet rehabbled. A bent-over old man with a rickety grocery cart lumbers up to the door. It takes the man 11.6 seconds to fumble with his keys and twice that to wrestle the cart through the entrance. The building’s windows are small and dingy-looking. The place is a dump. But Barnes finds it more appealing than the lurid building to the west. A dump is good camouflage. People’s eyes slide right past.

Barnes watches while the sun slants and shadows lengthen, turning the west-facing windows into signaling mirrors. The street is dark. Rogers says goodbye to the woman at the door, the retreats to
his new apartment. Barnes’s phone buzzes in his pocket – Rogers orders takeout.

Nothing bad has happened.

Relocation achieved.

CONFIRM
Barnes tucks himself into a dim corner under a shop awning. He sits on the duffel and pines for a grilled cheese, for coffee. The protein bars are pretty squashed after a month in the bag. His body is tired from the stresses of the day. It’s restful to sit in shadow and watch, even if it is a sandwich-less watching.

It’s also a necessary watching. The lights come on in windows around him – Rogers’s apartment, of course, and many of the other windows in that building. But not the three windows immediately to the south of Rogers. He watches for 3 hours, as lights go on and off. Eventually, mostly off.

The delivery man arrived and left, followed by muffled noises and clatter from the listening devices. At 1119, Rogers stands at his window for 8.3 minutes before he turns off his light. There is rustling, the thump of a hard object (conjecture: knee or elbow) against a wood floor, and static, as if the leather jacket has been wadded up.

“Oh wow,” Steve mutters to himself, “this is worse than I remember.”

Is there heat. Rogers needs to stay warm. Rogers needs to sleep. Adequate sleep required for optimal health.

Barnes has a pair of night-vision goggles in the duffel, standard HYDRA issue. But Rogers isn’t visible from the street, lying on the floor three flights up. The only remaining sound is soft music, something about a forest in Norway.

Elevation necessary. Shelter desired.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Barnes circles the crummy building. Only two windows are lit up, one on the second floor and one on the fourth.

The front door is ancient, with a glass pane too large for adequate safety. The lock takes a full minute to pick just by virtue of its being rusty and the tumblers bent. Needs graphite. No wonder the old man had trouble.

Inside, the building smells of mildew and dust. The scent is echo-memories, very old ones, accompanied by a sense of high ceilings and an empty belly. A scrawny boy with a black eye, coloring and general facial structure consistent with. Rogers? Before he was a lab rat, in childhood.

The museum had photos of Rogers before the war, hollow-eyed and little, with a list of ailments long enough to warrant his living in a hospital.

Where was the Bucky-person when they made Rogers change.

Did they put Rogers in a chair, to make him the size of a boulder.

The banister under his metal hand creaks. Surveillance required. Eyes on target necessary.

PROTECT

Confirm.
The stairs are creaky, and the paint on the walls is chipped and scuffed. It was probably once dark green. But the bones of the building are good: plaster and lath walls, skillfully carved wooden chair rails around the walls. The building is shabby, old, but solid. There is a good past in it, even if it has been ill-used for a long time.

SELF

What?

SELF

Okay?

SELF

I said okay.

CONFIRM

Confirm, jeez.

The first floor is all dark hallway. Elevation required. He climbs straight to the third floor, two-thirds of the lights are out in the hallway. The carpet is worn through in sections. There’s a sound of dripping in the background and a tinny voice – probably a television.

Barnes leaves the duffel at the top of the stairs and stalks up and down the hallway. An infrared scope would be valuable. The apartment at the northeast corner is the source of the television sound. But he wants the southwest corner, where the hallway is dark and silent.

The lock on apartment 3A is broken, and the door only takes a firm lift to open. There is furniture inside - Barnes goes completely still when he sees a tiny old woman asleep in an armchair in the front room, her mouth hanging open. The cat sitting on her knee stares at him but doesn’t move. Cats are clearly not mission assists.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Cute, though.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Barnes steps backwards out into the hallway. He shuts the door carefully, but the door is crooked in its jamb on top of the loose lock. Indicative of an inattentive landlord: good for covert surveillance. Bad for helpless old ladies and their cats.

Apartment 3C is empty. There’s some furniture here too, albeit dusty. The windows in the narrow bedroom and the living room overlook Rogers’s apartment. Ideal. Radiator heat. No electricity, but the ancient stove has gas and the sink has water. Electricity can be spliced in.

Someone clearly died on the sofa, but he doesn’t need to sit on it.

Short-term shelter acquired pending further confirmation.
CONFIRM

Confirm.

Barnes retrieves the duffel, trains the directional mike on Rogers’s window, and turns the crunchy mattress over. The other side is *slightly* less crunchy.

Set sleep: 3 hours.

Three hours is not enough after relocation. Three hours is UGH territory. But the building is still silent and the sky still dark. He unscrews the (pathetic) doorknob plate. Future people have obviously expended much more effort on perfecting grilled cheese than on locks.

Good choice, future people.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

At 0446, coffeeshop Pronoun is not open. Points off, Pronoun. Starbucks is open and the sandwiches are ready.

Rogers wakes at 0645 and takes an inordinate amount of time bathing for someone with so little hair. By the time Rogers emerges from the building, all scrubbed and shiny, the sidewalks are filling with people, many of whom walk in the direction of the subway. But the crowd is nothing like Manhattan. Barnes can breathe. No one jostles him.

He follows Rogers around all morning. First to Pronoun, where Rogers orders *tea* and something called a “wheat-free paleo sunrise muffin.” Rogers takes one bite of it, stops in the middle of the sidewalk, stares at it, and then tosses it in the nearest trashcan. Barnes is tempted to grab the thing and test it for poisons, but it looks so … sticky, lying on top of an old newspaper. Who knew food could look malevolent.

Steve, pal, you gotta learn about the magic of grilled cheese.

CONTACT

Yeah, yeah. Maybe.

He follows Rogers to a grocer, to a drug store. The grocer is next to a hardware store. Barnes goes in and buys a doorknob and lock while Rogers tries and fails to get a word out of the grocer.

“Brooklyn used to be friendlier,” Rogers mutters to the sidewalk afterward.

He sounds sad. Sadness mission-noncompliant. Barnes glares through the doorway at the grocer, who glares right back.

These New Yorkers are hard cases. He should maybe carry more knives.

Rogers is back in his apartment, singing along to a song about a bejeweled lady cosmonaut, while Barnes installs the new lock on not-quite-his-yet door. A voice behind him says,

“Don’t tell me O’Riley sprang for a new lock. I thought that jerk was trying to rot us all out.”
Barnes grips the screwdriver loosely and turns toward the threat.

It’s the old man with the cart from the previous day. He comes up to Barnes’s chest. Threat assessment: low. Very low.

“No,” he says, “I bought it.”

“Ah,” the man says, squinting up at him through thick, black-framed glasses.

“You related to Mrs. Hawthorne?”

Query unclear.

The man waves.

“Since you’re moving into her apartment. I figure you must be related.”

Potential cover identity: accepted.

“Yes. Her nephew.”

The man’s face contracts into even more wrinkles.

“Nephew by marriage, I presume?”

Query unclear. Line of questioning suspect. Adjust angle of screwdriver up 13%.

“Given that Mrs. Hawthorne was black.”


The man looks Barnes up and down with a fearlessness that is (a) unfamiliar and (b) surprising in a person who might be knocked over by a heavy breath.

The man’s eyes focus on his left hand.

The man’s shoulders relax.

Pause. Reassess threat.

“You a vet?”

Technically accurate.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, son, I took you for a robber, or one of those drug-dealing assholes O’Riley lets in here periodically to hide from the cops and scare more of the tenants away.”

The man leans forward.

“Rent-controlled, you know. Can’t sell until we’re all out or dead.”

Desired response unclear. Threat unclear. Nod?

The nod is apparently correct. The man grins up at him, showing several gaps.
“Where’d you serve?”

Barnes pulls up his recollections of Wilson’s therapy sessions to determine an appropriate answer.

“Afghanistan.”

“Left part of yourself there, I see,” nodding at the metal arm.

“Yes.”

“I was in Korea, myself. Never saw much action. Caught malaria after I’d been in the country about 10 minutes. Got shipped back to the States to build tanks. Pretty lucky.”

“Pretty lucky.”

The man squints at him some more. Or maybe his eyes are just naturally squinty.

“Got the battle fatigue pretty bad?”

Pal, you do not even know a tenth of it.

“Yeah.”

“Homeless?”

Barnes looks at the new lock, then back at the old man.

“No.”

The man laughs. Why does the man laugh. The questions are awkward, but they establish a cover. If one neighbor accepts his presence, others will too. If he can tread carefully and not excite too much curiosity or endanger the mission.

“Right,” the man says, “welcome to the rat trap. Be sure to use plenty of hot water – gas and water are on O’Riley’s dime.”

He holds out his right hand. Barnes knows this: shaking. Civilians do this all the time. It’s like saluting, except standing too close and allowing transfer of contact poisons.

He shakes the man’s hand.

“Ollie Peters.”

Two-part name required.

STEVE ROGERS

No, other than that one.

STEVEN GRANT

No, that’s –

GRANT ROGERS

What.
ROGER STEVENS

Mission imperative, you are obsessed.

CONFIRM

And I am not going to –

CONTACT

For shit’s sake.

The man’s eyebrow has lifted, and the handshake has gone on for long enough that Barnes’s hand is damp. Two-part name still required. He takes his cue from the mission imperative –

CONTACT

- and uses his body’s old name.

“Jim. Buchanan.”

“Good to meet you, Jimmy.”

The name makes his face want to fold up in a grimace. Sounds like a child’s name. But it’s a cover. Tactical flexibility, Barnes.

Ugh.

In the afternoon, seven different men troop in and out of Rogers’s apartment, carrying boxes and furniture. Possibly leaving listening devices all over. It is necessary to enter the apartment and set up his own surveillance at the first opportunity.

His phone buzzes six times during the afternoon, each time from a blocked number. The seventh time comes at 1622, when the most recent delivery person has been gone for 19 minutes. Steve answers.

“You didn’t come to the tower.”

Stark.

“What?”

“You promised you’d come to the tower, where are you?”

“I was getting furniture delivered, Tony. And I just arrived yesterday.”

“Good furniture?”

“I don’t know, it looks okay and it’s comfortable, does that count?”

“So crap, then. Tower’s nicer.”

“I’ll come see it.”

“When?”

“I don’t know, some time –“
“When when when when when when”

This guy is like a 3-year-old.

“Tony, has anyone ever told you that you act like a three-year-old?”

See.

“Only every day I interact with humans.”

It goes on like that for 13 minutes. Stark manufactures quips as if they make him a profit. But they settle a plan: Rogers will go to Manhattan tomorrow.


Query: mission-compliant to nail Rogers’s feet to his apartment floor.

DENIED

Too bad.
Routines and allies

Mission note: if the apartment is to be suitable for medium-term habitation, the death-smelling sofa and the crunchy mattress must be replaced. Odor should not affect mission effectiveness, but Trotsky almighty. Watery eyes miss fine detail.

A cracked window helps with the smell in the bedroom, which is at least only time and dirt and not months-old body leakages. The sound of cars and far-off boat horns is almost comforting, as is Rogers crooning to himself. His voice takes the occasional detour from on-key, but the sound makes the muscles on either side of Barnes’s spine snap loose, so that even the terrible mattress feels comfortable.

Halfway through a song about a displaced person, Barnes falls asleep, before he can even set his sleep time. He wakes at 0615 to the sound or Rogers’s alarm through his earbuds.

Rogers has changed his alarm. It matches his ring tone.

Rogers has actively chosen to awaken to the sound of the banjo. Conjecture: something is wrong with Rogers’s ears. Or possibly his brain. Definitely his taste.

…

You don’t have to agree with me. I’ll confirm it my own self.

NOTED

Noted?

Conjecture: the mission imperative disapproves of early rising.

CONFIRM

Barnes would grin, except that he can see Rogers in the scope, and he is dressed in running clothes.

Ugh.

There are no bugs on Rogers’s exercise gear. Following is necessary.

Outside, the October air is cool on his bare legs. If this will continue (this will continue), he’ll need to do more shopping. And find a place to launder his clothes. The crummy building is inferior to the DC condo.

Rogers. Why did you have to move.

Rogers runs northwest into a damp, fish-scented wind. At the Navy Yard, Rogers does approximately 700 pushups, 800 squats, 900 chin-ups, and 1000 inverted sit-ups while Barnes hangs back behind the corner of a building and tries to square the largely quiet space with a ghost-echo of crowds, horns, and running coins through his fingers inside a loose trouser pocket. There was work here, once. Now there are a few fishing boats and a lot of lonely concrete that Rogers sprints around in wide circles for 35 minutes. Looks exhausting.

He passes within 4 m of Barnes on his way back to his building. The mission imperative achieves a Doppler effect.
Rogers lopes at a much more sedate pace back to their buildings, bypasses them. He pauses briefly outside Pronoun, then runs on. Barnes peers at the specials board: “sprouted pea carob fiber sun-blast bar.”

Is that supposed to be food.

Steve jogs to Starbucks. Well done, Rogers. Even though he still orders a tea.

Tea. Little young to be a granny, aren’t you Steve?

Tea and banana bread. Who even are you.

It is, however, in the best interest of close surveillance to try a piece (in addition to his breakfast sandwich). Barnes is a big enough man to admit: banana bread is acceptable food. Too bad it doesn’t have icing like the lemon. He’ll try that one tomorrow.

A morning with the windows left open has greatly improved the atmosphere of his apartment. And after 6 minutes of disheartening, rust-colored trickle, the pipes in the bathroom creak, then give out a blast of hot water. Mission improvement. It steadies the mind to breathe freely and have his body clean before he has to brave the subway.

It is an un-fun journey. Barnes is too busy for the noise and tight space to bother him: he has to pretend to not be the second-tallest person in the subway car, so as to avoid the notice of the tallest. It helps that Rogers is tuned into his own thoughts, probably of how many more hours of calisthenics he can fit into his day.

They exit the train at 42nd Street, next to a park. Rogers cuts through the park, weaving around people sitting on the grass in the bright autumn sun. The trees are still bright with scraggly foliage. His boots make a scuffing sound in the leaves that lie on the ground. Rogers kicks one little pile of leaves, and they scatter around his knees.

Barnes experiments with this, sweeping his foot at an angle as Rogers has done, and the leaves crackle and spin. A rich, spicy scent rises up from them.

I want to do that again, he thinks. So he does.

On the other side of the park, Rogers’s height at least makes him easy to follow despite the crowd. The number of people still makes Barnes twitchy. Any of them could be HYDRA. One with a poisoned blade or a syringe could get to Steve before Barnes even knew it, much less before he could stop it.

Rogers should travel in an enclosed vehicle. Bullet-proofed glass, armor plating.

At 45th and Park, Rogers walks into a singularly ugly building. The moment he crosses the threshold, the ambient city noise in Barnes’s earbuds cuts out. Barnes shakes his phone, which of course does no good. The silence in his ears is oppressive.

The building’s lobby is filled with people, including four obvious security guards who block access to the elevator banks. Even Rogers has to scan his hand. There are seventeen visible cameras.
It’s a secure building, at least. And Rogers has friends inside. Stark, with his robot suit, is a potentially acceptable backup.


The enormous legend etched into the glass door reads “Avengers Tower.” Barnes retreats for coffee and research.

The “Avengers” are the people in funny suits from the videos of fighting space aliens. Assessment: even if the building is rotten with bad guys, Rogers has a high probability of safety. Possibly as much as 82%.

But what is he saying. It’s weird to have silence in the earbuds. Assessment: dislike.

Barnes walks back to the building to look for possible sites of ingress. The loading dock is nearly as secure as the front entrance; otherwise, at street level there are no windows or other doors. This indicates a distressing lack of fire exits. The building material is too smooth for climbing.

On the northeast side, Barnes touches the wall with his metal fingers. Moderate pressure causes no damage to the surface.

“Can I be of assistance, Sergeant Barnes?”

Vertical jump: 0.4 m. Origin of sound, unidentified. No stationary humans within 10 m. No visible speakers.

Who has discovered him.

“Pardon me, Sergeant. I had no wish to startle you. My name is JARVIS. I am the building.”

“You are the building?”

“Correct.”

The building talks.

“Like the internet?”

“Something like that.”

The building talks. The building is talking to him from an unidentified location. The building –

“Did you tell Rogers that I’m here?”

“I have not. I thought it best to ascertain your purpose.”

Assessing threat level. Smart building.

“How do you know who I am?”

“I have access to all of the SHIELD and HYDRA files recently released online, as well as all video footage of the events in Washington DC. Also, Agent Romanoff mentioned that you might come to New York. She advised that I not notify Captain Rogers without your permission.”

The red – what?
“I don’t know what I think of that woman.”

“She is rather inscrutable, sir.”

Barnes stares at the granite wall, but the source of the remains nowhere evident.

“Sir, if I may inquire again as to your purpose here.”

“Mission. Protect Rogers.”

“Your current mission is to protect Captain Rogers?”

“Confirm.”

“Then can I assume that you are the source of the surveillance devices on Captain Rogers’s shield and clothing?”

“Confirm.”

It’s nice to talk to a building. Sticks to the subject.

“What is the purpose of said surveillance?”

Maybe not a smart building.

“Critical intel for protection.”

“I see. The radius of the listening devices appears to be roughly 45 m.”

“Confirm.”

“Let me take the liberty of boosting the signal while the Captain is on the premises. And I can assure you, sir, that he is perfectly safe while inside, in case you have other places to go.”

MISSION ASSIST

“Um. Thanks.”

“My pleasure, sir. Unless you’d like to come in?”

CONTACT

“Refuse.”

“Very well, sir. May I take the liberty of pairing to your phone?”

CONFIRM

“Confirm.”

“Done. I will notify you when Captain Rogers is ready to leave.”

And the earbuds are full of sound again – Stark talking (as usual) at a high rate of speed (as usual) about something totally incomprehensible (as usual).

Barnes pats the building.
“Thanks, pal.”

“You’re very welcome, sir,” this time in the earbuds, soft and perfectly clear.

Pretty weird to talk to a building. Nice building, though, even if it is ugly.
Barnes takes the building at its word, and as he walks away from it, the signal remains strong in his ears. He walks south, and the signs of the ugly aliens are all around, even 2 years later: buildings under construction swaddled in tarps and scaffolding. Some are still derelict, piles of concrete and twisted metal.

He doesn’t like to think of the videos. Rogers putting himself in the way of every possible harm, with just the people in weird suits and the redhead for backup. It would be good for an alien lizard-thing to show up right now. So he could punch through its face.

All the while, he hears the noises of the building – Rogers greeting people in the elevator, meeting up with Stark and a “Ms. Potts.”

“Took you long enough to get here.”

“I know, my completely unreasonable forty-eight-hour delay.”

Well done, Rogers.

“Don’t mind Tony,” the woman says, “he’s just really excited to show you the tower.”

She sounds calm, sensible. Approved.

Stark sounds like the world’s fastest-talking tour guide for the next 24 minutes. Barnes can tell by the repetitions of “mmm,” “ah,” and “very nice” that Rogers is also bored half to sleep by laboratories and offices. The coffee bar sounds extensive. Set task: query the building for further information.

“And we’ve got food for everybody – vegan, paleo, raw,” Stark says.

“In my day, we called vegan the three days before payday.”

Download: beans for breakfast, beans for lunch, oh boy beans for dinner.

“Beans for breakfast, beans for lunch, oh boy beans for dinner,” Rogers says, almost in time with the download.

It is a memory with an associated physical response: smile.

“That sounds horrible,” Stark says.

“Better than no beans at all.”

Barnes can hear the shrug in Steve’s voice. His own shoulder lifts in response.

ROGERS

Confirm.

“Ugh, just the thought makes me want to order in from Momofuku. Babe can we get dinner from Momofuku?”

“Yes, Tony. Steve, do you like Japanese? Will you join us for dinner?”
“I do, and yes. That would be great.”

Wandering around Manhattan for the rest of the day waiting for the guy. Terrific.

“We can eat it in your kitchen!”

Stark is very excitable.

“Does that mean you’re going to actually show it to me some time today?”

“Keep your pants on, big guy –“

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“–first the gym.”

Potts bows out for that part. Her loss, because the gym sounds great: obstacle course, a firing range with fully two-thirds of every kind of projectile he might like to use, and a steam room. His new friend Building: approved.

Rogers’s reaction to the living space elicits curiosity.

“Wow, Tony. This is really … opulent.”

“Opulent for a Steinbeck novel, maybe. It’s not like you have gold fixtures.”

“Just take the compliment, Tony.”

“I wanted to do it up with red walls, white carpet, and blue furniture, but someone overruled me.”

“I’ll be sure to thank Pepper.”

The place sounds nice, and Stark – or Potts – clearly tried to fill it with stuff Rogers likes, given comments like “this record collection is great,” and “wow, I didn’t know they made tubs big enough to fit me.”

A tub big enough to fit Rogers is a tub big enough to fit Barnes.

I have a new life goal.

SECONDARY MISSION

Of course.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

The streets are lit up now, and less busy than earlier. Barnes’s head is full from looking at the city, and his belly is empty. In the earbuds, Stark yells,

“Pepper and Japanese!”

Barnes circles back in the direction of the building. After two blocks there is a place shining with red neon in the shape of a fish and the phrase “Japanese Food.”
Well, why not.

He walks into a small, dim room crowded with tables, all of which are currently empty. The elderly man behind a tall counter says,

“Thank god, an early eater.”

He waves.

Barnes has a preference. He would choose to sit at this nice table by the door, with his back to the wall and the exits clearly visible. But the old man waves so vigorously that shoulder dislocation is possible.

Ugh.

Barnes sits at the counter across from the old man. The counter is glass: underneath, chunks of raw fish sit on piles of crushed ice. Color and light. That could bear closer inspection.

“What you want?” the man asks.

“Menu.”

“No, no. Not needed. Just tell me what you want. The hamachi is good today.”

“What?”

The old man squints at him.

“Sushi?”

Barnes shakes his head.

“Raw fish?”

Barnes leans back in his seat. He looks down at the fish in the case. Looks nice sitting on the ice. There’s even a Russian saying about that. Does not look edible.

“How do you get to 2015 and not know sushi?” the man says, waving his arms around.

“I was away.”

“Away in a hole in the ground?”

Try a cryo tank, pal. Conjecture: this guy is an asshole.

They stare at each other briefly. It is weird that future people find raw fish so important. Should’ve just gone for grilled cheese.

The old man sighs heavily and shakes his head.

“Oh, you cold? You look cold.”


“Okay.”
The man walks to the open door behind the counter and yells a phrase in Japanese. He comes back to Barnes and uses a little wooden dipper to fill two tiny ceramic cups from a pot on a warmer behind him. He thunks one of the cups down in front of Barnes.

“Sake. Rice wine, to warm you up.”

Barnes picks up the cup and sniffs. It smells dusty. He glares at the old man, who rolls his eyes and holds his own cup out. He jiggles the cup. He jiggles it again. Action: unclear.

Then the man grabs his wrist and tugs until Barnes’s cup meets his own with a clink.

“Kanpai!” he says, then nods at Barnes.

Assessment: the kind of nod one gives to a particularly stupid child.

“Kanpai?” Barnes says.

The old man drinks the whole little cup at once. Likelihood of poison toleration scheme in a public restaurant: low. Barnes drinks. The stuff also tastes a little dusty, and sour, but it goes down warm and leaves behind a pleasant grain-ish flavor.

“Okay,” the man says.

He places another little cup (slightly bigger) in front of Barnes and fills it with a clear green liquid that’s a little bitter but smells of flowers. While Barnes drinks, the man is busy behind the counter, piling rice and vegetables on a square of green paper that he rolls up and slices. He puts them on a dish and placed it on the counter.

“Sushi,” the man says, “vegetable, no fish. You try it.”

Barnes picks up one of the little circles and tries to find the seam in the paper to undo it.

“No no no,” the man says, “just put it in your mouth.”

Raw fish and paper. That’s what Rogers et al. are chirping over in the earbuds? But this is a harmless order. Barnes chooses to follow it.

The sushi-thing is good. Parts are soft and parts crunchy. The paper is chewy, but edible. The vegetables have a tang of vinegar. Insufficient caloric value for hard missions, but good to eat.

“What is the paper?” he asks.

The old man smiles in a mass of wrinkles.

“Seaweed.”

He hands over a sheet of it. It smells like the ocean. Tastes like the ocean, salt and iodine. Neat.

A woman brings him a large bowl filled with broth, noodles, vegetables, and unknown objects.

“Soup to warm you up,” the man says, “nabeyaki udon.”

He hands Barnes two wooden sticks.

