The Long Road Begins at Home
by owlet

Summary

Oh sure, reunion results in happiness, kittens, and rainbows, because that's definitely how life goes when you've just spent 70 years as a tool of villainy. I mean, what could possibly go wrong?

Notes

Oh yeah, it's the big sequel y'all.

Because for real: you all are so amazing. Thank you. I hope you like it.

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Blood Loss and Awkwardness

The first night’s easy: they’re both giddy with adrenaline, and Barnes with blood loss too. It’s a night of “can you believe it” and some frankly masterful grilled cheese (made one-handed, even). Romanoff proved herself a decent hand with a bandage, and why would Barnes be surprised to discover that Lidia has a bottle of what must be horse tranquilizers. They make the world seem pretty hazy around the edges, anyhow. They make it acceptable to fall asleep sitting up on Rogers’s sofa with his plate still in his lap.

Waking … later (what are in Lidia’s pills), Barnes finds himself prone, with a pillow under his head and a blanket over him. How did you get so sloppy, Barnes.

And Rogers, sitting on the coffee table, staring. Smiling. Smiling is mission-compliant, at least.

“Good morning,” Rogers says, “sorry to stare, I just. Can’t believe you’re really here. That it wasn’t all a dream.”

Rogers’s proximity and the intensity of his gaze give Barnes a new, slightly uncomfortable view on surveillance. But given his many aches, he’s pretty certain this is all real.

“Think I might’ve bled on your sofa,” he says, “that proof enough?”

Miscalculation no. 1. The smile drops right off Rogers’s face. Great.

“Is it bad? Can you get up?”

Can he get up. It’s only a few gunshot wounds for shit’s sake. They just hurt, he’s not incapacitated. The worst part is the welts on his face. They smart. And the limited mobility owing to his right arm being strapped to his chest. Barnes pushes himself upright.

“Not so bad. Just need a tighter bandage.”

That through-and-through will take a while to seal up. Unknown how long, without a tank to lie in. Especially if he has to run every day.

“What time is it.”

“A little after nine,” Rogers says, stripping the cardigan off Barnes’s right shoulder and working on the bandage.

Rogers owns a number of cardigans. They look like the kinds of things Ollie would wear. Mission sub-task: set the cardigans on fire.

He listens for the mission imperative.

He gets nothing.

Rogers sits very close. He has his hands on Barnes’s skin. Sleep obtained: 3.25 hours. Function level under 60%. Rogers is so close. Respiration increased.

Note: his hands are gentle. Note: this is the target. Chance of target intentionally causing one physical harm: 7.4%. Proximity necessary for wound dressing. Proximity necessary, not intended as intimidation tactic.
“Here, take this,” Rogers says, one of Lidia’s pills in his hand.

Barnes takes the pill and has it halfway to his mouth before his brain engages. What the hell is that, following orders.

“Don’t want it.”

Where’s the mission.

“Are you sure? It’s stupid to sit around in pain, Buck.”

“Can’t run if I’m doped up.”

Surprise makes Rogers sit back to a more acceptable distance.

“Are you out of your mind? There’s not gonna be any running today, Bucky. You got shot. Multiple times. And shocked. Multiple times. I think maybe your workout routine can take a couple days’ pause.”

My workout routine could take a couple decades’ pause, pal.

“No. We are staying in today, and I’m not letting you out of my sight. Jesus. Bucky.”

This last is said in a different tone of voice. Softer, accompanied by an expression of wide, earnest eyes. And. Leaning in.

For fuck’s sake is this going to be hugging why is Rogers so large.

There is a metallic sound.

“Bucky! Whoa! It’s the door buzzer, calm down! Where did that knife even come from?”

Between the sofa cushions, where else? (Under the sofa cushions, under the sofa, and in the band of his left sock.)

Thank the motherland, the Old Person Brigade has arrived to save him again. They bring noise and cheer, even through the speaker. They clatter up the stairs, and Rogers is smiling again. Barnes lets go the breath he has been holding and tucks the knife away, pulls the cardigan back up around his shoulder. It’s dark brown: the blood won’t show much.

Pain levels moderate. Maybe a pill would be a wise choice. Since he doesn’t have to run.

“We brought you boys some bagels!” Ollie says at the doorway, holding up a paper bag. “Nothing helps set the world right again like an onion bagel and a schmear.”