“Chopsticks,” the man says, “for your noodles.”
He places the sticks in his hand and moves the pieces of sushi around slowly. Barnes watches the movement of the man’s fingers. It takes him two tries to pick up the largest object in the soup using the sticks, but then it makes sense. The thing is a shrimp. Tasty.

“Aha, you ate the tail!” the man says, laughing.

“It’s good. Crunchy. I like crunchy.”

“You like shrimp tails, you’ll be fine with sushi when you come back.”

Unlikely. But the soup is almost as good as grilled cheese. It’s warm and salty, with different textures. Complicated, but for once a good kind of complicated. Added nutriment inventory: soup.

The conversation in the earbuds has so far been about dinner and Rogers’s tour of the tower. Barnes is only a third of the way into his bowl when Stark asks,

“So what’s so great about Brooklyn?”

“I told you, Tony, it’s home.”

“Uh huh. Any HYDRA agents left on your doorstep yet?”

In under 3 days? They’re not that good.

“What are you getting at?”

“Just saying that I know I gave you a guest room, but don’t think your heterosexual life partner is going to be welcome here.”

His what.

“My – what?”

“He killed my parents.”

The soup loses all attraction.

“You read the file.”

“Damn right I read the file. I read all of the files. Fuckers made a fool out of me. And he killed my parents.”

“It wasn’t him.”

Don’t be naïve, Rogers.

“Don’t be naïve.”

“Tony,” Potts says, “it’s not Steve’s fault.”

“Didn’t say that.”

“It’s not Bucky’s fault either. They never gave him a choice.”

“Everyone has a choice.”

“You think that?” Steve says, so loud that it causes pain.
“You think he had a choice about being frozen for years on end? You think he had a choice about that arm? He didn’t even know me, Stark. What are the chances that he had any idea what he was doing for HYDRA except what he was told? What do you think they did to him when he didn’t do what he was told?”

Oh.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“He killed. My parents. And how many other people?”

“Not nearly as many as you killed with Stark weapons.”

“Get out.”

The earbuds are full of rattling, muffled shouting, and an elevator bell.

The building cuts in, “Sergeant, it appears that Captain Rogers is exiting the tower.”

“I have to go.”

Barnes stands, and his chair knocks over. The old man jumps back. No time to set it right.

“The soup’s no good?”

“I have to go.”

Barnes throws money on the counter and sprints out. The old man’s vocal tenor indicates dismay. No time to fix it.

He runs three blocks.

“Building, update.”

“Captain Rogers exited through the front doors and turned south. According to the GPS on his phone, he is headed in your direction, 500 m away.”

Oh. Wow.

MISSION ASSIST

I’m impressed too.

Barnes stands under a small potted tree next to a restaurant. It’s almost like being back in the hedge. After 4.5 minutes, Rogers approaches from the north, head down and hands jammed in his jacket pockets. The expression on his face looks like the preamble to something getting hit. Barnes swings out into the sidewalk to follow. Rogers’s pace is barely slower than a run.

Jesus, Rogers, are we walking back to Brooklyn?

Assessment required re: Stark. The metal suit and access to resources makes him mission assist. His personality is terrible. But even if his words have caused Rogers pain –

PROTECT
—they are not incorrect. He did kill a lot of people. Refusing to download the details doesn’t change that.

Anyone but Rogers would put him in prison.

AVOID

Confirm.

Prison is non-mission compliant. Maintain secrecy.

Does Rogers think he can be reformed.

Barnes stops in the middle of the sidewalk.

He has been re-formed. Many times. Why not again? But choose the form to take.

SELF

Confirm.

The self chooses the form: good guy or bad guy. Killer or not-killer.


CONFIRM

Confirm.

Rogers walks all the way down to the end of the numbered streets and turns toward the river. At the end is a park, lit up with streetlights along curved paths. At the edge, overlooking the water, Rogers stands grasping the back of a bench, bent over as if stretching.

Rogers please do not start running. Don’t make me run in these boots.

Rogers kicks the bench leg. The iron bolt comes loose, and the bench squeals as one end moves forward.

“Dammit!”

Rogers maneuvers the bench back into place, then flings his arms upward.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit.”

Better watch it, Rogers, you’ve just used up most of your yearly allowance of swears.

Rogers flops down on the bench and dials his phone: Wilson.

“Sam, what am I even doing here?”

“Oh hi, I’m fine, thanks for asking. How are you?”

“Sorry. How are you?”
“Really am fine. I was just yanking your chain, man. What’s wrong?”

“Just… was this even a good idea, coming to New York?”

“Are you asking me or wanting to hear what you said?”

“So bad idea, then.”

“Steve, I don’t know. Risky idea. You don’t even know if he followed you.”

What.

“Had any more HYDRA agents tied up in the front yard?”

“No since you left.”

Captain Sneaky sighs into his phone.

“Maybe he did come after me, then. But I haven’t seen any sign of him. I thought for sure the sight of Brooklyn would. Do something.”

“Make him run up to you with a smile and open arms?”

What am I, a puppy.

“No, Sam. You know what I mean.”

“I know. I’m just not sure it’s right. No way to tell unless he comes to you, he slips up, or you start getting wrapped-up baddies on your doorstep again.”

“Yeah. I just wish.”

“I know you do, Steve.”

WISH WHAT

Confirm. Wish what, Rogers.

(CONTACT)

Shut up, I can hear you even when you whisper. Refuse.

“I wish I had something more comforting to say to you, man.”

“Thanks, Sam.”

“You call me any time.”

“I will.”

Rogers stares out at the lights of Brooklyn for 14 minutes. Barnes catalogs the numerous annoyances of the past hour:

1. Stark, although proving his own point (I’m looking at you, mission imperative) about the need to maintain covert surveillance because of past misdeeds, did not need to needle Rogers about it. Dick move, Stark.

2. That soup was really good, and he barely got to eat any of it. Plus, the old man was
friendly and helpful: the most friendly and helpful person encountered to date in New York other than Building. Barnes feels a sense of hollowness in his chest associated with the thought of the old man’s distress. Assessment: guilt. Again, thanks for nothing, Tony Stark.

3. The night air is freezing, and made worse by proximity to water. A heavier jacket is required.

4. Shopping. Ugh

5. Steve are you going to sit there all night.


Finally Rogers gets up off the bench. Barnes’s nose is dripping from the cold. More of that soup would be really good right about now. And a handkerchief.

Rogers hails a cab. A cab. Jesus. Hope the taxicab drivers’ union isn’t rotten with HYDRA agents. Barnes heaves a sigh for the ages as the cab pulls away.

Then he hails one for himself and goes home to his smelly apartment to take a damn warm bath.
Enhance Skill Set

For 5 days, Stark and Rogers are having a fight. Barnes can tell because there are no more trips to Manhattan (thank Marx), no more phone calls from Stark, but three calls from Potts.

“I’m not going to apologize for him, that’s his job,” she says, “but he was really rude. I want you to know that I told him that.”

“Thanks, Pepper.”

“Are you okay out there in Brooklyn by yourself?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I know it’s not easy. But it’s not for Tony either. He was a jerk the other night, but he’s been through a lot.”

“I get that. I do.”

“So just give each other time, okay?”

“Okay.”

Whatever Stark did to deserve her is not enough.

Rogers walks a lot – and runs a lot, ugh – during the 5 days. Barnes is hungry every minute from all the activity. He sees a lot of Brooklyn.

To the southeast is a large park with good running trails and workout equipment. Barnes becomes intimately acquainted with these trails and only occasionally has to stop himself from using his metal arm to pull apart the chin-up bars, etc.

There’s a big war memorial in the park with both their names prominently inscribed. Rogers stands in front of it for 22 minutes their first day in the park. But there are no bugs on the workout gear, so if he says anything, Barnes doesn’t know.

It’s just past dawn, and a light frost tips the grass. It’s pretty but a reminder that no stores seem to carry any damn handkerchiefs. Barnes wipes his nose on his sleeve.

The fight with Stark brings the return of Rogers’s sad expression. Fucking Stark.

This is a particular difficulty of the mission: how to erase Rogers’s sadness while maintaining distance. How to suggest the comfort of a long bath or a grilled cheese with ham. A white mocha can fix almost anything for a little while.

Hey. Note: it is useful knowledge for living to have a list of things that are good no matter what.

CONFIRM

Rogers walks, and mopes, and occasionally sits at a restaurant or in a park to draw and mope.

Barnes has a much better time, following at a cautious distance. He finds a store that sells sheets. Clean sheets and a thick mattress pad improve the crunchy mattress. Rogers finds a little café he likes that has a sleazy diner across the street that’s more Barnes’s speed. Their coffee is terrible,
but he is working his way through the menu. He’s pretty sure pancakes are something he has liked for his entire long life.

But charging his phone at coffee shops is inconvenient. On the second day of the fight, Rogers has stomped up and down the streets for 5.2 hours. As Barnes is wearily unlocking his door, the old lady from 3A sticks her head out into the hallway.

“Young man.”

She is looking straight at him.

“Young man, come here please. I don’t want Eleanor to get out.”

Greater mission secrecy required. This apparently means interacting with neighbors to maintain cover identity.

He moves to the door and, at her beckon, squeezes through the narrow gap while the cat seen on his first night tries to escape.

“Drat you, Eleanor,” the woman says.

Then, to him, “she always wants to get out, even though she never goes any further than the landing.”

The cat is winding around his legs and purring as if he were an old friend.

“She likes you.”

What does one do to a cat.

“Should I pet her?”

“Well, feel free, but there’s no obligation.”

The cat sits and yawns wide, showing teeth like needles. Better leave it be.

“Come in, we’ll have a talk.”

She grabs his elbow with her small hand and steers him toward her front room, pushes him onto the sofa.

“Sit there.”

She disappears into her kitchen. Amid the clatter and beeping, cat Eleanor jumps onto Barnes’s knee. He presses back into the sofa, hands still, and stares at the creature. Estimated weight 3 kg. Currently shedding hairs, cream with brown tips, onto his jeans. She blinks her pale green eyes at him and pushes at his knee rhythmically several times, then perches on his leg and purrs.

Does he call for the old lady. Cat Eleanor has already demonstrated that her claws are scalpel sharp, and those teeth.

The purring could be a trap. But his metal arm ought to be impervious. He reaches out with his left hand and strokes the cat’s head. She stretches her neck and purrs harder, a thrum against his leg. He scratches a little behind her ear, and she makes a high-pitched sound.

“She doesn’t usually take to people,” the old woman says.
She’s carrying a tray with mugs and a plate on it. An ancient urge rises to get up and take the tray, but the risk of severe puncture wounds is too great if he moves.

“Eleanor’s a tough customer. You must be high quality.”

Assessment: high quality assassin, fighter, and spy. Cats are predators. Maybe cats are attracted to the tough and deadly. He scratches a little more firmly, and Eleanor rises, pads over and snuggles down on his lap.

She is purring, right on top of all his tender parts, and that’s where all her claws are. Terrifying.

The old lady hands him a mug with a picture of the Brooklyn Bridge on it.

“I made it with milk and sugar the way I like it. Is that all right?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

It’s tea. But, as tea goes, not awful.

“So,” the old woman says, settling into the armchair she slept in when he first saw her, “you and Eleanor are friends for life. I’m Esther.”

“Jim.”

“So Ollie tells me. I must say, so far you’re a very quiet neighbor.”

He nods.

The old woman grins and hands over the plate. It has cookies on it. He takes one. Chocolate, cinnamon, dried cherry. It’s good.

“Listen,” Esther says, “what I’m about to say to you is not exactly legal.”

Oh ho.

He stops scratching Eleanor briefly. The cat makes a set of holes in the fold at the top of his thigh. He resumes his labors.

“But this building is neither fancy nor organized. You may have noticed.”

“Yes.”

“Have another cookie. Anyway. Since Gloria died, I know there’s no power over in your place. I wanted to say, once you get that worked out, as long as you pay a share, I don’t mind if you splice my cable.”

Splice her. Is that a euphemism?

“For the TV.”

Oh. Oh good.

“Don’t need TV,” he says, “but I could pay to splice electricity.”

The woman grins.

“Deal! Better to pay me than those ConEd bastards.”
“How much.”

“I’m not out to cheat you, Jimmy. I’ll keep this month’s bill for comparison and you can look at the bills going forward. Pay the difference, plus say – fifteen dollars for my troubles?”

It’s gonna be forty, lady, but we can have that argument when the bill comes in.

“Sure. Thank you.”

“Have another cookie. Now, is there anything you need to know about the neighborhood? And feel free to tell me absolutely everything you’ve ever thought, said, or done. I have been stuck for ages with only Ollie and Lidia for company, and I’ve heard every story they have to tell a hundred times.”

Required responses completely unclear.

“Um.”

“Have another cookie.”

“Thanks”

Barnes replays the entire paragraph while he chews.

“Where can I do laundry?”

“Oh no, don’t tell me you’re going to be boring.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“How terrible.”

She leans forward in her chair and glares at him.

“Jimmy Buchanan. Are you *shy*?”

Is ‘shy’ going to make you stop pestering me.

“Yes.”

“Oh well, no matter. I’ll pry it all out of you eventually. I have a washer and dryer here that you’re welcome to use for the price of eating baked goods and fixing a few things around here. There used to be laundry in the basement, but it’s been so long since the lights worked down there that who knows?”

“Okay.”

“Just knock any time. As you can tell, Eleanor will be happy to see you. Have another cookie, you look starved. Does your stove work over there?”

“Works, yes.”

She looks at him over the top of her spectacles. It is an expression that strikes an ancient fear in him. He has the physical urge to clasp his hands behind his back, lower his voice, and promise to be good.
Pretty sure the Asset never got glared at by tiny old ladies.

Absolutely sure no one ever gave the Asset homemade cookies.

Barnes for the win.

“But do you use it?” she asks.

“Don’t know how to cook.”

Esther sighs at the ceiling.

“Do young people these days learn anything useful? Sure, you can make things go blinky on the world wide web, but can you sew on a button? Can you feed yourself?”

Barnes has a list of all the useful skills he possesses, most of which would probably send this slightly bonkers old lady screaming.

“I can sew a button. Mended a tear in these jeans.”

“Well at least that’s something. But you can’t cook.”

“No.”

“What do you live off of?”

“Mochas and grilled cheese.”

“Young man, that is not a balanced diet! There’s not a vegetable in there!”

“They put vegetables on grilled cheese now.”

“Oh DO they. How marvelous for the modern age.”

Noted: never introduce this woman to the redhead.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“You’ll come for dinner tomorrow,” she says, “five pm. I’ll teach you how to make grilled cheese.”

“Can’t commit to the time. I have things I need to do. My schedule is different every day.”

Esther purses her lips at him and glares again. The conversation is so alarming that Barnes leans back, which makes cat Eleanor dig her front claws into his hip again.

If Rogers only knew.

He would probably give himself a hernia from laughing.

“Very well,” Esther says, “I won’t be a stickler on the time. But you’ll show up.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Now I’ll trade you cat for plate.”
Cat Eleanor protests for a scary moment, but Esther detaches her from his lap. Then she steers him up and out the door – in under 30 seconds he’s standing in the hallway with the plate of cookies.

“I know you’ll be back. You have to return the plate,” Esther says, and shuts the door.

The cookies provide excellent fuel for his late-night wiring project. By 0120, his apartment has power. Rogers has long been asleep, so it’s safe to turn on all the lights. This illuminates the disgusting state of the apartment (that death sofa has to go), but it’s satisfying nonetheless.

The third day of the fight is cold and rainy. Rogers, because he is terrible, goes for a run anyway. Barnes has looked online and knows that Rogers’s building has a gym. But no. He wants to run in the rain. The chill makes Barnes’s shoulder ache at the seam with the metal arm.

Bad things about the day:
- running in cold rain
- reduced caloric intake (the four remaining cookies) owing to disinclination to get his remaining clothing wet by going to Starbucks
- the scope shows that Rogers has from somewhere obtained a tiny laptop: an uncloned laptop and therefore a critical gap in intel

Good things about the day:
- the crummy building’s centralized hot water system never runs cold
- by 1600, the apartment is much cleaner; he has even dragged the death sofa to the empty apartment across the hall and obtained from there an armchair that smells only of dust
- he is on time for his cooking lesson with Esther

Rogers has ordered two pizzas and is sitting in front of his television, feet up, sketchbook on his knee and a stack of books by his side. The rain blows at an angle outside. Even Rogers won’t go outside in this, surely, without a good reason. Barnes knocks on Esther’s door and hears the rapid tap of cat Eleanor’s feet behind the wooden door.

“Not too busy after all, I see,” Esther says when she opens the door.

“No.”

Cat Eleanor stands up on her hind legs, balancing her front paws on his knees, and says hello in cat. Esther smiles.

“She wants you to pick her up.”

REFUSE

Higher likelihood of claw holes from picking up or not picking up.

DANGER

Eleanor makes holes in his kneecaps. He picks her up and drapes her on his shoulder, where she purrs into his neck and presses her cold, wet nose against his ear. Barnes learns that the area around his ear is extremely ticklish.
The mission imperative is a sound in the back of his mind a little like “eeeeeee.”

The technique of grilled cheese is straightforward. Barnes makes note of the supplies needed. Esther, for all her smart comments, is as thorough as the old Japanese man. She moves slowly, talking the whole time about the merits of cast-iron pans, the general pestiness of Eleanor, and the only trustworthy grocers in the neighborhood.

“The cheese looks different,” he says as she slices.

She hands him a piece. Its flavor is akin to sour, very strong. He wants more.

“You won’t find good sharp cheddar most of the time in ones you can buy. Too expensive, and many people, who are wrong by the way, find its flavor too strong.”

“I like it.”

“As well you should.”

Then she launches into a tirade about types of cheese, varieties of bread, and apparently infinite condiments.

Barnes feels dizzy with possibility.

The next morning provides more of the same cold drizzle. Barnes declines the opportunity to run in the rain. Again. It’s more important to establish surveillance in Rogers’s apartment.

The front door lock is no problem. The one on Rogers’s apartment is actually a minor challenge and takes 2.1 minutes of delicate struggle before it pops open.

APPROVED

Confirm.

Barnes hooks his own laptop up to Steve’s and sets his little spyware program installing. He sweeps for bugs and finds only three. The ones in the bedroom and doorway he destroys. The one in the kitchen is barely larger than a seed, and when he touches it, his earbuds crackle.

“Pardon me, Sergeant,” Building says, “that particular device is mine. I assure you that I monitor only Captain Rogers’s well-being.”

MISSION ASSIST

Yeah, no kidding.

“Confirm.”

He leaves that one alone. His own bugs seem kind of sad now, being only moderate-range. Maybe he can butter up Building and get some of the better ones. Unclear how to talk up a piece of architecture.

The apartment is comfortable to look at, with furniture that invites lounging. The thermostat is set too low; Barnes turns it up so Rogers won’t catch cold.

The refrigerator is practically empty. It contains a bag of apples, a nearly empty container of milk, and a package of sliced ham. Nutrition: insufficient.
SELF
Excuse me?
SELF
Are you telling me to go grocery shopping?
CONFIRM
Confirm.

Barnes looks in the sketchbook on the sofa. There are many quick sketches of the past few days: a boat at the Navy Yard, the corner café where Rogers has already eaten three meals. His own face again, with ‘where are you?’ written underneath it.

It would be easy to take the pencil and write ‘here.’

It is tempting to do so.

But Barnes knows, from present experience and download-memory that Rogers is – has always been – stubborn enough for twenty-seven standard humans. If Barnes wrote that note, Rogers would turn Brooklyn upside down, making surveillance/protection impossible.

Even Esther might quail before Rogers with his chin stuck out and his feet planted wide. But wouldn’t that be worth observing.

He doesn’t write the note.

The rain has let up by the time Rogers returns from his run. Barnes is full of egg sandwich and coffee and has the advantage over his target of being entirely dry.

“Man, how did it get so hot in here?” Rogers says.

The signal is clear and strong.
Close Call

The fourth day of the Rogers/Stark fight is sunny but cold. Barnes is glad of the gloves purchased on the previous day’s ramble-and-mope, even if they are cheap knit and too small. The neighborhood around the apartments is thick with tiny restaurants, but he has been unable to locate acceptable places to purchase clothing.

The spare concrete space next to Rogers’s café had proved to be a clothing store. Barnes gave up pancakes to enter it, only to discover that skinny jeans, which were $65 in DC, are $170 in Brooklyn. This seems unfair to Brooklyn residents. He bought them out of a desperate desire for clean trousers, but that doesn’t help with all the running.

Rogers, doing his seven hundredth chin-up on the park equipment, is probably warm. He has a thick sweatshirt given to him by Army (presumably US). Ugh.

Rogers gets his tea (please, Rogers, you’re killing me) and ambles through the neighborhood after his run, his chin lifted to face the morning. While Barnes shivers and wipes his nose on his sleeve. It’s not an exercise shirt, and he had already worn it twice. It smells awful. He only has one clean shirt left. Rogers probably has a drawer full of shirts that smell like pine trees and sunlight.

Barnes learns that none of his programming involved giving him telepathy. Thinking ‘go home Steve go home go home where it’s warm’ is an utter failure. What a shame.

One of the grocers recommended (allowed) by Esther is between the park and the apartments. Barnes steps gratefully inside after Rogers. Steve heads straight for the meat counter. Barnes makes the happy discoveries that (a) it is heated and (b) the meat counter is visible in a mirror positioned over the bread aisle.

There is so much bread. White, brown, covered in seeds. Square, round, even flat. He picks up one loaf of square slices. It is surprisingly lightweight, as if the pieces are filled with air.

“Jimmy!”

Shouldn’t bread be heavier?

“Jim! Hey Jimmy!”

Wait.

“Jim! It’s Ollie!”

In the mirror, Barnes sees Rogers look up and over toward the end of the bread aisle, where Ollie stands waving. Rogers’s eyebrows are up, and he wears a small smile. Memory-download defines this as his Mr. Friendly face, ready to chat. Barnes drops into a crouch. Detection undesired. Mission endangered. Adrenaline strike noted. Respiration increased. Risk of mission failure.

“Fancy meeting you here, neighbor. I heard Esther has already sunk her claws into you. You’ll never have another thought to yourself again.”

Barnes is surprised to note that his left hand, hidden and not holding the bread, has a knife in it. The metal plates are shifting. Respiration critically fast. Rapid heartbeat.

Stop.
The arm’s plates continue to shift. The internal structures have tightened to shorten reaction time. Ollie is 0.6 m outside maximum reach. Estimated time to access 2 s. Angle required, 50 degrees to hit femoral artery for shortest time to demise. Egress in 3 m. Ollie is almost within range. Adjust angle. Three more steps.

Wait.

“Jimmy?”

Barnes holds up his right hand, as if the loaf of too-light bread will shield the old man from him. His neck aches with the strain of holding himself still. The metal arm quivers and whirrs.

He has been about to kill Ollie. A harmless, friendly old man. For having. Startled him.

Barnes. Three days ago you stood on a sidewalk and chose to be a good guy.

What if that is not possible.

“Hey, son. Hey.”

Ollie lays his hand on Barnes’s right wrist. Barnes cannot clench his jaw any tighter without crushing his own teeth.

“Can you give me the bread, Jim?”

Let go, Barnes tells his right fingers. After a pause, they do. Ollie takes the bread and crouches down next to him.

“Guess I startled you there.”

Nod.

“Sorry about that.”


“Guess you weren’t kidding about the battle fatigue.”

Shake head.

“Maybe you could walk home with me.”

Home is the crummy apartment. Home is a locked door and quiet.

ROGERS

Home is Rogers.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Pound of ham, please, and half a pound of Swiss,” Rogers says in his earbuds.

The sound moves through Barnes like a shudder. For a moment, he forgot the mission. Focus on the mission.
If only he could get behind a locked door. And maybe have a bath. Or a nap. Before focusing on the mission.

He shakes his head hard, which clears it somewhat. He lifts his left hand to push his hair back out of his eyes, but the knife is still there. Ollie gasps.

Barnes puts the knife away.

“Sorry.”

He whispers, in case the muscles in Rogers’s ears also grew three times in size with the serum.

“Don’t worry about it, son.”

“Which aisle is bread?” Steve says in his ears.

Barnes rises, hooks Ollie about the waist with his metal arm, and launches them both toward the back of the store and to the right. They wash up among the juice, both breathing hard.

“What was that?” Ollie squeaks.

His thick black glasses sit at a sharp angle across his face.

Barnes feels at an angle to the outside world. The lights are too bright. The insecurity of his control over his reactions is. Distressing.

“Can’t endanger the mission.”

Speaking of lack of control. The words fall out of him.

Ollie straightens his glasses, concern showing in the mass of lines across his forehead.

“Mission?”

Barnes cuts his eyes up toward yet another mirror, where Rogers can be seen examining the bread Ollie left on the floor. It has been tightly compressed in the middle. Ollie is, sadly, sharp enough to catch the look.

“What’s your mission, Jim?”

There’s the same tone of warning from their first meeting. Barnes wants to smile. This frail man is brave. Nosy. But brave. A little like Rogers.

CONFIRM
Confir

“Protection detail.”

Ollie whirls around to stare at the mirror again. When he turns back, his expression is pure disbelief.

“You’re working protection for him?”

Nod.

“Son, that’s Captain America. I’m fairly certain he can protect himself.”
“Can’t. He never watches his own back.”

Ollie grins.

“That I’ll believe. Does he know?”

Shake head.

Ollie peers at him. Looks at the mirror. Looks back at him.

“I see.”

They stare at one another. Barnes feels sticky with sweat, and his knees are not entirely stable. He wants to pat Ollie and ensure that the man is okay. He can picture the man on the floor in the bread aisle, dead in a lake of blood.

He can picture Steve’s face, observing the scene.

AVOID

Confirm.

And his face must be telegraphing information, because Ollie grabs his (left) elbow.

“Jim. This is not right. Anyone in the shape you’re in needs to be in a quiet place getting treatment, not on active duty.”

“Has to be me.”

Ollie squints at him.

“Is this because of that SHIELD thing all over the news? The stuff in DC?”

Nod.

Ollie nods back at him.

“Go get your groceries, Jim. I’ll keep your fellow in my sights.”

He pats Barnes’s arm.

“You look half starved.”

He totters toward the front of the store. Barnes is faster. He could stop Ollie. But his knees protest movement.

Focus, Barnes. Return to mission.

Ollie makes a big show of struggling with the door at the front of the store. Rogers practically jumps forward to help. Their conversation in his ear unlocks Barnes from his shutdown.

They’re swapping war stories by the time Barnes has returned to the bread aisle. He stalks to the deli with his knobbly, seed-studded loaf amid a truly revolting pair of stories about what happens to feet left in wet socks too long. He gets ham and extra-sharp cheddar – and a little bit of Swiss cheese, to see what Rogers likes - and for shit’s sake they are talking about fungus. Between toes. He will never eat again. Or wear socks more than one day. Laundry has reached an even higher
level on the priority list. If they keep talking about feet, laundry will be more important than protecting Rogers.

DENY

It must be nice to be a mission imperative and not have to think about toe fungus.

Better to think about which among the 14 types of mustard to choose. Or 6 types of butter. By the time he gets to arugula (only one type available), Ollie and Rogers have thankfully moved on to Landmarks of Brooklyn Long Since Past, and Barnes feels the skin around his eyes relax from the previous 4 straight minutes of flinch. Ollie is clearly mission assist.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Unless he and Rogers become best friends -

SECOND BEST

Confirm.

—which might prove slightly awkward.

Barnes follows the two of them home. He remembers the internal conversation during his shutdown and smiles at the thought: following home home.

Rogers invites Ollie in for tea, but Ollie begs off. Barnes has put his groceries in the newly cold refrigerator. It has three shelves: one for the ham, one for the cheese, and one for the two condiments. Very organized.

There is a knock at his door. Barnes can tell by the wheezing that it’s Ollie.

“I left your young man safely at his door. Funny guy. You’d never know he was famous.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you kidding? It was my real pleasure. Feeling any better?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now. You’re coming to my place for dinner. Six o’clock. Got it?”

There are more than 8 hours until then, to quiet his mind. Acceptable.

“Okay.”

Rogers stays in his apartment for much of the day. His activity as observed through the scope and associated sounds suggest that he is cleaning. Cleaning for Rogers is an activity requiring singing along to high-tempo music at a loud volume.

Time spent behind the locked door allows Barnes to restore his equilibrium. He uses a cast-iron pan borrowed from Esther to successfully prepare two grilled cheeses for himself. As suggested by an internet article titled “25 Grilled Cheeses that Will Blow Your Mind,” he makes one with mustard, ham, and arugula added.
GOOD

Confirm.

The other is plain ham and Swiss. Barnes can see why Rogers likes it. Even if it’s not good enough to tempt even a mission imperative.

Skill set: expanded. It is satisfying to feed oneself. Convenient to be able to eat without having to leave the apartment. Or resort to a protein bar. Also economical. He feels pleased. These are the actions of a standard adult human. They are appropriate for this long-term mission.

In the afternoon, Barnes chooses to not take Esther up on her offer of laundry. He still feels brittle around the edges. It is enough damage caused to frighten only one elderly person per day.

Scouting of the basement laundry room shows that the lights do not work because of a lack of bulbs, but that’s no detriment to a person wearing night-vision goggles. The machines are intact and functioning. They are supposed to be coin-operated, unless the mechanism mysteriously gets crushed and bypassed.Oops, so clumsy Barnes.

All of his clothes are filthy (except the new jeans) – including the ones he’s wearing, so he strips down and places them all into the washer, then shaves two slivers off his bar of soap into the machine.

The floor is both cold and disturbingly sticky. He puts his boots back on.

Better planning could have prevented having to stand in the dark for 90 minutes wearing nothing but night-vision goggles and boots.

Operational brain functioning should have registered sooner than 50 minutes into the wait that he possesses a phone with the entire internet on it AND a light.

Well. At least at the end of it he has clean clothes.

Pulling on a pair of jeans warm from the dryer is going on his list of good things.

Rogers wanders the neighborhood for a hour late in the afternoon. He peers into alleys and pokes around the more deserted edges of the Navy Yard. He frowns. He mutters “aw jeez, what am I even doing” to himself. He gets takeout from a place selling Thai food.

Barnes gets pot roast for dinner. The meat and vegetables have been cooked until they are soft enough for the most elderly of teeth: three sets of them. Barnes has been ambushed by the old people brigade. There’s Ollie, in a pair of brown trousers hiked up around his armpits and shoving a thimble-sized glass of “sherry” into Barnes’s hand. There’s Esther in a light-blue dress. Why does Esther get a much bigger glass of sherry. And there’s a woman named Lidia, a tall and broad-shouldered woman with dark brown streaks still in her hair and a accent placing her in Eastern Europe: Poland, maybe, or Romania. She leans in close when she shakes his hand and stares at his face.

“I think he’s a good one, Ollie,” she says.

“Trying, ma’am,” he says.

Lidia grins at him. She looks like the type who would take her handbag and knock a guy over. He likes her.
“He has Eleanor’s seal of approval,” Esther says.

Barnes sips the sherry. Some sort of alcohol, lightly sweet. It makes his throat warm.

They squint at him a lot during the course of the evening. They are all wearing corrective lenses, so either they need updated prescriptions or Ollie needs brighter lightbulbs. It is a little dim in the place. The little metal table wobbles, and a couple of Ollie’s many bookshelves list to one side. Barnes can fix those things for his mission-assist Ollie. Who looked at the knife but didn’t run away.

The constant stream of questions barely gives him time to chew his dinner. The ones about the apartment are easy to answer. Ollie shuts down Lidia’s query about his military service.

There is a long silence, during which the six eyes peer at him with what looks like calculation, and Barnes has that sense of encroaching mission difficulty. One of them is about to ask him something awkward. He can smell it on the air.

“I made a sandwich,” he says.

Ollie and Lidia frown, but Esther slaps the table.

“Jimmy! You cooked!”

Nod.

“And how was it?”

GOOD

“Good.”

“Of course it was, you had excellent instruction. You didn’t let soap touch my cast-iron pan, did you?”

“No ma’am.”

Esther was firm in her instructions. Soap is forbidden. If he returns the pan to her damaged, she has threatened to hit him with it.

“Glad to know you’ll be feeding yourself better, Jimmy. I hate to see you lurching around like you’re about to fall over.”

This from a man who takes 3 minutes to climb a set of stairs. Note: assess appearance.

“Don’t fret him, Oliver. We’ve taken over his care and feeding now, he’ll turn out all right.”

They have taken over.

Ollie laughs. Lidia pats his hand.

“We’ve needed a project. Hope you don’t mind.”

Barnes considers. As long as they don’t interfere with the mission, he does not mind. Ollie puts more meat on his plate, and Esther brought dessert.
Amends

Chapter Notes

By introducing the image of Bucky Barnes wearing nothing but night-vision goggles and combat boots, I feel as if I’ve really done the world a service.

-----

On the fifth day, Barnes studies his computer screen as it shows that Rogers is watching old videos of himself and the members of his team from WWII: blurry, black-and-white newsreels with no sound. Rogers watches the same ones over and over. Assessment: obsessive behavior. Through the scope, Barnes can see that he is sitting close to the screen, with terrible posture. This is worse than wandering the streets and sighing into alleys.

Maybe there are old people living in that building. In Barnes’s experience, elderly neighbors are helpful and a stabilizing influence. And they provide one with leftover lemon bread pudding for breakfast.

Rogers’s phone rings with a call from Stark. That’ll prove distracting, at least.

“Stark.”

“Rogers.”

17 seconds of silence.

Probably the longest Stark has ever been silent.

“You called me, Tony. What do you want?”

“Look, I. Said some things.”

“I noticed.”

“Come on, man. I’m trying to apologize here.”

“You are?”

“Natasha tells me there’s another file.”

“There is.”

“She says maybe I’ll shut my big mouth if I see it.”

That would be a miracle.

“Not sure the file is that miraculous. But it would give you some perspective.”

“Look, man. I said some things, but you did too. Meet me halfway here. I’m trying to not be an asshole.”
Among his other miracle-man qualities is Rogers’s super sigh.

“I’m sorry. I can bring you the file.”

“Can you bring it now?”

“What?”

“Bring it now. I have some other stuff to show you too.”

“Tony, I don’t know.”

“HYDRA stuff.”

“On my way.”

Aw, dammit.

The subway ride to Manhattan is not as upsetting after days of rest. Barnes slumps in his seat and watches from under his ball cap as Rogers pages through the Asset file; his expression grows sadder and sadder.

Pal, you gotta refuse that input. It’s nothing but pain.

Rogers raises his head, and his eyes are moist.

ASSIST

How do you protect a guy from hurting himself.

“Dammit, Buck,” Rogers says.

He closes the file up and tucks it into his jacket.

What did I do. I didn’t make you look at the file.

Doesn’t seem fair, to have been providing such excellent surveillance and yet be in trouble.

Barnes slouches further down into his seat and crosses his arms.

Thanks a lot Steve. Ungrateful.

They get off the train, and Rogers cuts through the park as before. It is really freaking cold. Even kicking leaves doesn’t help.

The lousy, mean target walks into the Building. Barnes goes around to the side and touches the stone with one metal fingertip.

“Good morning, Sergeant.”

“Building. Know why Stark called Rogers?”

“Yes sir. Mr. Stark has obtained information suggestive of a HYDRA cell trying to organize locally. Would you like that information?”

“Yes.”
“I’ve sent it to your phone.”

Dammit. This cold is so annoying.

“Hey Building. Where can I buy some handkerchiefs? And a coat that doesn’t cost a ransom.”

“I would suggest the Army surplus store on west 30th Street.”

Army. Surplus. And they will have knives.

“Sounds great.”

“The directions are on your phone.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“My pleasure, Sergeant.”

Talk about mission assist. Barnes would live in the army surplus if it were close enough to Rogers. It’s dark, it’s cramped, and it smells like old mildew. It is great. He wants to buy everything.

While Barnes wanders the shop, touching everything not locked in a case, he listens to Stark and Rogers try to resolve their argument without either of them actually apologizing.

Just punch each other and get on with it.

DENY

Oh come on. Outside the suit, Stark’s little fist would barely hurt at all. Although. If he got the angle right, maybe he’d knock some sense into Rogers’s giant head.

DENY

Confirm.

“Look, fine. You show me yours, I’ll show you mine,” Stark says.

What.

“Here, look at this and tell me that’s not trouble brewing in Queens.”

“This is the file Nat told you about.”

During the silence, Barnes takes his beautiful purchases to the wonderful counter and pays the wholly reasonable prices required.

“Can you throw these away?” he asks, pushing his old jacket and cap across the counter.

The guy curls his heavily mustached lip.

“I might burn them.”

“Okay by me.”

They had everything he wanted in black except the handkerchiefs: pants for running, a sweatshirt, a thick turtleneck sweater, pea coat, watch cap, lined leather gloves. Even the knives (only two) have black blades.
He catches sight of himself in a window just outside – cap pulled low, coat collar turned up, everything clean and whole. His skin looks very pale, but his eyes are vivid blue.

Damn. Looking good, Barnes.

CONFIRM

Con-fucking-firm.

And then, half a block later, when it becomes necessary, he pulls a clean and proper handkerchief out of his pocket and uses it.

Even small triumphs are satisfying.


“Yeah.”

Barnes sits on the nearest likely set of stairs and pulls out his phone. The files are mostly photos: sketchy-looking people unloading trucks late at night, an obvious handoff on a crowded street, and an open crate filled with machine guns.

“Where’d you get all this?” Rogers asks.

“I’ve got ears to the ground. Maria, for one. She and Nat have contacts everywhere, seems like. I had them put out the word that I’m trading cash for info, and it leaks in at a pretty good clip.”

“They could be playing you. Selling what they want you to see.”

“Yeah, because that whole genius thing is just a shtick and I’m actually a complete moron.”

Barnes can hear the glaring. It sounds adorable.

“Okay,” Rogers says eventually, “looks like they’re gearing up for something.”

“That’s my thought too. How do you feel about a pre-emptive strike?”

“Pretty good.”

No. No you do not, Rogers. What you feel is a deep-seated need to sit in your apartment and read a novel. A series of novels. Something with 25 volumes.

“Okay. I’ll set up a meeting. We’ll make a plan.”

Thanks, Stark. Gives me a head start.

“Are you hungry?”

“Uh, sure.”

“Yeah, I know,” Stark says, “world’s most obvious stalling tactic.”

“It’s okay, Tony. I don’t have anywhere else to be.”

Barnes notes that he too requires some topping off in the nutrition department.
He walks back to the Japanese restaurant. The old man is behind the counter again, and surprise makes all his wrinkles reconfigure themselves.

“You came back!”

“Yes. Sorry about the other day.”

The man smiles at him. It is a kindness. Civvies may be soft and obvious, but they are generous with kindness. Like Rogers. Kindness makes a quiet place in the mind like safety.

“No problem,” the man says.

Barnes sits at the counter as before. The man smiles at him when he asks for the soup by name. It is gratifying to be smiled at. He remembers the movie from the Smithsonian, Rogers smiling at his Bucky.

Rogers mostly wears a frown now.

Barnes smiles back at the old man. The muscles in his face are not used to the expression yet. Feels weird. But the old man nods and gives him a small cup of tea, so the smile must not look too bad.

The idea of tea is growing on him a little bit. Just not as a substitute for coffee.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“So,” the old man says, “today you try sushi.”

Barnes refrains from pointing out that he already tried it and liked the seaweed. He nods. It will be good to eat that again.

The man molds an little oblong of rice with his fingers. He lays a sliver of pink across the top.

“Ginger,” he says.

Then he reaches into the case and pulls out a piece of raw fish.

Oh no. No.

Barnes stares at the little rectangle set in front of him, orange with white veins and glistening.

“Salmon,” the man says. “Just eat it. A big guy like you shouldn’t be such a baby.”

Incorrect. This body is nearly a century old.

Of course, this consciousness –

MISSION

- is only about 2 months old. With echoes and overlaps.

Stark and Rogers are talking about motorcycles. The thought of eating uncooked fish is actually more comfortable than the thought of Rogers on a motorcycle. Because of course he wouldn’t wear a helmet.

Down the hatch, Barnes. Can’t be worse than smashed protein bars.
The flavor is mild, but very rich, with a little sweet bite from the ginger.

“It’s good.”

“You see. That’s why you respect your elders. We know some things.”

Barnes makes another smile at that. He won’t say, ‘not my elder, pal.’ But it’s funny to think it. Just as his soup arrives, Stark says,

“So. About that file.”

And that’s not funny. The old man has moved down the counter, so Barnes ducks his head to eat and listen.

“So, uh. The thing with the aliens really messed me up,” Stark says.

Reasonable. Hideous space aliens are the kind of thing that ought to stay in books.

“I’m not really – good at talking about stuff. It’s easier to throw money at things, right? Or build something.”

“I get that,” Rogers says.

“I thought Pepper died.”

Potts? Good she didn’t, she seems like a nice lady.

“Last Christmas. With the thing. She. Fell. I couldn’t reach her, so I watched her fall. I thought she was dead, and I had nothing. Then she wasn’t.”

“Stark, I’m probably the only other person on the planet who knows exactly what that feels like.”

Rogers. Pal.

“Yeah,” Stark says, “I just now figured that out over lunch.”

“But she’s okay, right? She seems normal. She seems good.”

“Yeah. She’s smarter than me that way, you know? She talked to therapists and went horseback riding and shit. Took up meditating. Went on some damn retreat where she didn’t talk for two weeks. Now it’s just nightmares sometimes. We seem to trade off who’s having them. You know.”

“I do know.”

What. Rogers, sleep is required for optimal health and functioning. Set task: increase volume on the earbuds overnight.

There is a long pause.

“They tortured me. In Afghanistan.”

“I know.”

“I could take it, mostly. Didn’t ever tell them what they wanted. I’m proud of that.”

“You should be, Tony.”
“But I mean. When I found out about Barnes. Saw that he broke.”

Barnes puts his spoon down before he crushes it.

Was broken, asshole. There’s a difference.

“Go on,” Rogers growls.

It is not a friendly sound. Barnes bares his teeth in agreement.

“I’m trying to say,” Stark says, “I thought I understood. What they did to me was not. That.”

Someone sighs heavily.

“I’m not okay with this, all right? He killed my parents. He killed a big pile of people. But this file, it’s. It’s terrible. HYDRA didn’t just torture him, they messed around in his brain. So maybe – I can see a little bit of your side of things.”

“Thanks.”

“Can I have JARVIS scan this and analyze it? I need to learn about neuroscience. I need to take a better look at those grim machines. Might give me an idea about the kind of state he’s in.”

Warm new clothes, eating good soup, safe base of operations, and some mission assists: status excellent.

“God, Tony, that would be great. Yes, please. I’m losing my mind with worry.”

Worry. Why?

“Me too,” Stark says, “but probably for different reasons.”

“I don’t think he’s a danger to anyone other than HYDRA right now,” Rogers says. “You know he was leaving HYDRA agents in my path all over the place in DC? Most of them were even alive.”

“You think that’s who stashed the ones at Nick’s funeral?”

“I know it was. I saw him.”

Ugh, that was awful.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Outside my friend’s window. It was just a split second. I thought I made it up until I started tripping over goons everywhere I went.”

“Huh.”

“And he showed up in Lower Senate Park in broad daylight. Couple dozen people saw him. He just … stood there for a couple of minutes, then disappeared.”

“ Weird.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what to make of it. Why circle around me without ever contacting me? Why leave the HYDRA agents right where I could find them? It didn’t make any sense.”

“So you came here.”
“I thought, if he followed me. If he came here, familiar sights might trigger some memories.”

“Any evidence that he remembers anything?”

“Other than my being alive? No. But he does. I don’t need evidence. I know him. I saw it. We fought on the helicarrier, and I saw it. I saw him stop and remember.”

RESET

Confirm.

“That’s pretty thin evidence, friend.”

“Then how the hell did I get out of the river? Someone called 911 and told them where to find me. He saved me. Again. Like he always did.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“And now I’m going to save him.”

Aw, pal. Don’t need saving, but thanks.

“What if he doesn’t want to be found?”

Steve makes an unhappy sound.

“I can’t – I don’t know. I’m not going to take choices away from him. That would make me no better than HYDRA.”

“Huh. You’ve thought it all the way through.”

“I don’t think about much else. I just. If I knew he was okay.”

At the moment, Barnes’s biggest problem is his empty bowl. Good food, good intel, and the old man waves him away with a bright smile. All told, a terrific lunch.

He walks back to Building and listens while Stark calls a bunch of people and makes plans to meet up at night to hit the HYDRA warehouse. So that’s his evening planned for him.

Back to Brooklyn they go. The sad expression on Rogers’s face is no good. Even though Barnes is glad to know that the comment about him on the train to Manhattan was worry and not criticism.

Is there an action he can take to ease that worry –

CONTACT

– that does not compromise mission effectiveness.

(CONTACT)

Still a denial, pal.

But it’s a mission sub-task. Protect Rogers from worry. Tactical plan required.

Barnes is glad to be back at the apartment, to have time to think before his trip to Queens. Time to
figure out how to help Steve smile.

He unlocks the building’s front door and stops cold. From three floors down he can hear cat Eleanor making a bad sound.
Barnes stops cold in the entryway. Cat Eleanor is making a sound like “wom wom” that echoes and is clearly a distress indicator. He also hears small sounds of scuffling.

And then he hears Esther say,

“No!”

Barnes pelts up the stairs, sticking to the left side to avoid the creaking bits.

On the second floor, he sees Lidia standing in the hall, holding a broom and looking ready to use it. He gestures silence to her, and she nods.

The scuffle is louder now. Cat Eleanor continues to make that awful sound, and now he can hear a man’s voice. Laughing.

Barnes’s hand tightens on the hilt of his knife.

Halfway up the stairs, the man comes into view: short but stocky, very pale, with wiry red hair sticking up off a supremely ugly head.

“What’re you gonna do, Esther?” the man says, “call the cops on me? Funny how I’ve got no record that you paid your rent the last six months. So who’s a cop gonna believe? Legal property owner or a deadbeat old bat? Open the door, sweetheart.”

Barnes is on the man. The man has risen into the air, hit the opposite call, and been pinned by his neck before he even noticed Barnes was there.

“You must be O’Riley,” he says, “nice to meet you. Heard a lot of things.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

The guy swings both arms up to break the hold – a classic brawler’s move. Which does not work against a high-tech metal arm. But it does inspire Barnes to squeeze a little. The guy’s face goes purple.

“Let’s find out more about you,” Barnes says.

He places his knife flat against O’Riley’s ear and presses it into the plaster of the wall. Slowly. The guy’s eyes are wide, and he breathes sharply through his nose while Barnes fishes around in his pockets for his wallet.

“Michael Bernard O’Riley of 140 East Jackson Street,” Barnes says, “I know just where that is. Bet my backup knows even more.”
It’s a risk, but Building JARVIS, best mission-assist imaginable, monitors him as he suspected.

“Incoming details, Sergeant,” Building says.

The guy looks terrified. Barnes pulls the knife from the wall and traces its tip gently over O’Riley’s face and neck while he speaks. While the guy tries and fails to contain his panting and his tears.

Barnes repeats the information Building feeds into his ear: phone number, social security number, bank balance. The make and model of his car, the dates on the checks Esther wrote for her rent. And oh yes, the jackpot. Barnes pats the guy’s cheek with the flat of the knife.

“Well look at that, Mikey. My backup just found your confidential informant files. Haven’t you been sneaky. Letting drug runners hole up in here to scare your tenants, then run to the coppers to squawk about them. How would those drug bozos like to know about that? Or about the payments from the police? Double-dipping. Very bad behavior, Mike. Could end up very troublesome for the other inhabitants of 140 East Jackson Street.”

Barnes leans in close and holds the point of his knife just under the guy’s eye.

“Maddalena Jimenez O’Riley, age 42. Michael Bernard O’Riley, Junior, age 14. Catherine Lucinda O’Riley, age 11. Shame for your friends to find out about them. And vice versa.”

“Who are you?”

Barnes grins.

“I’m your new super, friend. I’m the guy making sure your legal tenants get to live unmolested in their homes. Great of you to bring me in, right? To watch over these people.”

Oops, his metal thumb just can’t seem to help itself from pressing in on O’Riley’s jugular.

“Right?”

The guy tries to nod.

“Yeah. Yeah, right.”

“Because you’d much rather have me here, right? Helping out these nice people. Otherwise I might find myself over on Jackson Street. Might even acquaint myself with some of your friends. Bring them along with me.”

He scratches the tip of the knife so gently under the guy’s eye.

“Over on Jackson Street with nothing to do, Michael Bernard O’Riley. I hate to be bored. Don’t you hate to be bored?”

“Yes.”

This jerk is about to swallow his own tongue.

“So we’re set then, aren’t we. You and I.”

“Yes.”

“These nice people write their rent checks. You stay home and cash them.”
He leans in and whispers in O’Riley’s ear, his breath ghosting over the knife point pressing ever so slightly now, denting the man’s skin.

“You stay home and I stay here. Because if I see you again, I’ll pin you to the floor. I own a lot of knives. Plenty to pin you down through each hand, each foot, the loose skin at the top of your shoulders. And then cut you apart. I’ll saw off your limbs, one at a time. Finger by finger, toe by toe. Very messy work. Unpleasant. You don’t want that.”

“No.”

Barnes raises his voice again.

“What was that you said to Esther about her rent?”