“It’s the carbs,” Lidia says, “they cause an insulin spike that dulls your stress response.”

“That sounds like something I would say,” Barnes says without meaning to.

“Oh dear me, how ironic,” Lidia says, and winks at him.

Esther sits next to him on the sofa and prods at the welt on his face with cool fingers. Why is her presence so much less upsetting than Rogers’s. Rogers is the target. It makes no sense.

“Did you get any sleep?” she asks him, “you have to sleep to heal.”
“And grow new blood,” Lidia says.

“No blood!” Ollie says, “we’re not gonna talk about blood, or scary people, or holes in the wall until after bagels.”

They even brought coffee. Because they are the best mission-assists alive, even counting Building JARVIS.

He listens.

There is no “CONFIRM.”

Well. They are.

Esther fixes his coffee for him (three sugars, lots of cream), and Ollie piles what has to be multiple servings of cream cheese onto a bagel. Lidia makes a gesture suggestive of trying to feed the damn thing to him, which is an absolute deny. She grins at his glare, though.

“Oh just checking to see how far you’d let us coddle you,” she says.

“If it’s up to me,” Rogers says, “infinite coddling, and the welcome-home party would last at least a year.”

No parties, Rogers. What the hell.

"Say, that's a nice sweater, Jimmy," Ollie says.

Barnes stares at Rogers.

"Eat the other half of your bagel," Esther says.

She slathers more cream cheese on it, and Lidia pours another cup of coffee from the cardboard container.

"How is there coffee inside cardboard."

Rogers wears an expression of surprise.

"There's a plastic bag inside," Lidia says, then, to Rogers, "he likes to know how things work."

That is accurate.

"And you like cream in your coffee now, Buck?"

Why does that make Rogers sad.

"What's the ridiculous concoction he always drinks?" Ollie asks.

"Three-shot, two-pump white mocha with extra whip," Lidia says.

"I don't even know what that means," Rogers says.

We gotta get that guy a proper hot drink.

Silence.

We do.
"Keep eating," Esther says.

He's going to, but Barnes blinks at her twice. Just to show that it's his choice, not following orders.

That's another thing that makes no sense. He's let the Olds boss him around for months now.

Pain levels high.

Stress levels high.

Room silent. He looks up to a crowd of frowns. Why.

"So! Iron Man!" Ollie says, "that's something you don't expect to see in your hallway in the middle of the night!"

"Did he help you clean up last night? Do I need to speak to the police or anything?" Rogers rubs his head, "I'd like to. Keep Bucky out of it, if we can."

"Oh, that's all done," Esther says, "some people in black outfits showed up, and Lidia and that nice Mr. Stark talked at them until they couldn't think anymore, and they took those horrible things away without asking hardly any questions at all!"


"Are you cold, dear heart?" Esther tucks the blanket closer around him, "keep eating."

He has cream cheese on his finger plates.

"And he dragged the bed out of Walter's old place to plug up the hole in the wall! Very useful young man, with the flying and the shooting lasers out of his hands. Bit of a know-it-all, though."

"Takes one to know one, Ollie," Lidia says.

"You should know," Ollie says.

No more frowns. Good job, Olds.

Sigh.

Confirm.

"I hope your landlord can get that fixed soon, it's too cold to be open to the elements like that," Rogers says.

Rogers is significantly behind on the latest intel. Even Barnes, low on blood and high on the freak-out scale, can smile at that one.

"Might was well hope for my old teeth back!" Ollie says, "after everything Jimmy's put that bastard through! Pardon my language."

It's embarrassing to sit under four pairs of eyes and be talked about. To be described as the hero. All he did was chase away one rat of a landlord and his large, ugly friend. Well, and without killing them. That was pretty good. But it shouldn't be enough to make Rogers look all melty about the eyes like that.

They weren't even that tough. The ugly friend only had a lead pipe, not even a proper weapon.
Barnes probably wouldn't have done more than toss him out on his ear, except the guy had tried to ruin Barnes's stuff when he'd just bought supplies for -

"Oh no," he says, and why are words coming out of his mouth, "I was going to buy a heat-conserving container and make a mocha for Steve."

Hrm. Function levels might be lower than originally calculated.