“You’re all paid up, sweet – gasp – Mrs. Berman. Thank you.”

Barnes hauls the guy down the stairs and pushes him out the door. Four steps away (out of arm’s reach), O’Riley turns, brave outside of a threat. Stupid.

Barnes smiles at him.

O’Riley blanches and backs up several steps before turning and running.

At the top of the stairs, Lidia stands with her arms around Esther, who sobs. Cat Eleanor is winding around them both, crying out with a much less upsetting sound than previously.

“Are you hurt?” he asks.

Esther looks up and rushes to him. She puts her arms tight around his waist. She is so close to him. It takes two breaths to remember: this is hugging. He puts his arms around her bony frame but doesn’t squeeze. Esther feels so fragile, pressed up against him. He doesn’t wish to injure her.

“Thank you, Jimmy, thank you,” she says.

Her voice quavers, unlike the firmness with this she usually speaks. Assessment: dislike.

She is so close, and still so upset. Adrenaline still high. Heartbeat loud in his ears.

Lidia’s eyes are as sharp as blades.

“Let the man breathe, Esther,” she says, pulling Esther away.

“You’ll be all right now, darling. Thanks to our new friend.”

Cat Eleanor walks over and leans hard against his shins. Barnes bends to scratch behind her ears, but he won’t pick her up. His flesh hand is shaking. His metal arm twitches with the urge to punch/pull/rend/destroy.


It would be good to hit something.

It would be good to hit a lot of somethings.

“Jim are you having a bad moment?” Lidia asks.
Emotion: identified.

“I am angry. Very angry.”

“Whereas we are very grateful.”

“Going to check outside, make sure he’s gone.”

“Good idea, Jim. I’ll stay with Esther.”

Conjecture: Lidia knows about fighting. Or soldiers. Or people with large gaps in their heads.

His anger is a sound between his ears like a train. It is a tight band around his chest. It is hands that ache to do violence.

Violence was already on his calendar. He ducks into his apartment to grab a bag of supplies. By the time he is back in the hallway, the women are behind Esther’s closed door. O’Riley further damaged the hinges — the door hangs crooked.

His anger is cold and white. Something will get taken to pieces.

Barnes shoves the front door open and nearly hits Ollie with it in the face, because great, Barnes. Just what is needed.

“Jimmy, what’s wrong?”

“Talk to Esther.”


At least that craven asshole had the good sense to get the hell out of his territory. And if O’Riley comes back. Well. Won’t that be a mess to clean up afterward. For making cat Eleanor afraid. For making Esther cry.

Oh, he will hit something. A bunch of somethings, thanks to Stark. He’d like to go to East Williamsburg and hit O’Riley, but he will forbear (for now) because of the other O’Rileys age 42, 14, and 11.

HYDRA agents, however, are fair game.

He’s not taking the subway to Queens. That way carries an 87.3% probability of civilian casualties and public infrastructure damage. If he’s going to spend time in an enclosed space, it’ll be fucking alone.

He trusts that his body will know practical things like how to jump-start a car and how to drive. It does. Maybe his new conscience will feel bad about the broken window later.

Barnes learns a valuable bit of information: if you are looking to stoke the chill fires of blind rage, driving in New York City is an excellent choice. By the time he arrives in Queens, he couldn’t form words even if he wanted to. His limbs have stopped shaking, and the stillness they carry is the tension of a coiled spring about to let go.

He’s not stupid-angry. He puts on the tactical vest. He takes the time to scout a little. The late-afternoon light is beginning to dim, and there’s a strong glare on the western side of the building: that is a tactical advantage.
At least it’s a lonely side street of crumbling warehouses and sketchy-looking auto-body shops
with their dinged up steel security doors locked up tight. The only activity is at the HYDRA
building. Which means they’re all bad guys.

Barnes feels his face broaden into what cannot possibly look like a friendly smile. This is a good
test. He has anger to spare, and people who deserve it. Good-guy, non-lethal. Hopefully.

Hey, mission.

CONFIRM

Those people over there want to hurt Rogers.

PROTECT

They want to turn him into a lab rat.

PROTECT ROGERS MISSION PROTECT

He launches himself at the warehouse with an anger so bright it feels almost like joy.
Barnes has no explicit memory of ever being a thing other than one that fights, that kills, that is supremely good at both.

Assessment: not-kill is a higher level of difficulty than kill. Not-kill, however, prolongs the fight. He wants the fight to last as long as his anger. To go on for days.

Rogers, with his super-serum, could withstand multiple blows from the metal arm without toppling like a drunk sailor. HYDRA are neither super soldiers nor even sailors but merely standard humans with widely varying levels of training. The two by the door go down hard into a dark sleep: two blows, two naps. They continue to breathe, though he doesn’t envy the visual difficulty and projectile vomiting that awaits them upon waking.

But it can’t all be a one-sided boxing match. Many of the other goons will have weapons. And they know the layout of the building.

Barnes drags the two sleepers to the corner of the building and secures them with their own sleeves and shoelaces. Around the other side, he sees black-clothed workers loading boxes into a panel truck.

He waits. He lets the truck clear the corner. Then he is a heavy shadow that swings in from the side. Golly who could have anticipated his catching the driver with a boot to the face. Barnes, why are you so clumsy, what a shame how the guy is knocked right out.

Good-guy non-lethal score so far: 3-0. With the driver strapped into his own passenger seat, Barnes pulls out into the street, guns the engine, and drives the truck straight through the building’s entrance.

It’s like kicking a bees’ nest. Goons rush at him from all sides. From the moderate protection of the truck cab, Barnes assesses. Nine people, four handguns, five automatic weapons. Three ridiculously bad stances indicating inadequate instruction.

Non-lethal target desired.
Good choice, mission. Any but the most highly trained sort will lose all functioning with a blown-out knee.

Barnes could maintain focus, of course. And maybe the redhead.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

But these yahoos? Running guns in Queens? Unlikely.

Automatic guns first. Five, four, three, two, and the last moves sideways, catches Barnes’s bullet right in the ass. Speaking of another non-lethal target that will drop a guy flat.

Next, the handgun shooters. Down you go, lady. Your turn, sir. Didn’t forget you, guy, here you go.

He climbs down from the truck cab as the last remaining man turns and flees into the back of the warehouse, where they have built it out into rooms and hallways.

The HYDRA agents are flopping on the floor and screaming, getting blood everywhere. Shouldn’t have signed on with the villains, then.

There’s no sense in using up his own ammunition. That would be wasteful, with all these perfectly functioning weapons lying around. He collects guns from the floor as he passes. The couple of jerks with the presence of mind to protest the requisition of their materiel get a boot to the head for their trouble.

Head down, Barnes. Hair covering face. Move quickly, avoid likely camera locations.

ON THE LEFT

Oh, there’s the runner. Sight, squeeze, another kneecap down. Bad day for kneecaps around here.

Thanks, mission.

The people in the rooms at the back wear civilian clothing. Seventy percent of them weep and raise their hands. The other thirty percent, after a bit of running and sliding around, each lose a kneecap, except for the unhappy guy who rounds a corner straight into a metal fist. Surprise! He goes horizontal and lands flat with a thud.

The clench of anger in Barnes’s chest has released. Inside, he is chill and silence. He is eyes connected to hands connected to triggers. His metal arm windmills, deflecting bullets. Like Rogers’s shield.

He plows through these assholes like retribution.

The weepers have gathered at the back. Barnes doesn’t trust for an instant that their surrender is genuine. Six of them immediately produce small guns from their clothing and then mysteriously lose knees. Weird how that happens.

One woman mists a lavender-colored gas in his direction. Barnes drops to the floor to avoid it. He hooks one hand around her ankle and yanks. She falls face-first through her own cloud. She shrieks and bleeds from her ears. She doesn’t rise.
Does this count against his non-lethality goal?

Well. This is only his first effort. He can’t expect perfection.

As Barnes rises, he’s hit by taser contacts. Ouch. He sweeps them aside, thanks to the tactical vest, and turns another kneecap into a memory.

Another moron seems to think that the complete ineffectiveness of the taser makes it a good idea and hits him with a second one. Right in his metal arm. The contacts go *plink plink* and fall to the floor. He doesn’t even bother with her knee. Let her take a nice long nap.

The last of them to put up a fight faces him in a crouch, with a knife in his hand.

Barnes could sigh with happiness.

The guy is fast for a standard human, and he knows his way around a knife. Barnes could end this in an instant, but he’s still angry. It feels good to substitute this broad-faced man for O’Riley and draw the fight out, like dancing.

Knives are great. They make a little clinking sound when they clash together. Even a flesh arm can hold one all day without tiring. They flash in the light.

The crouch, the circling, the lashing out – these are comfortable, like scratching an itch. The man takes a full minute to adjust his blows and stop going for the metal arm. Not much of Barnes is a useful target, between his arm, the tactical vest, and his speed.

This poor bozo is dressed up like an office worker. White shirts show blood so easily. The guy’s not bad: he doesn’t even seem to notice the slashes to his forearm and shoulder. But he really doesn’t like that poke in the gut.

Good-guy non-lethal is a challenge this close, with knives involved. That abdominal wound shouldn’t have punctured anything fatal. Hard to judge a distance of millimeters at that speed, though.

This moment of thought is inattention, and the guy gets in a lucky slice across Barnes’s left cheek. It fucking stings.

Enough. Barnes reaches out with his metal arm and breaks the guy’s wrist. The guy shrieks. While Barnes is tying him up, the guy says,

“Wait’ll my superiors find out you’re in New York. They’ll fry your brain so hot you’ll have the mental capacity of a donut. Traitor. We made you, you don’t get to leave the reservation. You’re property, you –“

Oh dear, the metal arm appears to be squeezing his neck, how did that happen.

Barnes leans in close to Mr. Big Mouth.

“Nobody made this me. *I* make this me, asshole.”

MISSION HEAD

Confirm.

And it would be easy to squeeze the life all the way out of the guy. But Barnes chooses otherwise. He chooses to maintain parameter: non-lethal.
He does punch the guy in the head so he’ll stay unconscious longer. That’s just good sense.

Barnes has worked all the anger out of himself for the moment. Conjecture: that is a side effect of winning. Without rage to spur him on, the clean-up is exhausting. He wants to sit down. And have a coffee. And apply some first aid to his face.

But he binds the arms of all the blubbering, bleeding people. One of them is looking a little blue around the lips. Barnes yanks the belt off the guy next to her and loops it around her leg, above what used to be her knee.

She cringes back.

“What are you – what are you doing?”

“Tourniquet.”

“But why?”

“Non-lethal parameters chosen. Don’t want you to bleed out before you get nice and arrested.”

“Oh Jesus,” the belt-less man says, “the Asset’s self-actualizing.”

“Not Jesus,” Barnes says, and smiles in a way that he hopes is terrifying. The man blanches.

“Not the Asset either.”

The man’s teeth actually chatter. Neat.

At the end of the hallway, before the warehouse opens up, Barnes presses the button on his phone to summon Building.

“Congratulations, Sergeant. It appears that you have created an opening on Mr. Stark’s and Captain Rogers’s calendar this evening.”

“Confirm. Have I been an idiot and run around visible to a lot of security cameras?”

“Yes sir. But when you entered the building with your phone, I was able to intercept the feeds. The fight is recorded, but I will follow your instructions as to what’s to be done with the recording.”

Building is amazing.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Especially considering that it belongs to Stark.

“Why?”

“Why what, sir?”

“Why let me choose instead of sending it straight to Stark?”

“Agent Romanoff was extremely firm in her insistence that you be allowed to make your own decisions about contact –“

CONTACT
Deny.

“-and your mission.”

PROTECT

Confirm.

“Having examined the HYDRA files, especially the one given to me by Captain Rogers, I have come to agree. You have had too many choices taken from you. So long as you maintain current protection protocols and you are not in imminent danger, I will assist you in whatever level of secrecy you desire.”

Barnes needs to stand still for two breaths and blink a few times. Also, he might’ve been a little harsh about the redhead.

TROUBLE

Well, confirm. But still.

“Thanks.”

“Of course, Sergeant.”

Back in DC, his mission assists were an empty condo, maybe flying Sam, and a hedge. Now he’s got a bunch of old people and an omnipresent building.

And maybe Stark.

And *maybe* (probably) the redhead.

Makes up a little bit for the crowds and the subway.

Just the broadcasts from the building alone are worth – oh. Oh, right. Sub-mission.

“Building. Locate convenient security camera.”

“There’s one just to your right, around the corner.”

“Send the recording out 20 minutes after I leave. And call the police.”

“Very good, sir. Would you like me to send you the response?”

CONFIRM

“Confirm.”

He binds up the last few stragglers, then approaches the camera. He shakes his hair out of his face and arranges it into the flat Asset expression. He stares up at the camera, then raises his left hand, thumb and forefinger making a circle and the other fingers upraised.
Cool-down

It’s dark outside by the time Barnes returns to the stolen car. His 20-minute clock is ticking. He wants to be as close to the apartment as possible when Stark gets the video.

He’s glad to take off the heavy tactical vest and shrug back into his warm coat. He’s very glad to sit in the car, to press his handkerchief to his bleeding cheek.

The streets are less crowded, and Barnes is too tired for his anger to re-ignite. He drives. He drives home, and it feels settled and calm to think “home.”

This gets him most of the way back to Brooklyn – the chill of the wind through the broken window, quiet, and driving through the dark city.

Until 20 minutes have elapsed, and his earbuds go nuts.

“Fair warning, Sergeant,” Building says.

Followed 1 minute later by Stark yelling,

“What the hell? JARVIS, patch this in to Rogers. Rogers, boot up your computer. It’s a feed from the warehouse. You’re gonna drop your jaw on the floor.”

Followed another 2 minutes later by Rogers,

“Is this live?”

“No, Captain. The security feeds were temporarily jammed. There is an approximately 40 minute delay.”

“Forty minutes. God, he’ll be long ... Bucky on the left!”

Barnes looks left, heartbeat elevated, but of course it’s just the dark sidewalk.

He can hear Rogers breathing.

Don’t hyperventilate, pal.

His phone makes the delightful hunting horn sound: Rogers has sent a text.

SAM HEI SHERE

Oh shit Rogers has had a stroke. Barnes jams the accelerator to the floor. He drives without care for traffic laws at the highest rate of speed allowed by the narrow streets and required route. The highest rate of speed allowed by the narrow streets and required route is not fast enough.

What, Sam texts back.

BUCKY IS HERE IN NEW YORK WATCHING VIDEO RIGT NOW

Wait. Maybe not a stroke.

What’s he doing?

BLWING OUT KNEECAPS OF HYDRA
“Crap what is that? Oh man.”

Aside from the obvious state of excitement, Rogers’s voice sounds normal. Stroke unlikely. Barnes exhales the breath he’s been holding and backs off the accelerator.

*Call me when you’re done,* Sam texts.

Rogers groans.

“Buck, be careful. Heh. Not like you don’t know your way around a knife.”

CONFIRM

Confirm. I know my way around a lot of knives.

“JARVIS, can you read lips here? Find out what they’re saying?”

“No Captain. The angle doesn’t permit it.”

“How many casualties?”

“One hundred percent, sir. Mostly severe concussions and leg wounds. Only one death – the woman with the gas. Police have the canister for analysis. I am monitoring their files.”

“What is he doing to that woman?”

“Sergeant Barnes applied a tourniquet, Captain.”

“A WHAT”

Ouch. That is quite the super soldier bellow you have there, Rogers.

“A tourniquet. According to emergency department reports, she may lose the leg, but it appears that Sergeant Barnes saved the woman’s life.”

Go me.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Barnes, back in Vinegar Hill, carefully parks the car in the same spot from which he took it. After a moment, he unfolds four twenties from the money in his back pocket and tucks them under the driver-side visor.

Hope that’s enough to fix a window.

His body is tired. His brain is tired. His face has stopped bleeding, but it still stings. And he is *starving.* Ugh. The half a block to the apartment seems too far, especially with three flights of stairs at the end.

“What is he,” Rogers says,

“What.”
“What is that?”

Then he laughs. It is a sound unlike the low chuckle he sometimes gave in Sam’s house. It is high, loud, and maybe a little hysterical. It goes on for 63 seconds.

“Oh my God,” Rogers says, still breathing hard, “oh my God, Bucky. Oh my God.”

Then the sound is not laughter but sobbing.

What the hell. Sub-mission failure? Jesus, Rogers, what is it gonna take for you? And don’t even say it, mission, I am in no mood.

(CONFIRM)


Oh. Okay. Maybe not mission sub-failure after all.

Barnes shakes out his shoulders and hefts the duffel a little higher. He feels slightly less tired now.

He walks back to his apartment building with the accompaniment of gross, snotty sounds as Rogers blows his enormous super-nose several times.

“JARVIS,” Rogers says, “can you tell me anything about the state he’s in?”

“His behavior suggests mental organization, Captain. Sergeant Barnes acted within a logical pattern of non-lethality. I would take that as an encouraging sign. His physical appearance seems generally sound, except for evidence of mild malnutrition.”

Really? I am pretty hungry.

“I just. Don’t even know what to do with this,” Rogers says.

“Give it time, Captain. Time and thought will tell you what to do.”

“JARVIS, how did I make you so smart?” Stark asks.

“You allowed me to evolve, sir.”

They keep up the three-way banter like that while Barnes climbs the stairs to his apartment, each one seeming 4 feet taller than the one before.

There’s a plate in the hallway in front of his door with a note on top that says,

“Dear Jimmy – Come see us tomorrow if you feel up to it. In the meantime, please accept this first gift of thanks. Esther and Eleanor.”

Esther even drew a little paw print on the card next to her own signature.

It is a gift for him. His first gift. Barnes presses the note to his chest briefly. The gesture feels appropriate. The note is precious.

The plate is piled with cookies. Barnes eats one while he runs water into the tub. Then he sits on the floor for a minute to regain his equilibrium.

The cookies are happiness-flavored. They taste like mission complete and reward for well done.
He sits in the bath and eats the cookies, listens to Stark and Rogers say “can you believe it,” “he seems so disciplined,” and “do you think think he’s maybe okay.”

The conversation with Sam is more of the same.

“He’s here, Sam. He’s in Queens.”

Oh, Rogers. Such a literalist.

“Wrapping up bad guys for you?”

“Come on, Sam. Not for me.”

You know, there is such a thing as too much humility.

“But yeah,” Rogers says, “the only one who died had some creepy gas. He put a tourniquet on one. He saved her life.”

“He did what?”

“A tourniquet, Sam. He talked to some of them.”

“Did they swallow their own tongues from terror?”

Sam you are funny.

“Sam.”

“I’m not gonna say you were right, Steve. But maybe you’re standing in the same room as right.”

“He looked straight at the camera, Sam. He made the okay sign.”

Rogers sounds torn between laughing and hyperventilating.

“That’s. That’s surprising,” Sam says.

“You’re telling me, I practically had a meltdown.”

“Like he was deliberately communicating?”

“Yes. Yes. Definitely.”

“And that’s not hope talking.”

“Sam.”

“I’m just saying. You need to manage your expectations.”

“I know that. I do.”

“You think you do. How’d he look?”

“The same. Not like he’s been sleeping rough. But JARVIS said a little malnourished.”

Oh, right. Barnes eats another cookie. The water has gone cool, and the weariness left behind by all the anger has been magnified by his soak.
“So you’re moving to Queens, then?”

No, Rogers. Denied.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“No. No, I like it here. It’s close enough. This place is starting to feel comfortable. And I made a friend.”

“Oh yeah? Is she cute?”

“His name is Ollie and he’s about 80.”

“Oh, a friend in your peer group.”

“Yes. Also, shut up.”

Barnes climbs into the crunchy, narrow bed. He listens to the end of the conversation, his eyelids too heavy to stay open and his neck too heavy to hold his head upright. Rogers sounds excited. Barnes’s blankets are warm, and his belly is full of mission assist Esther’s cookies.

It is all good.

It is so good.

If he dreams, he doesn’t remember it. He wakes feeling peaceful and with no hurts.
Sadly, the quiet, peaceful morning of the amazing secret bodyguard cannot last, because the target does love an early morning run.

Barnes sighs. He has, at least, new warm clothes to wear. The morning is frosty, and his breath makes clouds in the air. The run actually feels good for a little while, stretching muscles worked hard the previous day. Once Rogers gets on his loop in the park, Barnes doesn’t have to follow him anymore – he can step off the trail where there is a nice little rise and a group of low shrubs under a tree suitable for sitting on the ground and observing Rogers.

As an assassin, the sciences most useful were biology and physics. It is unexpected that botany should be so integral to surveillance. But pleasant. Plants are nice, quiet companions.

Rogers has a pronounced spring in his stride this morning. His run is almost a bounce. His pushups almost send him into orbit.

Sub-mission: successful.

WELL DONE

Confirm.

Rogers stops at his little café and, even in his sweaty running gear, works the waitstaff into a frenzy of googly-eyed adoration by grinning at them all as if the morning were a gift wrapped up just for him. Barnes notes that Rogers orders three full breakfasts. It’s good to see him properly feeding himself.

Bearing in mind Building’s admonition, Barnes at his grubby diner gets an extra side of bacon with his pancakes. And a glass of orange juice.

Orange juice is, as far as he can tell, equivalent to battery acid. It is not going on the list of good things.

Rogers walks back to his apartment with such perkiness in his step that if their lives were a movie, it would be a big musical number. With dancing.

Thank Lenin their lives are not a musical.

Rogers’s excitement ramps up even further 2 blocks from their apartments.

“Ollie! Hey, Ollie! Good morning!”

Oh jeez.

“Morning, Steve. You look cheerful today.”

“Yeah. Got some really good news yesterday.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Thanks. Say, how’s this neighborhood on Halloween? I want to make sure to buy enough candy.”

Candy will rot your teeth out, Rogers. Low-quality caloric fuel. Suggest cookies as substitute.
“We get a pretty good crowd. Not in my building, of course, but lots of kids.”

Children? Children are unpredictable. Also fragile. Why will there be children.

“I thought I’d set up on the sidewalk, anyhow. Want to join me?”

“Sure, Steve. Sounds fun.”

“Say, 6:30?”

“See you tomorrow.”

Rogers goes into the grocer’s and buys two large sacks of candy from orange and black displays that Barnes had previously ignored as tangential to grilled cheese supplies. The display is decorated with skeletons and spiders.

What even. Who celebrates spiders.

He buys a half-dozen pears in protest.

Barnes is entertained during his post-shower tooth brushing by Rogers requiring step-by-step instructions on how to send the warehouse video to Sam. Email attachments: the true weakness of Captain America.

CALL ME WHEN YOU WATCH IT, Rogers texts.

I’m at work, Sam sends back, practice your super-patience.

“Aw, man,” Rogers says.

Cute.

The delay gives Barnes the chance to return Esther’s empty plate.

He hears cat Eleanor’s feet in the hallway even before he knocks. The door rattles in its frame. That stupid asshole O’Riley. He’ll re-hang the door. New locks for Esther, Ollie, and Lidia.

Maybe he will teach them to shoot.

Esther cracks open the door, then waves him in. Barnes squeezes through while cat Eleanor tries to tangle herself in his feet.

“You like peanut butter, I see,” Esther says.

PEANUT BUTTER

Confirm.

Barnes is glad to hear that Esther’s sharp vocal tone has returned.

“Liked them a lot.”

Esther grins.

“There are more any time you want, Jimmy. Here, give me that plate so you can make Eleanor happy.”
Don’t be ridiculous, mission.

Barnes picks up cat Eleanor, who wriggles around on his shoulder and licks his earlobe.

It’s good that no one from HYDRA knows about the ticklish thing.

“I tell you, Jimmy, no one has ever stood up to O’Riley like that. I feel like a new woman today. You don’t know how much we’ve all worried with. What is that on your face?”

She actually grabs his chin and angles it to examine his cheek. Cat Eleanor squeaks at the sudden clench of his fist.

“Just a cut, not serious.”

“I see that. And where did you get this ‘just a cut’? Surely not from O’Riley? I wouldn’t have thought him able to walk under his own power when you were done with him.”

“No, something else.”

“Hm. This has to do with that young man you’re protecting? Don’t glare at me, Ollie told me. He thinks it’s a terrible travesty, but Lidia says it’s better to be busy when you’re recovering from trauma. I’m inclined to agree with her. And to have words with whoever put you in a position to be traumatized in the first place, young man.”

Of course they sit around and talk about him. For shit’s sake. Excellent discretion there, Barnes.

“Did the young man have trouble yesterday too?”

“No. Stopped the trouble before he got into it.”

“My, you were busy.”

“Like you said, busy’s good.”

“Hungry work too, apparently.”

His face smiles without his even needing to tell it to.

“Very.”

“How does lunch sound? It’s just salad, but you’re welcome to it. Just reward for good work.”

Esther teaches him to make salad dressing. It is an exact science requiring precise proportions, and anything not based on oil, vinegar, and lemon juice is suitable only for those who lack working taste buds. Barnes refrains from telling Esther how much he likes the creamy pink stuff they put on pale greens at the dumpy diner.

She’s impressed by his ability to reduce a carrot to perfectly even matchsticks in under 90 seconds. Cat Eleanor is unhappy at the cruelty of having to stand on the floor under her own power while they prepare lunch. She takes her revenge by climbing his left shin and wedging herself into his lap under the table, rooting around until she pushes up his shirt and presses her cold nose against his belly.

HELP
Poor mission.

The crooked door draws his eye. Its misalignment is bothersome. If he could be sure that Rogers would stay indoors, he could go to the hardware store for supplies. Estimated time necessary, 20 minutes. Risky. At any moment, Rogers could decide to head to Queens to search for the guy following 10 m behind him.

MISSION ASSIST

Mission assist Esther approved?

CONFIRM

Useful. Thanks mission.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Esther displays signs of excitement at his request: she flaps her hands and says “oh my” several times. Barnes gets the scope and sets it up in her front room. She bends down to peer through it, then stands up with a frown.

“That’s the target?”

CONFIRM TARGET

“Yes.”

“But that’s.”

“Yes.”

Esther looks at the window, then back at him. Her expression is ferocious. Is she going to refuse mission assist.

“Jimmy.”

“Yes?”

She looks at the window again, then back at him. She flaps her hand again.

“Never mind. I’ll keep a close eye on him while you’re gone.”

Barnes writes down his phone number for her. When he leaves the apartment, she’s sitting on her sofa with cat Eleanor on her lap, his number clutched in one hand and her eye glued to the scope.

The 20-minute estimate is accurate within 4 minutes. He buys new locks for Ollie and Lidia while he’s there.

Why does it surprise him that Ollie and Lidia are standing in Esther’s front room when he returns. Their expressions look guilty.

“What,” he says.

“I hope you don’t mind that we came over to help Esther,” Lidia says, “it’s the second most
exciting thing to happen in a month and far more pleasant than yesterday’s trouble.”

Oh is that all.

“Okay.”

“How much exercising does that kid do?” Ollie asks.

“Ugh, way too much.”

Their running commentary about his actions is an amusing counterpoint to Rogers humming in the earbuds.

“That’s not a sandwich, that’s a bus!”

“If I had known you could watch young men with no shirts on through their own windows, I would’ve gotten one of these years ago.”

What.

“Lidia, don’t you care about privacy?”

“Don’t you care that he’s young enough to be your grandson?”

“No and no.”

“<These people,>” Barnes says to cat Eleanor, who is supervising his repair work and giving instructions, “<are almost as funny as Sam.>”

Cat Eleanor apparently understands Russian, because she chirps at him in reply.

When Barnes needs an extra pair of hands to hold the door in place to drill holes for new hinges, he lets Ollie believe that Ollie is holding most of the weight. He doesn’t point out Lidia’s foot, very firmly braced against the edge of the door.

When Esther’s door is newly hung and the lock replaced, they all take turns trying the new key and crying out in triumph. Then they troop down the hallway to Ollie’s door (leaving poor cat Eleanor locked behind the new door) and keep up a running comedy routine about Barnes’s repair skills that demonstrates a profound ignorance of locks, hardware, or which end of a tool is actually the handle. When Ollie’s lock is installed, they all take turns trying out the new key and crying “hurray!”

Repeat on the second floor. The old people brigade consists of crazy people. But they are fun. And they are mission assists. Perhaps he, with his brain gaps, simply fits in well with crazy people. It’s acceptable.

Lidia’s apartment is piled with books: stacks and stacks of them, on every surface and on the floor. Once the lock ritual has been completed, Lidia pulls them inside, and Barnes examines the stacks. Books in English, French, Russian, Polish, Italian.

“You read all of these?” he asks.

“Certainly not. My book collecting is aspirational.”

Barnes likes the look of books. The stories in books stay constant. They are quiet. And they can be thrown with great force when needed.
Lidia gives them food, including little glasses of liquor.

“Oh Lidia, it’s too early in the day,” Esther says as she takes her glass and sips from it.

They eat dark brown bread with butter and slices of strong-flavored pickle. The bread is interesting, firm-textured.

“Esther,” he says, examining it.

“A nice mild sheep’s-milk chevre. Or Gouda. I would also add some of these nice pickles. Plenty of butter, inside and out.”

Definitely a mission assist.

Sam very conveniently waits until the food is gone and the mission assists are beginning to look askance at one another before he texts Rogers about watching the video.

Lidia kisses Barnes on the cheek when he steps into the hall. Esther kisses his cheek when he leaves her at her door. Barnes stares at Ollie.

“I am not kissing you Jimmy, don’t even get your hopes up.”

Thank Marx. Kissing is not allowed for Rogers. Not allowed for Barnes, either. Too much touching.

“Goodnight, Jim,” Ollie says, and pats him on the arm.

Acceptable. He pats Ollie on the arm.

“Goodnight.”

Sam calls Rogers 20 minutes later. Barnes settles into his armchair, legs up on the windowsill, for the evening’s entertainment.

“So what do you think?”

Rogers you have no manners on the phone.

“I don’t even know what I think. Besides that your boy is still completely terrifying. Did he miss a single kneecap that he aimed at?”

No I did not.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Well. Okay, the one guy who moved, but we won’t talk about that one.

(CONFIRM)

“JARVIS said his behavior suggests mental organization.”

“Yeah. Maybe. That tourniquet, man. That was really something.”

“And the end.”
“You know what’s weird about that.”

“I do.”

What’s weird. Is the OK sign no longer used?

“That’s twice now.”

“It is. I mean, I have no idea how he pulled it off, but he has to have me bugged.”

Jesus, Mary, and Stalin, I always forget he’s not actually a moron.

“So what’s your play?”

“Hell if I know, Sam. Wait him out? I know he’s out there, he knows where I am. We’re both world champions for stubborn. I figure either he has a good reason for keeping away or, if he doesn’t, when I see him I’ll punch him in the mouth.”

You can damn well try, pal.

DAMAGE NOT WITHIN MISSION PARAMETERS

Thanks a lot.

“You gonna be able to deal with that? Waiting him out?”

“What’s my other option?”

“No, I mean. I’ve seen you, man. Saw the way you tortured yourself over that file. Is that how you’re going to live now, until he finds you? Sitting around making yourself miserable?”

DENIED

Confirm.

“As opposed to what?”

“Making your own life while you wait.”

“Tried that. Didn’t work.”

“So he’s it for you, then.”

“He’s my true north, if that’s what you mean. Always was, always will be.”

“You think that’s one-sided?”

Barnes snorts.

“Hell no.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“So it is like that,” Wilson says.
“Like … what I’ve been saying all along, you mean? He’s my friend and I’m going to find him?”

“Nah. I’m saying I get it, and I don’t judge. Not a whole lot of other people will either. It’s a different time from when you were coming up.”

Ehh?

“Come again?” Steve says.

“I’m just. Trying to make a point that I don’t care who you love. It’s all right by me.”

Modern people are so weird.

“Oh my God Sam, are you talking about boning?” Rogers yells.

Did he just say ‘boning.’

CONFIRM

Don’t laugh don’t laugh don’t laugh don’t laugh

“Why does everything have to be about sex? Every one of you is as bad as the other. Do I run around humping chair legs?”

self … strangulation … imminent

“Did you ever see me ogling Nat?”

Rogers you had better not, I hate that girl.

“For fuck’s sake Sam, we all kid that I’m 95 years old, but it has been three years for me. Three damn years in which everything changed. The guy I see in the mirror is barely five years old, and I don’t even recognize him most of the time. Three years, and I lost everything. I died and came back to life. My best friend died in front of me, and I didn’t save him. I didn’t jump off that goddamn train and save him, and then he comes back to life with a fucking gun held to my face. I come back to life and the woman I was on my way to loving got old without me and doesn’t even know who I am sometimes.

“And that doesn’t even get into the aliens. Or my having inadvertently worked for the same organization that I chased around Europe for two years, that killed my best friend, and that I killed myself trying to stop. Which didn’t even work.

“You want to call us brothers, you want to call it something else, I do not even know. Everything I cared about got taken away from me before I could figure anything out, and I’ve been running ever since. I am standing on quicksand, Sam. I don’t have the damn resources to spend time thinking about who I want to put my mouth on.”

ASSIST

Mission, shut up. He just scooped my heart out with a spoon, you asshole.

ASSIST

PROTECT

CONFIRM: ROGERS SHARES THESE ORDERS
Holy hell.

Thankfully, if Barnes has been programmed with any bullshit about men not being able to shed tears when the situation warrants, he doesn’t remember it. He can hear Steve breathing hard.

“I am … really sorry, Steve,” Sam says.

Rogers sighs.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s really not. This is what I do for a living, man. I should’ve used three or four brain cells before I opened my damn mouth.”

“Well. I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“Dude, I know people in the Air Force who would call that sweet talk.”

“Shut up.”

“Roger that.”

“Ugh!”

Well done, Sam.

“So the plane thing.”

“What do you want to know, Sam?”

“That was on purpose. Like the Helicarrier?”

“God. I don’t know. Yes? It just seemed like the right thing to do, and I didn’t mind it. Or I only minded it a little. I mean, what else was I supposed to do? Go home, marry Peggy, and name our first son James Buchanan Rogers? It would have broken my heart all over again, every day. It seemed so much easier to just be done.”

Rogers you shit.

“That’s not how grief works, Steve. People who are hurting don’t like to think it, but most of us are more resilient than that. They find a way to go on. They find a way to not re-break their own hearts over and over.”

“Well, it didn’t work anyway. I couldn’t even die right.”

“I for one am pretty glad about that. Along with most of New York. And your boy Barnes, seeing as how he seems to be taking out anyone who even thinks about threatening you.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. So maybe hold off on all the heroic suicide thoughts for a while, will you?”

“I promise. I have to get Bucky back, don’t I?”

“Wait a second. If he has you bugged, that means he can hear you, right?”

“That is generally how surveillance works, Sam.”
“Ever thought about talking to him?”

What

“What?”

“If he can hypothetically hear you, why not talk to him?”

Rogers’s voice goes deep, with a sound in it that makes Barnes’s stomach drop about 8 cm and inexplicably makes him think of … shoe polish? In his hair?

“Sam, that is a great idea.”

Oh no.
Halloween

Chapter Notes

In which we learn that Bucky Barnes is kind of a prude.

----------------------

Rogers doesn’t talk after he hangs up the phone. He hums along with music. He clanks around his apartment. He goes to bed.

Barnes has been on many missions, even if he chooses not to remember them all. Rogers’s silence is not comforting. It is the opposite of comforting. It is highly suspicious.

But Barnes, per protocol, mirrors Rogers’s movements. He washes his face and brushes his teeth. After 27 hours, the cut on his cheek is a pink line of healing flesh.

Barnes lies in his bed and waits for the hammer to drop.

2245

2315

2330

2345

Maybe it’s safe to go to sleep.

0215

“Hey Bucky wake up.”

Barnes wakes. Externally, it may have looked like a peaceful waking. Pulse increased 50%. The hour is unsuitable for wakefulness. What the hell Steve.

“Remember when we were eleven and I put a smelt in your Sunday shoes?”

What is a smelt.

Internet search indicates: a small fish. Shoes are an inappropriate receptacle for fish. Download requested.

No memory arrives in his brain.

“Aw man, the smell. I thought you might actually get rid of me for that one.”

Purpose of inserting a dead aquatic creature into footwear unclear. Sounds like kind of an asshole move, Rogers. Why would you do that.

0230
0245

0300: Barnes drifts back to sleep.

0330

“Hey, Buck!”

Awake. He is awake. He’s awake now. His eyes are open, he’s awake. What is it.

“Don’t mind me, I just don’t feel like sleeping. I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

For shit’s sake, Rogers.

0345

0355: sleep

0420

“Man, Bucky, I bet it is going to be a GREAT day.”

Not if I haven’t had any sleep, asshole.

0430

0445

0500: sleep

0515

“Well, that’s enough lying around for me. Might as well get up for a run!”

No, Rogers. Why are you so terrible.

“I love running. How about you? Back in the day, you used to like to stay in bed until noon when you had the chance. Used to drive your mother crazy. Every time she changed the sheets there was no telling how many comic books and apple cores would fall out. Guess you’re more like me now. Gotta keep up with the old serum, get that blood moving.”

Noon. Noon sounds beautiful.

Pre-dawn runs are even worse than dawn runs. Rogers doesn’t sprint around the park any faster or longer than usual. It’s just so early. And the sleep has been so short, thanks for nothing you giant pain in the ass. And the clump of bushes is somewhat damp.

Ugh, so terrible.

Not, however, as bad as the rest of the morning.

What does Rogers eat, to make those sounds. The sounds are obviously emerging from both ends of his digestive tract. They are awful.

I may not eat for a week, malnutrition be damned. How do you even make those noises, Rogers. How can this possibly be normal.
“Excuse me,” Rogers says.

No excuse for you, the mission briefing downloads.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Far too gross for excusing.

Conjecture: one of the traits magnified by the super-serum is obnoxiousness.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Rogers runs out of air in his guts around lunchtime, thank the motherland.

The morning has not been improved by his research into Halloween. Barnes disapproves of Halloween. There are too many spiders involved. Spiders are not cute, no matter how many efforts are made to draw them with friendly facial expressions. They have too many legs.

Also: risk of compromised target safety. HYDRA may have extremely short agents and put them into costumes. Which will also put Ollie into potential danger.

“I wonder whether you can actually see a bullet inside the barrel of a gun,” Rogers says.

Barnes finds himself plastered against his own living-room window, his body apparently trying to sieve itself through glass.

He climbs down from the windowsill and peers through the scope. Captain Jerkface isn’t even holding a gun. He’s sitting in an armchair, smirking at his own apartment door.

He stares for 8 minutes.

“Dang.”

Flying Sam: reclassified no longer mission assist. Reclassified trouble-making hooligan, possibly listed for de-accessioning.

DENIED

Humph.

Then Rogers starts singing.

At first, this is a welcome relief. Singing is standard. Rogers’s singing voice is both familiar and pleasant. Then Barnes notices the topic of the songs in question.

He sings a song about illicit drug use.

He sings a song about venereal disease.

He sings two songs about public drunkenness and urination.

There is a song about the founder of HYDRA having only one testicle.
He sings NINE songs, in both English and French, that display great disrespect for women and their bodily autonomy and discuss meat in such a way that Barnes briefly considers the virtues of vegetarianism.

Also. One should not try to insert one’s genitalia into a human ear. It’s impolite. And impractical.

Please Rogers. Go back to the other music. The one about the lady cosmonaut is so nice.

But no. There are two more songs about venereal disease, one of which is almost as bad as the talk about toe fungus.

“Ah, the music of the good old days,” Rogers says.


Rogers stands in his kitchen with his hands on his hips for 4 minutes. When he inhales, Barnes flinches, anticipating more terrible music.

“Damn. I don’t know any more dirty songs. That was always your forte. And I feel kinda stupid.”

You sound stupid, Rogers.

“Just. What the heck, Bucky? Why don’t you come home?”

I am home. Besides, over on this side of the street we have cookies.

It is a relief at 1815 to hear a clatter in the hallway. Barnes looks out his door, in case Esther needs assistance. Preferably with cookie consumption.

Esther and Lidia are standing in front of Esther’s door. Esther has a large bowl of candy, and Lidia two folding chairs.

“What do you nosy old bats think you’re doing?” Ollie yells from his own doorway.

“We are counting on your generous introduction to … The Target,” Lidia says. She looks over at Barnes and closes one eye.


“I’d like to know when you think that ever stopped me,” Esther says.

“Just put your big ideas back in that dried-up hickory nut you call a head,” Ollie says, “Steve and I are going to have a perfectly pleasant evening talking about man stuff, so we don’t need you.”

If the mission assists start to fight, whose side is he supposed to take? How is he to separate them without causing injury. Barnes looks to Lidia for assistance, but Lidia is grinning. Grinning is an inappropriate response.

“You’re a sour, small-hearted old man, Oliver Peters.”

“At least I know enough not to stick my nose where it’s not wanted.”

“HA!” Lidia says.

Barnes squeezes the door frame so hard his hand hurts. Good thing it’s his flesh hand or there
would be repair work.

The sniping is not accompanied by blows. The three of them move toward the landing. Ollie’s chair keeps clanking against the floor as if it’s too heavy for him. Lidia turns back.

“Wouldn’t you like to come too, Jimmy?”

CONTACT

Deny.

He shakes his head.

“Can’t.”

“Ah yes,” Lidia says, “covert surveillance. Forgive me, I forgot.”

Note: observe Lidia further for signs of age-related dementia. Also observe Esther to ensure that snorting sound is not incipient respiratory infection.

It takes the mission assists so long to descend the stairs that Barnes is in time to watch them meet up with Rogers.

“It’s a party,” he says.

“Sorry,” says Ollie, “they’re like cat hair. I can’t get rid of them.”

But Rogers laughs and shakes hands with the ladies. He sets up the chairs for all of them. He hovers and pats, until all three of them are smiling by the light of Steve’s little battery lantern.

Then the children start arriving: witches, werewolves, and zombies. Teenagers in half-hearted painted-on beards. Lots and lots of short Captain Americas, with Rogers clearing his throat and putting enough candy into their pumpkin buckets to keep dentists in business across the borough.

There are no miniature Assets. There are no children in blue jackets. This is the disadvantage of covert operations, one supposes. But there are tiny Stark robots. There are small green things. There are little people in red capes with hammers. At 1924, Rogers receives a text from flying Sam.

**THERE IS A BABY FALCON AT MY DOOR.**

**STEVE THERE IS A LITTLE MAN DRESSED UP AS ME STANDING AT MY FRONT DOOR WANTING A SNICKERS BAR**

The old people brigade are busy passing out candies to a group of tiny fairies and princesses. Rogers, in the background, smiles at his phone.

*Better give hm one, then. Prety weird, right?*

*If by weird you mean AWESOME*

*I definitly mean awesome.*

There are even a few child redheads.

Child redheads! And green things. And fucking Starks. Unfair.
For 2 hours Barnes watches Rogers and his mission assists give treats to small children. The children are polite, generally, and occasionally amusing, even if none of them display an inspired taste in costumes. They mostly say “trick or treat” and “thank you.” Rogers modulates his voice and smiles a lot, so that even the youngest and shyest children will hold up their bucket or sack for a candy.

Then there is a pair of small boys with their father. One is dressed in red, white, and blue. The smaller one wears a blue jacket.

The smaller one wears a blue jacket.

“Hey, look at you,” Ollie says.

“I’m Captain America,” the larger child says.

“I see that. You look really good.”

“And my brother is Bucky Barnes.”

“Very handsome, young man,” Esther says.

“Hey,” the older boy says, “is your friend sad?”

“No, I’m not sad,” Rogers says, “I think your costumes are really great. Are you and your brother best friends like Cap and Bucky?”

It is unfortunate that pressing one’s eye more firmly to the scope does not result in greater resolution.

“We-ell. We fight sometimes.”

“Yeah, thometimes,” the little one says.

“Best friends doesn’t mean you never fight,” Steve says.

CONFIRM

Confirm?

“That’s what our mom tells us,” the bigger one says, “that you’re still family when you fight and you love each other anyway.”

“That’s right.”

Rogers’s voice sounds hoarse.

“And best friends is like family,” the boy says.

“Yes.”

In the scope, even in the dark, Rogers looks sadder than ever. This natural bent toward sadness is a mission difficulty.

“Well, you look great guys,” Ollie says, “happy Halloween.”

The boys chorus it back, and Rogers drops candy into their little pumpkin buckets.
“Are you all right, Steven?” Lidia asks.

“Yeah. Just. Lots of memories.”

“It must be strange to have children dressing up as you.”

“Actually, that part’s pretty great. It means I must be doing something right, you know?”

“What, saving the world isn’t enough for you?” Ollie asks.

“Aw, you know what I mean.”

“I do. I was just trying to make you laugh.”

“Sorry, Ollie. I’m not much for laughing these days.”

MISSION

Confirm.

“Won’t stop me from trying.”

“See, that’s why we hang out.”

“You fought a lot? You and Bucky?” Lidia asks.

Esther appears to have a deep fondness for small pieces of candy, given the regularity with which her hand dips into the large bowl.

“Oh God, constantly. Well. I fought, and Bucky patched me up. Once the bleeding stopped, then he’d lay into me for being stupid and never knowing when to shut my mouth.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Pretty much as far back as I remember, Bucky was always looking out for me. Even when I thought he wasn’t around, he’d show up from nowhere and pull me out of trouble.”

“Really,” Lidia says.

All three of the old people turn their heads slowly and look up at the window where Barnes is watching them through the scope.

It would be spooky, if they knew anything.

Thankfully, there is no indication that they know critical intel that might be hazardous to the mission or their continuing to breathe. Instead, they banter with Rogers and pass out candy for another 45 minutes. Then Rogers folds up the chairs and carries them across the street.

“Sure you don’t want me to bring them upstairs?”

“No thank you,” Esther says in her sharpest tone, “these chairs belong just inside, on the first floor.”

“That’s pretty convenient,” Rogers says.
“Quite.”

“Candy, Jimmy?” Ollie asks when they’ve made it up the three flights of stairs.

Barnes shakes his head. Empty calories. Less appealing than cheese. Unless.

“Are any of them peanut butter?”

Esther laughs. She piles orange-wrapped squares into his cupped palms.”

“Try these, Jim. Just be sure not to like them as well as my cookies.”

“Yes ma’am.”

He sits in his dark apartment until 2320, eating the too-sweet peanut butter candies and monitoring his computer as Rogers watches the old videos.

“Wish you could’ve seen this little kid, Buck,” Rogers says, “dressed up like you straight out of the war. He looked so good.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Do you remember that outfit? You were so proud to have your own uniform. Strutted around like a peacock.”

Well Steve, it’s a damn good-looking jacket.

“I’m glad people remember you. How you were. How you are.”

Don’t live in the past, Rogers. Then the present will let you down.

“Do you remember how we used to argue?”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“What I wouldn’t give for you to yell at me like that again.”

Keep putting yourself in harm’s way and I might be able to work that out for you, pal.

CONTACT?

Wasn’t talking to you mission.

“Geez. I probably sound like a crazy person, talking to the air.”

So what. The future is full of space aliens and HYDRA. Anyone who cares about whether you talk to yourself can have a conversation with my fist.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Hope you’re safe and warm, Buck. Good night.”
Good night, Steve.
Someone asked in a comment whether it's okay to rec this: yes please! I'm thrilled that people want to. Someone is making a podcast: very exciting, will link. I've been threatened with ART, but none has materialized yet.

The next 2 days are so boring.

At first it is a welcome novelty to have no emergency landlord threatening, HYDRA shooting, or emotional outbursts. It's nice to simply follow the morning routine of run/coffee/sandwich (except for the running part). Nice to not travel anywhere, like back in DC. Roger's doesn't even shout nonsense in the middle of the night or make gross noises.

For most of the first day, this is terrific. Rogers spends the entire morning talking about baseball, which upon research turns out to be an American sport played at approximately the speed of a sleepy tortoise. The Bucky-person apparently loved it.

Barnes prefers target shooting. Or, really, pastimes that do not require sitting elbow to elbow with a large crowd.

"I hope we get to go to a game together again some day," Rogers says, "even if it has to be a Mets game. I draw the line at the Yankees."

Pass. Too many people, disallowed.

The time highlights a disadvantage of the crummy apartment: there is no entertainment. So far as the mission briefing is willing to divulge, the Asset never felt moments when time slowed. The hours of stillness and watching were mission. There was never any recreation time allowed. Seventy years is a long time without recreation. Barnes wants something to fucking do.

He performs a highly satisfying experiment in which he learns that pears make an admirable addition to grilled cheese (as long as the mustard is left off).

Post-lunch activities are much less successful. The internet is filled with information and entertainment, but it is too much: quantity too great and quality too uneven.

A large proportion of the internet appears to consist of videos of solemn-looking dogs holding various treats on their noses, waiting for the command to eat. Barnes dislikes these videos. They feel familiar in a way he doesn't wish to examine.

Ugh.

Lidia, however, has books stacked around her apartment. The Olds don't seem to have anything better to do than insert themselves into the personal business of everyone within shouting distance.

"Of course I'll lend you books, Jim," Lidia says, "what language? What do you like?"
"English. Don't know."

"You don't know what you like to read?"

"No."

Lidia's scowl is not as impressive as Esther's.

"Fiction? Non-fiction?"

Unknown. He shrugs.

Lidia's expression changes. Her eyes close slightly, and her mouth widens. She doesn't meet his eyes, but stares over his shoulder.