"Oh, Jimmy," Esther says with a quaver in her voice.

And there is Rogers too close again, with those wide eyes. The mission is not here, and the briefing is not here, and Barnes has a catalog of impairments: fatigue, injury, restraint, confusion, abrupt mission reconfiguration. Is there some left over cognitive damage from last night's struggle against reprogramming. Everything seems very close by and loud.

"Bucky," Rogers says in a soft voice, "you still can. We've got time."

Respiration decreases to 10% above baseline. Time is good. Time is required to regain function. Acceptable.

He nods. Rogers sits back on his heels.

"Look at the two of you!" Ollie says.

He is unable to sit still in the chair Rogers pulled up for him. He moves every second, and he doesn’t stop smiling even to chew.

"Cap and Bucky, together again! What a day. I could never have even imagined it."

"Me neither," Rogers says, his voice hoarse.

Which makes tears come into Esther’s eyes, and she pats Steve’s arm.

"Everything will be all right now, you’ll see," she says. "Just don’t push Jimmy too hard. It’ll be okay."

Push too hard. Push what. If running is detrimental to healing, so is pushing.


What is that frown.

Barnes looks at Esther. She smooths his hair out of his eyes and pats his uninjured cheek.

"You'll see," she says.

See what.

He looks at Lidia.

"You look as if you could use another pill," Lidia says, "tight around the eyes. You don’t want to wear yourself out with hurting, do you?"

"No."

"Just so. Will you take one?"
“They make me sleepy.”

“As well they should. You had a very exciting night. You should sleep.”

It’s rude to sleep around company.

“You’re here.”

“Son, we’ll be here so much you’ll think we’ve moved in,” Ollie says. “You’ve had your breakfast, now have a nap. Steve’s the only one hale and hearty around here, so he gets to do clean-up.”

Rogers laughs, and Esther rubs Barnes’s knee.

Okay. Okay, he can sleep for a bit.

He takes the pill. He lets Esther tuck him back in on the sofa under Rogers's scratchy blanket. She has her fingers in his hair, which doesn't bother him at all. It calms him, though the contrast with his reaction to Rogers’s proximity disturbs. She hums at him, so the quiet conversation Ollie, Lidia, and Rogers are having in the kitchen reaches him only in snatches.

"Busy's better … just stay … not too many questions," Ollie says.

“But I need,” Rogers says.

"Don’t. He'll let … give it time," Lidia says.

"What are they talking about."

"Don't you worry about it, Jimmy," Esther tells him, "you know those two, always running off at the mouth, it's nothing you need to concern yourself with. You just lie there and go to sleep, we've all had enough excitement for –“

He wakes to find that the Olds have gone, 4.5 hours have passed, and Rogers has fallen asleep in his armchair, a sketchbook tipped over in his lap. Clearly drawing Barnes in his sleep.

On one hand, it is a minor violation of privacy. On the other hand, if someone's going to stare at him while he sleeps, Barnes prefers Rogers to all the other nefarious bastards of the past 70 years. Seems fair, anyhow. Barnes has stared at Rogers for months now.

Rogers looks tired, even in his sleep.

It's a challenge to move silently with one's right arm strapped to one's chest, but Barnes has had excellent training. He rises from the sofa so slowly that Rogers doesn't wake, has a pee, and discovers that if they are in a contest for who looks most likely collapse in a heap, Barnes wins by a mile. He should probably be in a hospital.

Silence.

He might even agree to go to one, if it'll bring the mission and the briefing back. All this silence in his head. It's terrible.

Also terrible: the state of his hair. Looks like he's been spending time in a wind tunnel. He has no information as to whether it's rude to share hairbrushes, but this counts as an emergency.

Barnes wanders the apartment while Rogers sleeps. The body feels stiff under all its injuries. He will walk some, then sit back down. It's a boring plan, but it's still a plan.
The plant he gave Rogers remains alive. Barnes gives it a glass of water. The soil feels dry, and the leaves droop a bit. Bad form, Rogers.

The refrigerator is mostly empty, containing only orange juice, milk, Rogers's apples nestled up next to Barnes's pears, half a container of cream cheese, and 4 slices of dried-out pizza that do not look fit for consumption.

Rogers's phone is upstairs next to the bed. Its screen reports 5 missed calls. The bed is rumpled.