Highly suspicious.

"Perhaps you like military history. I'm sure I have a book here somewhere about Steven."

DENY

Confirm.

He cannot be seen in close proximity to any pictures of the Bucky-person.

"Fiction," Barnes says.

Lidia's face is a little like the redhead's: it carries a suggestion of laughter without any of the overt signs.

"Ah well," she says, "that saves me the task of having to find it."

She lends him five books: two with plain, color-blocked covers, one showing a man standing too close to rough seas, one featuring an angry polar bear.

And one with two half-naked people apparently in the process of falling over from a collision in high winds. Barnes is pretty sure Seduce Me, Rogue is not going to be to his taste.

It is really, really not.

Barnes leaves the book on the floor outside Lidia's door at 2230. He doesn't want it in his apartment.

Otherwise, reading is good. It makes pictures in the mind that are pleasant to observe. From the description in the text he can assign voices to the book people.

In the book with the storm on the cover, the whiny mad scientist has Stark's voice. The constructed man speaks in his own voice, which is weird. But also pretty funny, because the constructed man has a lot to say. It would make Barnes's throat sore to speak so much.

And the constructed man worries too much about philosophy. It gets him in trouble. Makes him angry. Makes him behave in an unethical and self-defeating manner.

Should've had a mission, constructed man. A mission gives focus and direction. You can tell a good mission if it pushes one to improve skills and behaviors. Barnes could say a thing or two to that constructed man about how to better organize one's thoughts and prevent anger from
overwhelming all other processes. Like any other skill, it merely requires practice.

But the story takes place long in the past, longer even than his own. Maybe there was no coffee back in those days. Lack of coffee would be mission detriment.

Rogers babbles in his ear all day while Barnes reads. More damn baseball. Which evidently is not only as interesting as banjo music but also requires a boggling amount of math.

"Remember that scam we had going when we were little, crowding up around families and making a ruckus at the turnstile so we could distract the ticket-takers and sneak in?"

What.

"We were so bad. 'Gotta save our dough for food, Stevie,' you'd say, 'the Dodgers'll understand. They don't want their best fan to starve to death.' Man. There was nothing better than those ballpark hot dogs with lots of mustard."

Pretty sure it's still illegal, Rogers.

The mission briefing doesn't download this memory. The mission briefing is a stingy bastard.

Reading is far superior to risking capture and punishment to observe a sporting event that can't be fully "enjoyed" without graduate work in statistics.

While Rogers eats dinner at his cafe, Barnes reads at the diner, using the sugar canister to hold the book open. The diner is full and loud, but the words in the book make a bubble around him. His body retains its awareness - he still looks up each time the waitress approaches - but his brain is unbothered by the ambient sounds. Chatter doesn't intrude. Barnes hears only Rogers continuing his charm assault on the cafe staff and the book's words.

"I like this," Barnes says to the book as he follows Rogers back to the apartment. "I like reading."

He adds it to his list of good things.

"I tell you, you have to try pasta, Bucky," Rogers says abruptly, "it is not at all like the plain macaroni from our day. Now it's delicious."

Confirm, Rogers. The diner does an excellent spaghetti and meatballs, which you would know if you weren't a snob.

"This thing I had for dinner. Cheese sauce and spinach."

That does sound good.

"I mean, I know you used to turn your nose up at anything green."

Poor choice, Bucky-person. Vegetables are an important source of nutrients.

"But I think if you."

He stops in the middle of the sidewalk. Barnes does a quick visual sweep: no barriers, Olds, or HYDRA goons immediately evident.

"Aw jeeeeezez," Rogers groans.

Barnes clutches the book tight and loosens a knife. Rogers's posture indicates sudden distress. Is
there illness. Has there been a contact poison. Barnes has not done sufficient investigation of the
diner or its employees. He could have been eating in a HYDRA front this whole time. Slow-acting
poisons would be unlikely to overwhelm the super-soldier serum sufficient for fatality but could
weaken Rogers's reflexes enough to permit capture. He will contact Building. He will -

"I am so sorry, Bucky."

For shit's sake, sorry for what.

Rogers rubs the back of his neck, which is Standard Rogersese for 'I feel like a dumbass.' Come to
think of it, it's weird that he doesn't spend every minute rubbing his neck like that.

"I'm such a jackass, talking about food when JARVIS said you're malnourished. I'm really sorry.
Do you need money? I can give you money if you need it. No strings attached, honest. You don't
even have to talk to me. I would really like to see you."

Just saw me on tape the other day, champ. Don't get greedy. I'm doing just fine. You'd be better off
paying better attention to your surroundings. Like that trio of teenage girls at your ten o'clock.

The teenage girls ambush Rogers, of course. This results in photographs and (ugh) hugging.

Barnes stands next to a light pole and attempts to turn his eyes into flamethrowers, to no avail.
Hugging seems a bit much following right on the heels of a poison scare--turned--dumbfuckery.

The girls are very handsy. Rogers's wince would be mistaken for a smile only by the inattentive
and the stupid. And their giggling. Unbearable. They show signs of a disturbing eagerness to
follow Rogers home.

A minor miracle occurs, in that Rogers demonstrates a glimmer of savviness and ducks into the
hardware store to linger among the washers. Surely teenage girls lack interest in washers.

Just to make sure, Barnes risks covert status. He approaches the girls at a saunter, wearing his
Asset fighting glare. The girls scatter. Barnes waits for Rogers, who pokes his head out the
hardware store's door after 4.5 minutes, looks around, and sighs heavily.

"Be glad you're not famous, Buck," he says. "People follow you around everywhere. It's really
creepy."

Barnes swings into step, his customary 7 m behind.

You could call it creepy, Rogers. Or maybe you could call it amazing surveillance and thorough
protection. It's all a matter of perspective.
Tuesday

After a miserably cold run, Rogers announces to his empty apartment and shivering protection detail,

“I’m going to the Navy Yard. Guess I’ll be there in about … forty minutes?”

Okay. Time to finish a chapter before our walk. Pretty gross day for walking, though, Rogers.

It’s not a normal walk. Rogers is carrying an awkward bundle, and he keeps stopping to poke his head into stairwells and dark doorways to announce his intention of going to the Navy Yard.

Are you trying to call rats, pal?

Once at the Yard, Rogers wanders around in circles for 42 minutes with his stupid bundle.

“Come on, come on,” he says several times.

It starts to rain.

“Argh,” Rogers says.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Dammit, Bucky,” Rogers says.

Wait, what? I’m the rat? I don’t come when I’m called, Steve. And I’m not lured in by flute music. Maybe by mochas. Or Esther’s peanut butter cookies.

Holy hell. If Esther ever makes a batch for Rogers, the mission might be in danger.

After 18 minutes of cold, soaking drizzle, Rogers stuffs his bundle onto the lee side of a concrete block, where it’s a little protected from the rain.

“Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

CONFIRM

Shut up, both of you.

But after Rogers is safely back in his apartment, hopefully drying off and warming up to stave off respiratory infection, Barnes hustles back for the bundle and takes it home. It contains:

- Two bottles of water
- Two apples
- Three ham-and-swiss sandwiches, wrapped in plastic and slightly smashed
- One elderly comic, titled HOWLING COMMANDOS: The Day Bucky Saved Cap!
- Two $20 bills
- A drawing of the two of them
- A letter

All of this is bundled in a shirt Barnes has seen Rogers wear before. Not even one of the bad ones: it’s grey, with a black band around the chest. The bundle is tied closed with a dark green scarf.

Barnes puts the scarf on. It’s nice. Soft. The rest of the stuff is. Perplexing. But cute?

CONFIRM

Confirm, cute.

Rogers is concerned for his welfare: warmth, nutrition, and memory.

PROTECT

Barnes feels his mouth smiling of its own volition.

His mission is trying to mission-assist.

The sandwiches have too much mayo, but they accompany his reading of the comic. The story is extremely silly and bears no resemblance at all to actual war. But comics-Bucky demonstrates mechanical repair skills, caniness, and a willingness to yell at comics-Rogers for running headlong into dangerous situations without backup or a plan. Barnes approves of comics-Bucky.

The drawing he pins up next to his bathroom mirror. Rogers’s self-portrait is a little lumpy. Conjecture: he lacks practice at drawing himself. The picture shows them standing side by side, laughing. Barnes recognizes a bit from one of the movies at the Smithsonian exhibit. The sunshine smile. Rogers has not quite captured it in his drawing. But it’s a nice gift.

Gifts go on the good things list. Barnes definitely likes gifts. Also, he looks way better in the shirt than Steve.

He keeps the letter in his back pocket. He will read it when his fingers no longer tremble to touch it.

By mid-afternoon, Barnes has an urge to kick holes in some walls. Source of irritation: unclear.

Rogers is behaving. He has been talking about innocuous subjects. No blame can be placed on the target.

“You know I had to learn how to draw all over again?” Rogers says.

Reasonable. Body mechanics are different. Muscle memory inapplicable when muscles are a completely different size.

“My hands were so big, I didn’t know how long the lines were anymore. The pencil felt like a toothpick, and at first I’d just snap them in half.”

Query: are the files to be downloaded about this body, from when the metal arm was new and strange.
Maybe I don’t want them right now.

Some time in the future, if desired.

“But, you know. I spent so much time on planes and trucks, doing shows. It was so boring. I had time to practice like crazy. Took a lot less time to get good at drawing the second time around. Helped to suddenly see everything better.”

While it is completely thrilling to listen to Rogers drone on (and on) about harmonies of light and shading, Barnes remains annoyed. Reading is dissatisfying. The body requires movement.

He knocks on Esther’s door.

“Jimmy! Just who Eleanor wanted to see.”

He picks up cat Eleanor and follows Esther around her apartment, grunting monosyllables while she chatters at him. He lifts down a bowl from a high shelf and changes three light bulbs. Cat Eleanor’s purring against his chest is soothing, but frustration still crawls through him.

He unsticks Esther’s bedroom window. She gives him a candle to rub against the wood on each side so the window will continue to open more easily.

“Well, I think all this work deserves a reward,” she says.

He follows her to the kitchen, where she pulls out butter, flour, sugar, and peanut butter.

“What,” he says.

“Turnabout’s fair play, Jim,” she says, “you kindly did that work for me, now I’m going to make you cookies.”

Reciprocity. Gifts are exchanged.

He will be impolite if he doesn’t give a gift to Steve.

Rogers will definitely go back to the Navy Yard to check on the presence of the bundle. His curiosity is one of his least endearing qualities, safety-wise.

What gift can safely sit outside for an unknown period of time in the cold and rain? Barnes thinks of the good things: coffee and grilled cheese would get cold, a book would be damaged by water.

“Esther,” he says, “where can I buy a plant?”

“You like plants?”

“I like plants.”
“There’s a florist shop up the block, next to that yuppie furniture store.”

“Be right back.”

He puts cat Eleanor down, and she attempts to climb his leg.

“But the cookies are almost ready! Is this an emergency plant?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, just knock when you get back.”

Barnes chooses a philodendron under Building’s assurance that it can survive neglect. It’s not too big – only 40 cm high. Barnes takes it to the Navy Yard and sets it on the concrete block. Satisfying mission preparation: when Steve goes back later, all Barnes will need to do is follow.

The cookies are still warm when Barnes returns. Warm peanut butter cookies do not taste like happiness. They taste like bliss. They are so good that he’s sitting with his eyes closed on Esther’s sofa under a lap full of cat, when Esther says,

“Jimmy! Steve is leaving his building. Do you need to follow him?”

Rogers stops in his tracks when he sees the plant. Barnes wedges himself into a dim corner and watches Rogers creep up toward it as if it might explode. Approved, Rogers. Approach more things with caution and I might get to relax a little.

Rogers reaches out one hand and rubs one of the damp leaves. Then he roots around. Shoved way inside, where it would be protected from the wet, he finds the little card with Barnes’s note: ‘thanks for the stuff.’

“Oh,” Rogers says.

He scoops up the plant and sits on the concrete block.

He is hugging the plant.

Guess that makes it a successful gift. And if hugging has to happen, a plant is an acceptable recipient.

Rogers laughs a little.

“You’re welcome, Buck. Really really welcome.”

When Rogers walks past on the way back, Barnes can see that his smile has reached part of the way up into his eyes.

GOOD JOB

Confirm.

Wednesday

The continuing success of the plant is demonstrated in yet another bouncy morning run and a chirpy phone call to the redhead.
“I’m taking you to lunch,” Rogers says to her, “I feel like celebrating.”

On one hand, good. On the other hand, Manhattan.

The rain has let up, at least. Rogers is so busy trying to smile the world into a new era of peace and harmony that Barnes has to ride on the next subway car over. The guy practically dances through the park.

There is a small child with a yellow balloon standing on the sidewalk. As they approach the child from behind, the balloon starts to rise, and Barnes hears the child wail. A gust of wind blows the balloon forward.

Rogers takes off running.

For shit’s sake.

He runs down the sidewalk, barely missing a post box and nearly being run over by a food cart before he halfway climbs a light pole and grabs the balloon’s string. Potential injuries during the sequence: 22.

Barnes glares at Rogers as he walks back to the kid, who is now staring with his mouth hanging open. Rogers kneels down and hands the string to the boy, speaks briefly, then pats him on the shoulder.

The boy gawps at Steve’s back as he walks away, and Barnes can see it all unfolding in slow motion. The kid’s open mouth, and his sticky little hand starting to open as his tiny child mind tries to process a golden giant crashing down the block to retrieve his balloon.

The string slips upward again, and the kid’s head turns, eyes wide as if he can’t believe it. Barnes is already on the move. The metal arm grabs the string just as it slides away.

The kid blinks at the arm. Barnes has to shake the string at the kid twice before the boy takes it. Those beady little eyes fixed on his arm makes discomfort in his chest.

Rogers is only 40 m away. If the child screams, he will be revealed.

CONTACT

Deny.

“Are you a robot?” the kid asks.

Barnes stares. The kid looks. Excited.

“Just part of me.”

“That is so cool! Can I touch it?”

Reaction: surprise.

“Sure.”

Barnes lowers his arm, and kid fucking lets go of the fucking balloon. Again.

Barnes grabs the balloon. Again.
“For shit’s sake, kid.”

The boy’s eyes go even wider.

“You said a swear.”

“I say a lot of swears.”

He ties the ribbon around the boy’s wrist. He uses a very secure knot. Then he lets the kid poke at the metal arm and wiggles his fingers while eyeing the street to ensure that Rogers is still in view.

“That’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen!”

“Thanks, kid.”

“Thanks for saving my balloon.”

“Sure thing.”

By some minor miracle, Rogers makes it the rest of the way to the Building without any further trouble.

The old man is not on duty at the Japanese restaurant. The younger man behind the counter is not so friendly. It feels weird to sit at a table, but the soup is as good as ever. The grouchy-faced woman serves it to him as usual.

“My father will be sad he missed you,” she says.

It is good to know there is nothing amiss with the old man. What is the polite action.

“Tell him I said hello.”

This appears to be the correct choice. The woman pats his hand twice.

Barnes only half-listens to Steve’s lunchtime conversation. It’s embarrassing. Lots of conjecture as to his own state of being. Whole minutes of incoherent burbling about the plant. Does Rogers recognize the redhead’s silent laughing expression. Barnes imagines that Rogers is getting a lot of that look.

“I hate to kick you out,” Romanoff says after 90 minutes, “but I’ve got a thing I’m working on. Come back tomorrow, will you? In the afternoon? And bring the shield, I want to test something.”

Crap. That sounds like trouble.

“Oh, yeah. Okay, sure.”

Rogers stops to greet his other acquaintances. Good job, Rogers. Allows time to chat with his mission-assist.

“Afternoon, Building.”

“Good afternoon, Sergeant. I trust you are well?”

“Functioning within healthy parameters.”

“I’m glad to hear it. If you will, Sergeant, do not be startled.”
What.

"Hey."

If she dyed her hair a different color, would she quit showing up like a bad penny.

"Hi."

Romanoff rolls her eyes and smirks at him.

"Calm down, Barnes. I’m just checking in.”

"I’m calm."

"No one doing that with their eyebrows is calm.”

He relaxes his forehead. And his shoulders. He puts the knife back in its sheath (but doesn’t snap it in).

"Nice scarf."

"Thanks."

"Here."

She holds out a stack of cash.

“I don’t know what your supply situation is, but everyone could use more cash.”

Barnes stares at it.

“It’s not marked,” she says, “обещаю.”

“Building, verify.”

“The bills are unmarked and nonconsecutive, Sergeant.”

He takes them.

“Is there anything else you need?”

“No.”

“Okay. If you change your mind, just tell JARVIS, and we’ll get you whatever you need.”

“Why.”

She squints at him. Picking which lie to tell. If she says it in Russian, he might hit her.

“Steve is my friend. He would want me to help you.”

That is. Not the anticipated answer.

“Sergeant, I concur,” Building says, “as you have no doubt heard in your surveillance, your well-being is paramount in Captain Rogers’s mind. It is therefore logical to deduce that he would wish us to assist you and your mission in any way possible.”
MISSION ASSIST

You sound awfully excited about that.

CONFIRM

Confirm. Yuck.

Romanoff holds out a small sheet of plastic.

“JARVIS made these for you.”

He takes the sheet. It’s covered in tiny dots, barely discernible.

“I took the liberty of producing better listening devices,” Building says. “They will increase your listening radius to over one hundred twenty meters, and they are fully waterproof. I have tuned them to the frequency of your current devices.”

“Hey, Building. Thanks.”

“You’re most welcome, Sergeant Barnes.”

The redhead has to insert her opinion. Unsurprising.

“Of course, if you just –”

“Don’t say it.”

She grins at him. Brat.

“I’ll put one on the shield for you when he brings it tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

She shrugs.

“No problem. If you want, JARVIS can program my number into your phone, if you ever need backup.”

Nice try, lady.

“Deny.”

“Okay, offer’s open.”

Barnes stares at her, all little and obnoxious, as if she didn’t have a gun hidden under that purple jacket and at least one knife sheathed in her jeans.

“Why do I hate you?”

It’s nothing he needs to know. It has nothing to do with his mission, or her assist, apparently. Identified: curiosity. Developing the target’s bad habits now, Barnes. Better watch yourself.

She does that thing again, where she laughs without sound or opening her mouth.

“Probably because I shot you.”

“You shot me in the face.”

“Calculated my angle using your shadow. Because I am very good.”

“And you tried to garrote me. And shorted my arm.”

“Yeah. I did.”

She is terrible. Rogers is lucky she likes him. Of course, he’s Mr. Likeable. Lucky him.

“You shot me too,” she says.

Download. Ah. Shoulder wound, heavy-gauge round.

“Perhaps you’ll call it even, then,” Building says.

She’s still laughing. She is his most awful mission-assist, but she IS a mission-assist.

“Agree.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Sure,” she says, “for now. Any other bugs you want me to plan while we’ve got Steve close?”

“The one at the back of his collar of his jacket, perhaps?” Building suggests.

“Sure.”

She takes the sheet back and peels off one tiny dot. Just before she turns the corner to the front of the Building, he remembers.

“No kissing.”

She stops, turns back to him, and grins full on.

So of course when Rogers exits the tower, she’s with him, her little arm linked with his. Out on the sidewalk, she reaches up to wrap her hand around Rogers’s neck and pulls him down, kisses his cheek.

So obnoxious.

“What was that for?”

Rogers’s voice is as clear in the earbuds as if he were inches away. She set the bug.

“Just a demonstration of friendship,” she says, laughing again.

Barnes likes Building so much better.

“Uh, thanks,” Rogers says.

Then, half a block later,
“She is so confusing.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

**Thursday**

The letter gives a sensation like a bomb waiting to go off. Barnes sets it on the windowsill next to his bed. It doesn’t disappear overnight. He still doesn’t read it.

After their run, Rogers wanders over to the Navy Yard. This adds 35 minutes to their usual exercise time. It’s so damn cold. Barnes is so damn hungry. *More* exercise is not desired. Rogers gazes at the concrete block for 46 seconds before he turns back for home.

“Well, it’s a really nice plant, Buck,” he says later. “I hope I don’t kill it.”

You’d better not Steve.

Of course, Barnes can get in the apartment. If the plant starts to suffer, he can always break in to care for it. Set some more of Building’s excellent bugs. On Rogers’s running gear, for example.

“Why a plant, though?”

Plants are nice. They are quiet, and green is a soothing color.

“I guess if there was a card, you didn’t steal it?”

For crap’s sake Rogers, I may have been a villain, but I wasn’t rude.

“I feel bad if you’re spending money on me, buddy. Especially if you need it for food or shelter. But I really do like it. Thank you.”

Captain Worrywart.

They take the train back to Manhattan after lunch. Barnes is glad to have had a little time to fortify himself with sandwiches and cookies. He needs more pears and arugula. And maybe a coffee maker. Esther and Ollie have coffee makers. Seems like a useful machine. He could increase his skill set and learn how to construct a mocha at home. That would be useful. He could buy a heat-conserving container and make a mocha for Rogers, leave it on the concrete block.

He can shop for a coffee maker and a heat-conserving container after Japanese soup. Perhaps the old man will be there today and give him more fish. Perhaps the Army surplus store will have a heat-conserving container. That is a pleasing thought, visiting the Army surplus again. This is an excellent list of plans.

“Hello Building,” he says when he drops Rogers off.

“Hello, Sergeant. I suggest that you will want to stay and listen to the conversation. Mr. Stark and Agent Romanoff have been busy.”

Oh, crap.
Busy, his icy ass. They have been cooking up trouble. Digging up intel on a small HYDRA information outpost 15 blocks away. Making plans to hit it. Keeping those plans away from Rogers.

“Don’t want your boyfriend spoiling all our fun,” Stark says.

“Tony, he is not –“

“Don’t care, not listening. Made you a suit. Put it on. Car’s waiting for you and Red.”

What the hell even. Stark is so awful.

“Sergeant,” Building says, “Agent Romanoff suggests that you head to the building at the northwest corner of thirty-second and Madison.”

He has come to Manhattan with only four knives and one gun. Where can he procure more weapons. Steve will be left with only these yahoos for backup. Barnes has no intel and wholly insufficient materiel.

“I need a rifle.”

“Go to the roof of the building at thirty-second and Madison, Sergeant. All will be well.”

He runs.

He supposes that maybe it’s a good thing he has had to follow Rogers around running all these months, because the run feels like nothing. He flies down the streets, unhappy pedestrians be damned.

He climbs to the top of the building, and there is someone already there.

It’s the archer guy from Rogers’s group. Why would you use a bow and arrow. It makes no sense. Slow, low powered. Potential advantage: silence.

“I’m gonna assume this is for you,” the guy says, and slides a rifle case across the concrete.

It’s a beautiful rifle, with a strong scope and lots of ammunition.

“Thanks.”

The street is quiet. Where are they. He checks his phone: Building has loaded it with intel, but there’s no time to read it.

“Who are you?” the guy asks.

Oh great, a chatterer.

“Nobody.”

“’I’m Nobody, who are you? Are you Nobody too?’”

Enh?

“What.”

“It’s poetry. Emily Dickinson. What, you don’t like poetry?”
“Of course I like poetry. Russian poetry.”

The man groans.

“Aw, dude. You’re part of Nat’s russki squad? No wonder you look like Gloombucket T. Doomerson, Esquire.”

What does that even mean.

“You want wide perimeter or narrow?”

He is going to assist with arrows. Sure thing, champ.

“Narrow.”

Technically, the width of one (large) human body.

“You got it.”

Robin Hood climbs on top of an air exchanger.

There is a crack down at street level, and black-suited people boil out into the street. Robot Stark flies in, and Rogers is – of course – following the HYDRA jerks at an uncontrolled run.

What are you doing.

No, Steve.

NO Steve, you do not run toward the enemy.

Stop it.

This should not be happening.

This is the most ridiculous mission in the history of all missions and you are the worst target imaginable. Why do you not behave Steve. Why do you not see that guy right there on your left. Do you need your eyes checked. What would you do without me to take them down for you?

ON THE RIGHT

Got it.

Except that one falls with an arrow in his neck. Interesting, that Arrow Guy is so fast. He does not share Barnes’s non-lethal targeting.

Get back, Steve!

Do you not have any thought for the people who care for you. Stark at least has a tin suit to wear. Where is your tin suit. Why do you not stand behind the green thing. The green thing seems pretty tough.

For shit’s sake Steven, duck.

STAND DOWN

Confirm.
Barnes breathes. About damn time. He only has 17 bullets left for the sniper rifle: critically low supply. Clearly next time (if there is a next time, which there had better damn well not be), he will bring all of his weapons. Okay, half of them. All is too many to carry.

That’s supposing he has any warning, thanks again for nothing, Tony Stark.

Rogers stands over the kneecap-less goon at his feet, one hand on the back of his neck. He looks up and around. Through the rifle’s scope Barnes sees that Rogers has his stubborn chin expression back on.

Oh joy.

HYDRA asshats and Stark, mucking up a perfectly good run, during which Rogers has actually smiled.

And in Robin Hood’s favor, there are a bunch of goons who look like pincushions. Reassessment: maybe it’s a useful weapon after all.

“I thought you were a friend of Nat’s,” he says.

Only reluctantly.

Barnes nods.

“Uh. So, then why did you spend the whole time yelling at Rogers?”

What.

“You know you were doing that, right? Yelling about how Rogers is a dumbass who can’t watch his own back? Totally agree, by the way. But … like. How do you even know him?”

Barnes wonders whether it would be possible to stand on the roof and work up enough anger at himself to induce a stroke and end all this nonsense.

PROTECT

Confirm. With bad grace.

“Ask Romanoff about it,” he says, though he has to clench his teeth to say it. “She can explain. But don’t say anything to Rogers.”

He should add another thing.

“Please.”

The guy looks at him, then down at the kneeless jerks in the street. He shrugs.

“Yeah, okay, I’ll talk to Nat.”

He sticks out his right hand. Barnes shakes. The man has assisted sufficiently to warrant a handshake.

“I’m Barton.”

“Barnes.”
“Pleasure working with you.”

He shoots an arrow with a cord attached and slides down like Tarzan. Neat.

It also distracts Rogers and gives Barnes a chance to get away.

He takes the rifle. Romanoff said she’d give him anything he needs.

**Friday**

Barnes thinks of Rogers’s description of the Bucky-person lying in bed until noon with longing and desire. Rogers had stayed awake late into the night at the Building, practically giggling over the blown-out kneecaps. Probably the after-effect of a successful mission. It had been cold and miserable to sit outside the Building on the rifle case, waiting for Rogers to stop chatting, only to find that Stark was sending Rogers home in a car.

But Barton had never mentioned him, only said,

“Like, your friend from way back in the day? Wow, crazy. Dude’s a hella good shot, that’s for damn sure. Too bad I didn’t see him.”

Mission, he had thought, maybe I’m a little unfair to the redhead.

And the answer had been,

CONFIRM

On a happier note, before he went to sleep, Rogers had said,

“Thanks for being my backup, Buck.”

After a cold, late night and a long, stupid train journey, Barnes is singularly unhappy to wake up for the morning run. He has researched on the internet. It is not actually necessary to run *every day*. Ugh.

Rogers demonstrates a small bit of kindness and spends the morning at home, humming. He talks about the music he likes, and how he still can’t dance.

No surprise there.

Barnes is curled up in his armchair, reading an excellent book about the noble struggle of trade unions against capitalist tyranny in Industrial-Age Britain and the sounds of Rogers rustling around.

And then the sound of the door opening. The sounds of the street.

Dammit, he only has two pages left in this chapter.

“Here, ma’am, let me help you with that.”

“Thank you, young man.”

Barnes trips getting out of the chair. His metal arm clanks against the radiator and he lands on his nose. Marx and Engels, Rogers is talking to Esther.
“Friday morning shopping?” Rogers asks, “looks like … brisket for Shabbos?”

Esther cackles.

“The only Jews I’ve ever heard of that come in your size are golems. Are you made of magic and clay?”

Rogers laughs. That is a good sound.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Oh no. I just have very fond memories of my neighbor, Mrs. Lowenstein.”

Barnes blinks. Challah toast with apricot preserves.

Apricot preserves might be good with a sharply flavored cheese.

“She used to give me challah toast with apricot preserves on Sunday mornings sometimes, when there was bread left over. And she was always the one I went to when we ran out of candles.”

“Rand out of candles?” Esther says, “Were you Amish?”

Ha, Esther.

“No ma’am, just poor.”

Then he’s smart enough to ask about the brisket, and Esther is off. It’s all peppercorns, thyme, and low ovens for the next 4.6 minutes while Rogers says things like ‘wow,’ ‘mmm,’ and ‘that sounds amazing.’

Rogers are you flirting.

Well. At least Esther is age-appropriate.

But if he comes in the building. If one of them blabs.

If cat Eleanor likes Steve better.

“Well, here we are,” Esther says, “thank you Steven, I can take it from here.”

“Oh I don’t mind carrying it up for you.”

“Thank you, but that’s not necessary.”

Barnes can hear the cart rattling. They can’t possibly be wrestling over it. He wants so badly to look out the window, because that would be golden.

“Really, Esther, you shouldn’t haul this upstairs, it’s heavy!”


Barnes hears her struggle the cart through the door while Rogers makes little fretting sounds.

Then, “aw, jeez.”
Barnes risks a peek over the windowsill and sees Rogers crossing the street, head down, hands in pockets. Poor guy, just trying to be nice.

Three sharp raps sound against his door: Esther is outside, her hair fuzzed out and her grin huge.

“Jimmy, will you please bring my grocery cart up from downstairs? I had a run-in with –“

Her voice drops to a whisper –

“the Target.”

Don’t laugh at her, Barnes, even if she is adorable.

“But don’t worry! I think I handled him.”

Barnes brings up the groceries. And he stays for dinner. The candles and singing are nice, and the brisket is delicious. Rogers would have loved it.
Bad Days Come to Superheroes and Their Bodyguards

“What are you doing,” Rogers says at 0218.

I was sleeping, thanks so much. Are we really going to do this bullshit again?

“Be careful!”

Vocal tenor indicates upset. Barnes fumbles for the night-vision goggles.

“Bucky!”

Where are the damn things.

“Bucky, reach!”

Oh no. Steve. This memory downloaded before, in DC after the storm. The end of the Bucky-person. The birth of the Asset.

The long fall.

“Grab my hand, Bucky!”

Barnes finds the goggles. Rogers tosses in his bed. Wake up, pal. Come on. Wake up.

“Bucky no! BUCKY NO! Oh no, no, no.”

Wake up, Steve.

Rogers convulses and sits up. his breathing is harsh and loud. He covers his head with his hands.

Barnes remembers reaching. He remembers the person not-him thinking, ‘shit, this is really it’ and wishing for home. Remembers the vertigo of sudden descent and Rogers’s face shrinking in the distance.

The rest of it is locked away. Refused.

“Sorry if I woke you up, Bucky,” Rogers says, “I hate it when I have that dream.”

Sounds like a shit dream, Rogers. No wonder.

“Used to be I had it every night, just after. And when I first woke up in the future.”

He laughs, and it is a terrible sound that makes Barnes’s lungs too tight to admit air.

“Later on my nightmares were all about aliens for a while. I’ll tell you about that some time. It was not much of an improvement.”

Of course not. Those aliens have nothing on my handsome face.

“Should’ve jumped after you, Buck.”

Yeah. Great idea, throwing yourself into oblivion for just one guy. Give the bad guys two brainwashed super assassins. Wonderful plan.
“All those times you were there for me. I’m so sorry I let you down, buddy.”

This guy and his guilt. It’s a romance for the ages.

Rogers sits up for hours, sheets bunched over his knees and his head in his hands. Barnes sits up too, though his eyelids are weighty. Around 0507, Rogers rolls over, and his breathing evens out.

When the hated banjo rings out 1 hour later, Rogers groans, and the earbuds sound staticky for a second, as if Rogers has struck his phone.

It is a moderate-sized miracle. They are going to sleep in.

Not until noon, of course. But at least the sun is above the horizon when Barnes reawakens to the sound of Rogers groaning in the earbuds.

“Uuuugh. Screw running. I don’t feel like it.”

Highly suspicious. But Rogers makes no sounds associated with illness. He rises from his bed without difficulty. Aside from stubbing his toe on the bedside table.

“Ow, dammit.”

He yawns while pouring milk over his cereal, and milk spills across the counter.

“For pity’s sake.”

He drops to the ground to mop up the milk from the floor and clips his head against the side of the counter as he rises.

“Shit! Ouch! Dammit!”

ASSIST

I don’t know, mission. At the rate he’s going, he would inadvertently kill me with a napkin.

Poor Rogers. His whole morning is like that: spills, minor injuries. Trying to put on a shirt that has one arm inside-out and getting so tangled that it tears into three pieces.

How the citizens would blush, to hear Captain America this day. Such language, Steven.

Even drawing makes him so unhappy that he subsequently learns that the spine of a sketchbook, thrown with sufficient force, will make a dent in a wall.

“Argh, fuck!”

That guy needs a nap. Barnes needs a coffee.

“Man, I give up on today,” Rogers says.

Good idea. The day seems out to get you.

Rogers orders four pizzas – two with vegetables, good job Rogers, very healthy – and plants himself on his sofa for the next 6.5 hours.

At 1520, an unfamiliar sound comes over the earbuds. Barnes looks over to see Rogers, feet up on his coffee table, head cranked over to one side, mouth hanging open.
Snoring. Terrible sound.

But good. Sleep can restore equilibrium. Also, Barnes wants to run an errand.

He passes the scope and directional mike to Esther. Between the hardware store and the grocer, Barnes finds the materials needed to learn to make coffee. That way, the next time Rogers has a day like this, Barnes can do something about it.

The weight of supplies in his arms feels satisfying. Coffee at home is an advantage. Mochas at home will be even better, once he has perfected the technique. This will not only benefit himself and Rogers: when his skills have reached an acceptable level, Barnes can have the Olds over for coffee and begin to repay some of their kindness. Rogers was right. This Brooklyn is a good place.

It makes the self feel steady and reliable, to be in a good place, with mission-assists. To be learning proper human interaction. To receive kindness and learn how to give it.

He will invite the Olds over for coffee. He will think how to tell the story about the child with the balloon in a way that will amuse them.

He unlocks the door to his building with a light feeling in his chest, his head full of thoughts.

So it is a complete surprise when he is struck hard in the back of his head with a blunt object. The bags fly out of his grasp and land on the floor in front of him as he drops to his hands and knees.

He gets a boot to the ribs. Ow. The bag of sugar ripped in the fall – he can see a line of crystals glittering on the floor.

The French press he bought is an aesthetically appealing little device of heavy glass. The thought of it broken ignites him.

The second kick doesn’t connect with his chest. Barnes twists away and reaches out to grab the man’s foot. He wrenches hard, and the man goes down with a grunt.

The guy rolls away. He only has the chance to do so because Barnes takes the time to kick his bags over toward the protection of the stairway. This asshole is not going to ruin his new stuff.

Barnes’s attacker is beefy, dressed in dark clothing but with no visible HYDRA insignia. He has a knotted, curving scar on each side of his mouth, as if someone cut him a bigger smile. Very ugly.

Conjecture: this is not a nice person.

Big Ugly holds up a length of metal pipe. And he’s missing one of his eye teeth.

“Who the hell are you, handsome?” Barnes asks.

The man grins. Those scars are terrible. The guy tosses the pipe back and forth between his hands.

Aw. Is that supposed to be threatening. It would be a cinch to pluck the pipe right out of the air.

“Got a call from my mate Mikey. Tells me some rotter has set up like a super in his building.”

He shakes the pipe.

“I’m afraid that won’t do, boyo. This ain’t your building now, is it? Ain’t your call to make nor none of your fucking business, either. And I can’t have my friend worrying about his fine tenants. So I’m here to ask you real politely now. To get the fuck out.”
Tsk tsk. Michael Bernard O’Riley. What a moron you are.

“Tell me something, sport,” Barnes says, “did you ever find it weird how almost every time you come hide out here, two or three weeks later the cops magically know where to pick you up and where you’ve stashed your dope?”

The guy freezes. The great, rusty tumblers of his mind attempt to throw off decades of disuse and actually produce a useful thought.

Looks exhausting.

Barnes takes pity on Big Ugly and rushes him. Kinda seems like O’Riley didn’t bother to tell him about the metal arm, given the look on the guy’s face when Barnes blocks the pipe.

Barnes sighs.

“You made me spill my groceries, asshole,” he says.

He knocks the pipe away.

“And you’d better hope you didn’t break my coffee press.”

Big Ugly swings. It’s like watching someone swing a bat in slow motion. Hey look at me Steve, it’s practically baseball.

Barnes strikes out once, twice, and Big Ugly drops to the floor.

The French press is intact, so Barnes will let him live.

But what to do with him.

Great. Steve’s bad day is catching.

First, bindings. Barnes pinches the sugar bag closed and jumps upstairs three steps at a time. He grabs zip ties and cables from his stash, then goes back to tie the guy’s arms and legs.

Barnes could pop out of these in under 10 seconds, but it’s likely enough to hold a standard human. Even one with puffed-up muscles.

Big Ugly will wake soon, though. A gag is desirable. This is a notable omission in his supplies.

Esther is currently monitoring Rogers. Lidia is most likely of the three to have weapons. But Ollie is most likely to have random purchases from the hardware store.

Barnes checks in on Esther.

“What’s happened, Jimmy? You look rumpled.”

“It’s okay. In the middle of something. Steve all right?”

“He finally leaned over and stopped snoring. Thank goodness.”

“Thanks. You can keep watching?”

“Of course, Jimmy. Anything you need. Just.”

“What.”
“Be safe.”

The Asset never had a single person caring for its well-being. Barnes has help and exhortations for safety at every turn. He must be doing something correctly.

“I will.”

Ollie has duct tape. He has taped the gaps in his windows shut to keep out drafts. That is a problem that Barnes will address later.

Ollie follows him to the entranceway, because of course. But Barnes doesn’t mind. Ollie is mission-assist.

Barnes tapes Big Ugly’s mouth just in time for the guy to start twitching his way to consciousness.

“Who is this, Jimmy?” Ollie asks.

“Friend of O’Riley’s. Trying to make me leave.”

Ollie sits on the bottom step of the stairway.

“Is this how it’s going to be now? Bad guys showing up at all hours?”

“Is that different from usual.”

Ollie sighs.

“No. No, you’re right.”

His expression is unhappy. He runs his hand over his mostly bald scalp several times. He is a very old man who deserves better than to worry about his personal safety in his own home.

“Ollie. I will keep you safe if I can.”

Why does that make Ollie look so sad.

“Thank you, Jimmy. We’re all very glad to have you around.”

Big Ugly stirs. He makes noises behind the tape, and he wriggles in an attempt to break his bonds. He cannot stay in the entryway.

“Ollie, do you have a car?”

Ollie looks surprised.

“I do.”

“Can I use it.”

“What are you going to do, Jim? I won’t have my car used to transport murder victims.”

He is a good mission-assist and a good person.

“Not dead, alive. Even after.”

“Okay, Jim. You can use it. But I want to go with you.”
“Why.”

“In case you get angry, Jim. In case you need help.”

This is acceptable. Barnes nods.

“Let’s wait until dark.”

Ollie looks alarmed at this, and Big Ugly makes noises of protest. But Barnes leads Ollie upstairs and pushes him into Esther’s apartment. He fetches Lidia, who will calm the other two.

Barnes expected Esther to be frightened. He does not expect that they are all concerned for his physical health when he tells them who the man is and why he came to visit.

Lidia insists on feeling the lump at the back of his skull and on his lifting his shirt to show the bruises on his ribs. Esther gasps at the sight, and her eyes fill with tears.

“Do you need medical care?” Lidia asks.

“Negative. Pain manageable, no injuries requiring intervention.”

“Oh Jimmy, why are you talking like that?” Esther asks.


“Don’t fret him, Esther. He’s busy thinking about how to solve our problem,” Lidia says.

Maybe that was the incorrect defusing tactic.

“All is well,” he says, and Esther relaxes fractionally.

“Can you still watch Steve?”

“Of course I can!” Esther says, “as long as you need, Jimmy. He woke up a few minutes ago. He’s watching an old movie. I think he must be having a bad day, given that frown.”

“Bad day’s going around,” Ollie says.

CONFIRM

“Yes,” Barnes says.

When the sky has darkened, Ollie and Barnes leave the ladies to the scope. Barnes hoists Big Ugly over his shoulder. The guy tries to kick, so Barnes pinches the back of his knee hard. That hurts like a son of bitch, and it makes the guy stop. He is obnoxiously heavy.

Big Ugly also tries to protest being stuffed into the tiny trunk of Ollie’s little car, but having his nose held shut briefly cures that.

“What are we doing, Jim?” Ollie asks as they climb into the car.

Barnes has to move the seat back before he can even get behind the wheel.

“Taking the guy to O’Riley.”
“And then what?”

Ah. Perhaps Ollie is worried about the other O’Rileys, ages 42, 14, and 11.

“I won’t do anything you disapprove of, Ollie.”

Ollie huffs through his nose.

“You mean, other than so far.”

“Yes.”

The house at 140 Jackson Street in East Williamsburg is in good repair, well lit. The contrast with the dingy apartment building makes Barnes wish Big Ugly will struggle again, so he’ll have an excuse for more pinching. Through the broad window to the left of the front door, Barnes can see a woman, presumably Maddalena O’Riley, bent over the son, one hand on his shoulder.

O’Riley should be better to them.

Barnes parks down the block.

“Stay in the car,” Barnes says, “I won’t be long.”

“I trust you Jimmy,” he says.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Barnes lifts Big Ugly from the trunk and sets him on O’Riley’s front stoop. He rings the doorbell and vaults over the railing into the darkness below.

The boy answers the door. Stares down at the large bound man, fear showing on his young face. Barnes dislikes inspiring that expression on the face of a child. Fucking O’Riley.

“Mom!” the child calls, “Mom!”

Maddalena O’Riley is more strongly made than her son. Or she knows something about her husband’s line of business.

She stares down at the man on her porch. Her faces moves quickly from surprise to anger to a vast, stony rage. She turns toward the interior of the house.

“Michael!” she yells, “Michael Bernard O’Riley, you bring your bastard ass down here this instant!”

Oh, Barnes likes her. This will help. This will help a lot. He returns to the car.

“Who’s the battle axe?” Ollie asks.

“O’Riley’s wife.”

Ollie laughs for six blocks.

“I guess you know what you’re doing, Jim,” he says when he catches his breath.

“Sometimes.”
They return to Vinegar Hill, and the women have not only kept up a close watch on Rogers but also fixed dinner. That is a very pleasant way to end a mission. Dinner, company, and a cat in one’s lap.

While they eat, Ollie tells Lidia and Esther about Big Ugly and O’Riley’s wife, making the story extremely funny and Barnes out to be canny and efficient.

He likes Ollie’s version of the story.

But it has been a long, busy day following a poor night’s sleep. The meal is good: chicken stew with dumplings in it and brownies for dessert. Barnes’s eyes want to close. He hair keeps coming loose from the hair tie and falling over his eyes or getting caught in his mouth.

There is a moment of silence.

“I can cut your hair for you,” Lidia says, “like you had it in the old days. If you want.”

“Like I. What.”

She stands behind him and gathers up his hair. Barnes only flinches a little at her touch. She waggles her elbow, and Esther fetches a small mirror.

Lidia is holding his hair so it has a little puff on top and the ends curling toward his ears. It’s the Bucky hair, sort of, and the Bucky face stares at him.

Assessment: his face, even when it is pretending to be the Bucky-person, hold more expression than in previous months. It currently looks tired and perplexed. But his mouth now looks as if it knows how to hold a smile.

Lidia drops his hair, and there is his own face again. She gives his right shoulder a squeeze, then one pat, before she sits back down at the table.

Barnes stares at the three of them. They stare back with soft, welcoming expressions. These mission-assists.

“How did you know?”

Ollie, Lidia, and Esther scream with laughter.

The sudden noise causes cat Eleanor to leave his lap with a clawed alacrity that is quite uncomfortable to his upper legs. They pound the table, stomp their feet. They snort and wipe their eyes. It goes on for 106 seconds. Subjectively, 106 seconds is a long time to stare at guffawing old people.

“Son,” Ollie says after he has blown his nose and pounded the table one more time, “would you like to know how I spent my free time when I was seven years old?”

“Um. Yes?”

“I collected your comic books. Picked up cans and bottle from out of the gutter to take for recycling to earn the money for it. I still have every last one of them. Could probably make a mint, if I were willing to sell them.”

Barnes’s body feels danger/violence/run. Not that any of them could catch him.

“I wrote a report on you in secondary school,” Lidia says, “got very high marks.”
“I met one of your sisters,” Esther says, and the floor underneath Barnes’s chair feels unsteady.

None of those memories have downloaded. “Family” is an abstract concept in black-and-white photos on the internet and from the Smithsonian.

“The eldest one, Rebecca. She came to my women’s consciousness-raising group in 1964 to talk about how to organize and plan demonstrations. She was an organizer for the Garment-Workers Union. Tough as granite, with a smile that lit up the room. But of course all we wanted her to talk about was you and the Captain. She had a picture of you in her pocket, from before the war. She said she was never without it.”

Barnes is as hollow as a bell. ‘Rebecca’ is just a name. Will the ability to remember go back that far, or does memory stop at Steve.

“When did you know.”

Esther takes his hand – the metal one, not afraid of it at all.

“I put it together when I saw who it is you’re watching,” Ollie says.

“But anyone would really need to see you together,” Lidia says.

“And be old,” Ollie says.

“I don’t think you have to worry,” Esther says, “you don’t look much like you used to. We just see you so much, and Steven too. We were bound to put it together.”

The Asset would be gone by now, leaving their cooling corpses behind. This would be mission abort.

But they give him intel. They help watch Rogers. Esther is teaching him to cook, and Lidia lends him books. If they were dead, the supply of peanut butter cookies would dry up.

“I don’t remember,” he says.

Strange. His voice sounds hoarse.

“None of it?” Esther asks.

He shakes his head.

“Just. Echoes. Falling. Fighting. Pictures. The only thing I really remember is.”

He stops speaking. His throat feels constricted.

“What do you remember, dear heart?”

“I remember Steve.”

Everyone goes a little damp around the eyes.

Barnes shakes his head. His backup team is a bunch of people with fake teeth and fragile hips. Plus a terrible redhead and a talking building. Strangest mission ever.

“Now that we have that out of the way,” Ollie says, “we have a question for you. Why don’t know just walk up to the man and say hello?”
CONFIRM

Lidia and Esther nod.

CONTACT CONFIRM

Why is he the only one who understands the need for a useful surveillance perimeter? Jeez.

“Deny.”

The Olds roll their eyes at him.

Ugh.
Despite his level of exhaustion, Barnes lies awake late into the night, listening to Rogers breathe. It is a quiet, pleasant sound.

Building and the redhead have known his body’s identity since their first meetings. It’s fortunate that each of them is a mission-assist. But one is a piece of architecture, and the other a spy whose list of villainous actions is potentially as long as his own.

His neighbors are normal civilians. Good people. Who know him: present and past (if not the bad middle). Yet they stay. They have seen the knives. They have heard the threats and cursing. But they fear for him. They help.

It is. Surveillance/protection without distance.

Rogers sighs in his sleep.

The envelope containing Rogers’s letter is a pale spot to one side of the windowsill.

Go to sleep, Barnes. The envelope will still be there in the morning.

“It’s a new day, Buck,” Rogers says after the 0600 banjo, “better than yesterday.”

I don’t know Steve, my day ended up all right.

Barnes follows Rogers on the run instead of sitting under his trees. He’s tired, and the appropriate course of action is unclear. The repetition of feet on pavement quiets his mind.

“Hey,” the young man behind the register at Starbucks says, “we missed you yesterday. You know, it’s funny. There’s another guy who comes in every morning after his run too. The Running Regulars, we call you: first tea and banana bread, when white mocha and breakfast sandwich. We can practically set clocks by you guys. You should introduce yourselves to each other!”

Damn. He is going to have to learn to make coffee right away, before Rogers becomes the recipient of this cheerful speech.

Time to alter patterns, Rogers. HYDRA’s going to find you out eventually.

CONTACT

Maybe. Maybe.

“Jeez, more rain?” Rogers says later, “I wish it would just get a few degrees colder and snow.”

How is more cold an improvement.

“Uh. As long as you have some place warm and dry to sleep, Buck.”

PROTECT

Yeah, mission. I get it.
Barnes follows the instructions from the internet carefully and brews his first cup of coffee. The process is satisfying, like cleaning guns. Fiddly but not too time-consuming. A task with a defined end result.

Said result is delicious, if nothing like a mocha. He tastes it black, with sugar added, and then with milk added as well. Each is interesting in its own way. A successful first experiment.

With a warm mug to hold onto, Barnes makes himself approach Steve’s envelope.

It’s just a letter. He has listened to Rogers almost 24/7 for months. There can’t be anything written in there that is too surprising. It’s ridiculous to be afraid of the thing. He tears open the envelope.

Rogers has tidy handwriting: a clear almost-printing sufficient for battlefield notes. Despite the neat, evenly spaced letter, there are words redacted.

Just read the damn thing, Barnes.

Dear Bucky,

I hope it’s okay that I call you Bucky. I’m not sure what else I could call you. Definitely not “Winter Soldier.” That’s not a name, it’s a code. It’s as bad as people calling me “Captain America.” Unless I’m on duty, I hate

Sorry. I feel kind of nervous, writing this. Which is weird. I wrote you letters all the time from the spangle circuit. Never sent any, though. I figured if you found out what I’d done, you might break your hand trying to

I should’ve written a first draft.

Look. I don’t know if you really remember me. I hope you do. But if you don’t, it’s okay. Whoever you are, I want to thank you for watching over me in DC with all those HYDRA agents. That means a lot.

And thanks for letting me know on the video that you’re okay. I almost lost my. It was really brave of you to do that. To take the risk that I would try to find you. It’s really h

Please come. You are always welcome to stay with me, if you need a place. You probably know, but I’m at the corner of Bridge and Water in Brooklyn, the big brick building with green trim. Apartment 3A. I’ll give you your own key, you can come and go as you please. I won’t even talk. Just know there’s a place for you if you want it.

The apartment is pretty nice. It’s nicer than the one I had before. I like this neighborhood. And there’s a bunch of hilarious old people who live across the street. They’re really nice. Maybe you would like them. I keep hoping they’ll adopt me.

I’m lonely. I think. Dammit.

I’m lonely, in the future. Are you? It’s a little better now than when I first woke up – the people who were helping me out in DC, Natasha and Sam, they’re actual friends now. I think they would be friends to you too, if you wanted.

Everything fell.
Everything fell down around me, in DC. When I found out that SHIELD was evil. When I found out you’re alive.

I mean, it’s a miracle, right? That you’re alive? And I’m alive? After all this time?

Who knew miracles hurt so much.

Sorry. There are so many things I want to say that I keep going off on tangents.

I have a file about you. About what happened to you. It’s yours if you want it. But it’s pretty awful.

I mean, you know that. You went through it. I’m sorry.

I know that you never had any choices of your own. So I’m not going to ever make you do anything you don’t choose. But I hope that you might want to talk to me. Just talk. Maybe over a cup of tea?

I am, always,

Your friend,

Steve Rogers

Barnes puts the letter down and makes himself a second cup of coffee. It’s more difficult, the second time. His hands keep shaking. He adds a lot of milk and sugar to the coffee, in case he’s going into shock.

He reads the letter again.

It’s funny that Rogers didn’t make a clean copy. Paper is cheap in the future. But Barnes can imagine his writing it: chewing on the pen, writing off on tangents, crossing things out with a frown.

So melodramatic, Steve.

PROTECT

Yes. I see that, mission, I’m not an idiot.

Will Rogers be angry at the redhead, to know she has been a mission-assist.

Surely he won’t be angry at the Olds.

Emotion identified: sadness.

The Olds would definitely adopt Rogers, as they have adopted him. Except that they have respected his request for secrecy and distance.

Barnes sits up straight, and coffee sloshes out of the mug, onto the paper.

He has made an error.
Distance has injured the target.

He has been so focused on HYDRA, on perimeters and surveillance, that physical protection took precedence.

The sunrise smile will never come back if Barnes prevents Rogers from finding his place in the future.

He looks through the scope: Rogers is puttering around in his kitchen, making dinner, humming to himself.

Change in tactics warranted. Assess: how to increase target’s emotional health while maintaining physical safety.

HYDRA will come for Steve. Again. In the meantime, how does Barnes increase his baseline happiness.

CONTACT

Maybe. Maybe.
In the end, they don’t come for Rogers. They come for him.

Barnes has delayed for 4 days, since reading the letter. He has had a lesson in cookie-baking. He has experimented with the addition of hot-chocolate powder to brewed coffee.

GOOD

He has listened to Rogers, visited Manhattan. He has stood in the back of the grocer’s and identified emotion: misery while Rogers talked to Esther about an upcoming American holiday called Thanksgiving that is the reason behind everything suddenly being orange and brown instead of orange and black and plastered with turkeys wearing hats.

“Surely you have somewhere to go,” Esther had said.

“Oh sure,” Rogers had said, “I can eat with my colleague in Manhattan. But it’s not like family, you know? It’s not really friends.”

“Jimmy,” Esther had said to him, back home, with her eyebrows drawn together in two fierce lines.

“Jimmy, that poor man of yours.”

“Yes.”

But before he can think of a way to make it work, both contact and protection, he wakes at 0026 to the sound of cat Eleanor making her bad sound: WOM WOM WOM.

He wakes, and his room has people in it.

Eight people, wearing night vision goggles. One has a syringe. Four have guns. Two have cattle prods. One is very tall.
They have come for him.
If he goes with them, will they leave Steve alone.

And a knock at his apartment door.

“Jimmy, are you all right in there?”

One of the people with guns spins toward the sound of Esther’s voice, weapon cocked.

No.
Absolutely no.

He launches himself toward that person. Shouts.

“Esther run!”

The guns go off in his direction, but he’s on the move, and three out of four miss. The fourth
scrapes across his shin. One cattle prod he knocks away, and the other hits him full on in the chest.
He hasn’t known such pain since the Chair. The Chair.

He throws himself backward, feeling sick, and kicks the bed at the crowd, giving himself the 1.6
seconds required to replace his earbud and hit the button on his phone.

“Building. Help.”

“Acknowledged, Sergeant.”

The guns are pointing back in his direction. Barnes runs at one of the cattle prods, and in the wave
of nausea/agon, he reaches out and hits the light switch.

The HYDRA agents recoil from the light. Barnes is up, untangled from his bed, but cut off from
the duffel. He grabs his kitchen knife, and the one he keeps stashed on the shelf next to the stove.
There is shouting outside in the hallway. Esther, Ollie, and Lidia.

Lidia. Get them to safety.

The goons recover and come into the living room, free of their goggles.

Who is the tall one. He has dark hair, dark eyes, very pale skin. He is very thin. And his expression
is. A smile. The man makes Barnes.

Afraid.

One of the goons shoots. Barnes swings with his metal arm, and the deflection actually succeeds.
It’s not a bullet. It’s a tranquilizer dart.

They are bringing him in. For refurbishment.

No.

No, I don’t want it.
Cat Eleanor is small. She can hide in tiny places.

He throws the smaller knife, catches the dart-shooter in the neck.

Seven.

The tall man hangs back, watching. Two more darts come Barnes’s way, but the shooters are nervous and un-enhanced. The darts embed themselves in the wall.

More weapons. He needs more weapons. He grabs the knife hidden under the seat cushion of the armchair.

He throws *Frankenstein* at one of the cattle-prod wielders, hits the guy in the nose. It’s only a moment. Not enough.

And then he is distracted by a strange sound from the earbuds – buzzing in Rogers’s apartment. Are they hitting both places. He has to get to Rogers.

“What? Who is it?”

And Lidia’s voice, crackly and tinny.

“Steven, it’s Lidia. We need your help. We need you.”

“Lidia? What’s wrong?”

“Come quickly, Steven. It’s Jimmy. We need you. It’s Bucky.”

Shit.

Two more darts.

One hits, right forearm. He pulls it out, but that arm will be slowed.

He needs more space. He needs weapons.

He dives toward the gun-holder to his left, grabs and rolls, so the cattle prod attack hits the goon, who convulses. Barnes grabs the gun and rolls away.

Six.

Three darts. Barely better than useless.

He throws everything within reach at the goons, using the metal arm for maximum force: Lidia’s books, the bag of coffee beans, the kitchen chairs, even the French press. He keeps the cast-iron pan.

Materiel: kitchen knife, dart gun, iron pan. Pathetic.

One of the cattle prod-der runs forward. Barnes takes the guy’s inertia, spins, and the flimsy wall of O’Riley’s damn shoddy building splinters. They fall into the hallway.

The guy smacks him twice across the face with the length of the prod before Barnes wrenches it away and electrifies the guy in the neck.
Five.

Materiel: kitchen knife, dart gun, cattle prod, iron pan.

Barnes deflects a dart with the pan. He aims his dart gun at the dark man, but misses.

How does he miss.

Another shot. He moves. A hot, bloody line across his right arm. Two of them have bullets, then. At least. He fires a dart at that shooter, and the man goes down with a dart between the eyes.

Four.

Barnes retreats against the far hallway wall.

Three shooters: two bullets, one dart. And the tall man.

There is a loud noise from downstairs.

“Bucky!”

Shit, damn, and fuck me sideways.

There’s a bang and a stab of heat through his right shoulder. Barnes spends his last dart on one of the bullet-shooters. Straight to the neck, and she goes down.

Three. He throws the empty dart gun toward one of the shooters, for what that’s worth.

There is a crash, from the west, near Ollie’s apartment. Barnes lurches to the left and grabs the bullet-loaded gun.

“Barnes.”

The Soviet robot, and the redhead.

“Bucky!”

And Steve.

Of all the hells in all the religions in all the world.

“Jimmy! Jimmy, be careful!”

And the Olds. Crowded on the stairway behind Rogers.

“Well, look at this,” the tall man says.

His voice is danger. It is chest-clenching fear. It is shaking hands. It is despair.

“What the hell is going on here,” Stark says.

“Shut up, Stark,” Romanoff says.

“Why, it’s the final performance of our most wonderful creation,” the tall man says, “and what a lovely audience we have to see.”

No.
No, please no.
Barnes throws his kitchen knife at the one with bullets in his gun.
Barnes misses.
He never misses.
How is this even.

“<Petrushka, listen,>” the tall man says, entering the Russian language portion of the evening.

“<Petrushka, clever boy. Do you hear?>”

ACCEPT

Comply.


CODE ORIGIN ACCEPTED

COMPLY

Comply.

“<Reset code origin. Petrushka, do you comply.>”

RESET CODE VALID

“Да.”

“<Good boy. Confirm comply.>”

The man waits.

CONFIRM COMPLY

“<Code origin valid. Confirm comply.>” he says.

CONFIRM

Wait.

VALID

Wait.

COMPLY

The body does not move. The body remains still. Reset code origin is a kill order. Target undefined. Awaiting target confirmation.


Rogers is approaching. Unarmed. Wearing fleece pants with sheep on them. How is this an appropriate target. They are sheep.
He lifts his gun, points it at the target. Who pauses. Facial expression identified: stricken. The target resumes walking forward. In the sheep pants. And bare feet. Ambient temperature low, bare feet inappropriate.

“<Target Captain Rogers, Petrushka. Confirm comply.>”

The voice is authority.

COMPLY

But the pants have sheep on them.

TARGET CONFIRMED, ORDER KILL

COMPLY

But the pants.

CONFIRM ORDER KILL

“<Follow your order, Petrushka.>”

“Bucky.”

“I can take him out, Cap.”

The robot.

“Don’t, Tony.”

The redhead.

Wait. The redhead?

A dart. He deflects it with the pan, swings the gun. Fire.

Two. Resume sights on target.

“Дурац!” the tall man hisses, “this is between me and the Asset. Listen, clever one.”

COMPLY

“<You know code origin, clever boy.>” the tall man says.

COMPLY

“Comply.”

“<Follow orders, my dear. Code origin. Target Rogers. Do you understand?>”

COMPLY

“I understand.”

“Bucky.”

The target is in front of him, with messy hair and sheep pants. Unarmed. Wet-eyed. Ready to die.
This is not right.

COMPLY

“<Take the shot, Petrushka. Then you can come home.>”

Distance to target 15 cm.

What is home.

FIRE

Wait.

FIRE

What is home.

“Bucky,” the target says, “have you been here all along?”

Confirm, Steve.

FIRE

No, confirm.

CODE ORIGIN TARGET ROGERS

No.

CODE ORIGIN TARGET ROGERS

No.

Mission. No.


ORIGIN

Deny.

FIRE

Deny.

FIRE

No. Protect. Contact.

CONTACT?

Confirm.

“<Petrushka, fire>” the tall man says.

“Bucky,” Rogers says.
“Jimmy!” Esther says.

CONFIRM

“Esther,” Barnes says, “close your eyes.”

“Jimmy!”

“Do as he told you,” the redhead says.

Rogers closes his eyes.

Esther closes her eyes.

The tall man smiles.

Barnes swings his pistol wide right and fires.

There is no room for non-lethality here. Not with tranq darts and cattle prods. Not with frightening men who know codes that make the mission forget itself.

The tall man drops, with a single bleeding hole in the center of his forehead.

And Esther did not see it.

“Bucky,” the target says.

“Steve.”

“Jim! Jim, son, look out!” Ollie says.

Barnes swivels, and the two remaining HYDRA agents go down: one from a blast of light and one from the redhead’s gun.

Mission assist.

“He’s okay, JARVIS,” Stark says, “stop your worrying.”

WHAT EVEN

It’s okay, mission. We’ll sort it out later.

“Buck.”

“Hi Steve.”

And there’s that sunrise smile. The one he has waited for.

Not that it’s easy from there.

The redhead causes all the trouble, of course. Once everyone has had 30 seconds to breathe, she says,

“So this is where you’ve been living all this time?”
And Rogers looks at him with an I’ll-punch-you sort of expression.

“Yes.”

“Best neighbor ever!” Ollie says, “fixes lightbulbs, drives off skanky landlords, and provides endless hours of entertainment! You have really been missing out.”

“Jimmy!” Esther says, and runs to him.

Hugging is difficult. He sees Rogers watching his discomfort. Sees Rogers frown, then nod. It is. Not optimal.

“Jimmy,” Esther says, after he has bled all over her.

Esther cries all over him. ‘Hey, that’s my shirt,’ Rogers says once Esther had gotten it all damp. Esther opens her door and cat Eleanor runs out, climbs Barnes like a tree, and makes extensive, fish-scented commentary in his face. Then she jumps down to sniff his entire apartment and actually pees on the corpse of the tall man.

It’s crass, but appropriate.

“Who’s this?” Rogers asks.

Cat Eleanor sniffs Rogers’s fingers but won’t let herself be picked up. She climbs Barnes again instead and sticks her cold nose up against his neck. Excellent cat.

“Give him a minute to breathe,” Lidia says.

“Right,” the redhead says, and oh NO we do not need to get those two together, “let’s get these bodies out of here and patch Barnes up.”

Rogers’s frown changes then, from confusion to worry, even though Barnes’s injuries are superficial. They hurt, though. And his head aches.

And his chest hurts, from where the mission is upset.

It’s okay, mission.

NO

It all turned out okay.

The mission won’t respond. It might take a while. That’s okay. It took a while for Barnes to understand. They aren’t perfect, but they are improving. Maybe they’ll all make it together: Barnes, the mission, and the briefing. Might even make it to one whole person some day.

“Does it hurt, Bucky?” Rogers asks.

“I’ll be all right.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Rogers can’t resist his natural hugging impulse at that one, so he gets blood all over himself too. Including those dumb sheep pants that saved the day.
And it turns out that sometimes the hugging is pretty okay. When it’s someone who has known you for a century. Even if they are the size of an industrial refrigerator.

With a hundred years to lean on, you can download every minute stored away in your memories. It’s not always pretty, and it’s mostly not nice, but you can still find a way back to okay. Because you both have a mission, and the mission is the same.

PROTECT

Comply.
“Middle of the night fights and unexpected reunions are exhausting. Are you hungry, Bucky? I’m starving. I don’t know what’s open at three am. Maybe we can get a pizza?”

“I can cook.”

“You can cook?”

“I can cook.”

“Buck, when did you ever care about food that wasn’t steak or chocolate?”

“A man can change. I mean, I have had a whole life separate from you and your omniscient gaze.”

“Unlike me, apparently.”

“Hey, you had a 2-year reprieve. And look at the trouble you got into.”

“Um.”

“Right.”

“So what are you cooking, then?”

“My specialty is grilled cheese.”

“Grilled cheese.”

“Amazing grilled cheese.”

“Bucky, that is not cooking.”

“Bet you a week’s coffee you’ll change your mind. Bring me the contents of my refrigerator.”

20 minutes later

“There is a salad inside my sandwich.”

“Shut up and eat, Steven, your manners are terrible.”

5 minutes later

“I was … wrong. Completely, entirely wrong.”

“Told you I can cook.”

“How much, exactly, do you spend on coffee in a week? In dollars, Bucky, not creepy grins.”

-----------------------------
“So you talked back to me that whole time you were listening in.”

“Yep.”

“You talked to me.”

“Of course.”

“Why the hell didn’t you come talk to my face?”

“It was mission non-compatible, Steve. Surveil and protect. Can’t make with the protecting so much when you are (a) standing on top of me all the time, (b) making me sleep, or (c) getting your ass handed to you at Mario Kart. I am currently doing a terrible job at my mission, and it’s all your fault.”

“You are a doof.”

“Your doof.”

“My doof?”

“You made me this way, with your total inability to watch your own back.”

“I always wanted a doof of my very own.”

“Well merry fucking Christmas.”

“You know I said I was gonna –“

“Punch me in the mouth. Yeah, I heard.”

“You heard that. Too.”

“Of course, I have very good equip- OW! Goddammit Steve!”

“Buck I swear to God if you ever.”

“I’m not ever, pal.”

“You damn well promise.”

“I’d bring out our sappy old chestnut, but then we’d both just cry.”

“Sam would say expressing our emotions is healthy.”

“No, Sam would say we’re both a couple of weepy nutcases. But it’s a look that works for us.”

------

“Shut up, Tony Snark.”
“Oh no you didn’t.”

“Oh no I did.”

“O.M.G., Regarding Henry, I’m so proud of you!”

“Gee whiz, your approval. Just what I’ve been dreaming of for a century.”

“Rogers! Rogers, your boyfriend is reaching an inspiring pinnacle of sarcasm. We are going to be best bros forever.”

“I’m not –” “’He’s not –“

“Yeah, yeah, river in Egypt, whatever. Just pack in that awkward conversation we were gonna have Darth Vader, it’s pointless now. I am your adoring slave.”

“But that’s not how human –“

“Nope, nothing, done, adoring slave. The end.”

“Can’t wait for the play date.”

“See? This is what I mean.”

“Who the fuck is Darth Vader.”

---------------

“You don’t have to watch us spar every time, Nat. Bucky’s not going to hurt me.”

“I like it. You fight well together. It’s almost as good as the ballet.”

“Pretty sure ballet is not that violent.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. Next time ABT mounts Mayerling or Manon, I’ll take you.”

“I want to see that.”

“You’re invited too, Barnes, of course. You’ll like it. Put your sparring to music and it could be like a MacMillan piece. It’s as if you read one another’s minds.”

“I can read minds.”

“What?”

“Steve’s mind, anyhow.”

“WHAT?”

“It’s not hard. It’s all the same thing. It’s all ‘wonder how many more pushups I can fit into my schedule. Got any fire fights for me to run straight into? I like doing the most foolhardy, stupid-ass thing imaginable, especially if explosions are involved’.”

“Bucky!”

“That sounds … plausible.”
“Natasha!”

-------------------------------

“Here, Commander Data, I made this for you.”

“Why.”

“Figured you need it. This way you don’t have to actually speak to the human-type people.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“What. You don’t. Why does he not understand that it destroys all the fun when he agrees with me? JARVIS, warn Rogers. No, on second thought, don’t.”

...

“Aw, Bucky. Did Tony give that to you?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t have to wear it.”

“I like it. Makes my position clear.”

“Who’s gonna hug you, Buck? Besides me. Anyone else is too afraid of getting murdered.”

“It’s good to be prepared.”

“I’m not going to stop hugging you.”

“Hafta. I’m wearing a sign. Says “NO HUGGING’ right on it.”

---------

**Morning**

“Barton! Barton come here, stand with me. I’m testing something.”

“What’s with all the potted trees everywhere?”

“They’re Barnes traps.”

“What?”

“You watch. If there’s a tree around, Barnes will go stand under or behind it. Every time. Hilarious.”

“What happens if there’s more than one tree in a room?”

“That’s the joke! I’m hoping this is where we find out that arm’s detachable. If it comes off, I’m
“Yeah, and this is where I leave. I like having all my skin intact and attached to my body.”

“What? I’m not going to keep it. He won’t let me run any tests!”

**Evening**

“Dammit, where did all my trees go?”

“Hey Tony, thank you.”

“For what?”

“For giving Bucky all those trees. He really likes them. He dragged them all into a corner of our apartment and set a lamp and a chair in the middle. It’s like his little reading forest. He’s been in there all afternoon.”

“He took them?”

“Oh. Oh, I’m sorry Tony, he said they were for him. Did he steal them? I’ll pay for them. I’ll talk to him about it.”

“No. No, it’s fine, they’re his, it’s fine. I hate him and he steals all the joy from my life, but it’s fine.”

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Plain text: Tony

*Italics: Steve*

**Bold: Bucky**

*Put your hand there.*

**That doesn’t feel right.**

*Maybe try a different angle.*

**No, that’s no better.**

*Try here, then.*

**No, it definitely won’t fit there.**

*I think it might fit if you grease it up.*

**Yeah. Yeah, that might work. Seems tight but doable.**

*Are you sure there’s no way to find out on the internet how to do this?*
Uh. You’re assuming I checked.

Oh my god, I can’t take it, I’m coming in. How do two grown men … wait.

*What are you doing here, Tony?*

Just … wanted to say hi? Have a knife held to my throat? Now that both of those are done, I’ll just. What are you actually doing?

**Putting together a bookcase, jackass. What did you think we were doing?**

Um. Having sex?

*You thought we don’t know how to have sex? Like there was no sex in the 1940s?*

Give him a break Steve, you know no one had sex before 1968. Before then, people procreated by means of spores.

*Oh that’s right. Very messy.*

**Terrible.**

Shut up.

*Not very genius-like of you there, Stark.*

**Plus, look at us. We’re titans among men. Our biceps are three of the most awesome human arms in existence. Plus there’s the whole wholesome/wounded bad boy duo act. We pretty much cover all preferences.**

*Except ladies.*

**Right. Except that. Otherwise, come on. Look at us. Even I want to do us, and I hate touching.**

That’s like five times as many words as I have ever heard you say.

*Wait, what?*

**Like you never thought of it.**

Ah ha!

*Shut up, Tony.*

**I had surveillance equipment. I *know*.**

Bucky.

Ha ha, he’s pulling the Cap voice out.

**What.**

*Confirm past tense on surveillance.*
Confirm past tense on surveillance, Bucky.

Ooooooo.

**SHUT UP TONY**

Shutting up, don’t mind me, I’m barely even here.

**Look, if you’re just going to stand here, you might at least help with the damn bookcase.**

*We are not done talking about whether you’re surveiling me, James.*

Ha! James!

**You’re a mechanical genius, right? So you can figure out these directions.**

*We are *so* not done talking about it. Privacy is a *natural right*. I mean, a HYDRA agent is not going to crawl out of the shower head, for pity’s sake. I get that you have your mission, but really –*

Where did you get this thing, IKEA?

Yes.

Forget it, man. Not even JARVIS can decipher these. You’re on your own.

**No Stark, don’t leave. Wait. Aw, dammit. Fine. Let me just sit down, will you? I’ll take my lecture like a good boy. Jesus.**

*You’ll take down all the surveillance, Buck.*

Deny.

Don’t ‘deny’ at me, I’m not your mission imperative.

**Nope, you’re my mission.**

*We live in the same apartment!*

**Look pal, if you’re gonna make me sleep, you’re gonna have ears on you.**

*I am a fucking superhero, Bucky. I can actually defend myself.*

**Inaccurate adjective.**

*Shut *up* you jerk, I am trying to make a point.*

Yeah well, I’m trying to distract you from it.

**You are such a pain in the ass.**

I learned from the best.

Ugh.
Confirm.

Uuuuuugh.

Chapter End Notes

Here's some more excellent fanart:


Thanks, y'all!

Works inspired by this: [Podfic] This, You Protect by DustySoul, Chicken Soup for the Emotionally-Constipated Soul by filia_noctis, Do Not Go Gentle by cairistiona, Love me tender by Talavin, Worked Hard To Make This Me by Guinevak, Backup by MollyC, Bliss by danceswchopstck, Debrief by MollyC, Fill the Cracks with Kintsugi ~Abandoned~ by Kerica (orphan_account), Lynx_Tiger, Vid: Fic trailer - This, You Protect (by owlet) by shirasade, Close Surveillance by quietnight, (PODFIC) This, You Protect by Owlet by AvidReaderLady, Barnes and Grilled Cheese by arilla, Küldetése: Védelem by AritaReal, On the Logistics of Shared Closet Space by Lestradesexwife, Meet the Winter Solider (AKA Asset) by Mysana, Is he supposed to be that color? by Yokogreyword, He's Wearing Sheep Pants by Yokogreyword, Fractured Mending by crankyfractal (upquarkAO3), mmouse15, Bucky Barnes Doesn't Remember Shit by DumpsterDiving101, squad goals by hey_you_with_the_face, Because the Drugs Never Work by Huntress8611, Not-a-chump Bucky by Kopapa

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