The sheep pants are lying on top of the wastebasket, one leg trailing on the floor.

No.

Barnes picks them up. They're stiff with blood – his blood. But they can be cleaned. Rogers should not discard clothing just because it got a little blood on it. That's wasteful. Also. These are the sheep pants. They are an important object.

If Steve doesn't want them, maybe he will give them to Barnes.

He goes back downstairs and sits on the sofa, the sheep pants on his knee, and waits for Rogers to wake up.

Rogers awakens 56 minutes later. Fifty-six minutes is a long time to wait for someone to wake up. It is a long time to consider operational possibilities. What if the briefing stays silent. What if the mission imperative stays silent.

He can feel the mission. It's like a knot of pain in his chest, just to the right of his heart. He can feel the briefing: it's a sense of something in one's peripheral vision. Present but unseen.

If they remain silent. If their only purpose was to guide him until he contacted Rogers.

Well that's fucking unfair, isn't it? You can't expect a mission head to do everything alone. What if there's another HYDRA reprogrammer out there.

There's always another HYDRA reprogrammer out there, Barnes, don't kid yourself.

Steve has to have the sheep pants. If there's any chance Barnes's control can be overridden, and the mission and the briefing are gone, what's left to stop him?

What if the Asset is still in there somewhere. The Asset hurt Steve. But the mission is to protect.

The sheep pants are critical to target safety. They remind the self to stay the self.

Also: if Rogers is going to spend all this time sleeping, Barnes is going to have to go across the street to fetch his phone. And a book.

"Hey, Buck, you okay?"

Rogers doesn't look any less the worse for wear after his nap. This is a sub-optimal day.

"You can't throw these away," he says.

Rogers looks at the pants in Barnes's hand.

"Throw them away?"
"They were in the wastebasket."

"I just took them off without looking, Buck, they have blood all over them. I'm not gonna throw away clothes just because they're dirty, that's wasteful. Why do you care about my pajamas?"

Oh. Explaining.

"I need them."

"You need my pajamas? You can have them Buck, of course."

"I need you to have them."

"You need me to have them?"

Nod.

"But why?"

The words won't come out. Barnes's mouth feels stuck shut. He can only shake his head. He holds the pants out toward Rogers.

"It's important?"

Nod.

So much frowning. Mission adjustment is difficult. Proximity should have resulted in happiness. What are you doing wrong, Barnes.

Probably everything.

"What's wrong, Bucky?"

What.

"You look upset. It's okay about the pajamas. I won't throw them out."

That’s not what he meant. But Barnes doesn’t know how to make the words come out.

"Your shoulder hurting?"

"Pain improved."

"Which I guess means no pill."

"No pill."

Are they going to stare at each other for the rest of their lives.

"Look, uh. Ollie and Lidia said."

Anything Ollie and Lidia said will probably be useful.

"They said you have a hard time talking about things."

Confirm, useful.
Nod.

"There's so much I want to ask, Bucky. But I don't. I can see it's."

Talking is apparently not Rogers's' strong suit either.

"See what."

"I can see it's hard, Buck. For you. I. Want to help."

The mission isn't here to yell at him, but Barnes remembers: Rogers shares the order to protect.

"One question."

Rogers's right eyebrow hops up and down.

"Just one?"

Barnes feels his face almost smile at that one.

"No! No way, Bucky, that does not count."

He looks so relieved. Good job, Barnes.

"Okay. One more, then."

Some of the stiffness runs out of Rogers's shoulders, but his face does a strange thing. He ducks his head, then lifts his eyes - wide, almost fearful.

"You remember me, Buck?"

Barnes runs through the information left to him by the briefing. It is a wholly inadequate amount. But remember: yes. He has this consciousness's memories as well, going back to September. Those are his own.

"Some."

"You remember that we're. Friends?"

1. That is a third question, pal. 2. It is a stupid question. Twelve hours ago Barnes had the argument of his life with himself just to avoid shooting this guy in the face.

Reassess: if that amount of memory is insufficient, what the hell's it gonna take, Rogers.

"From the look on your face, if this were the old days I'd say you were thinking what a dumbass I am," Rogers says in a voice that is not one bit successful at sounding light and joking.

However.

"Accurate."

Rogers actually laughs a little at that one.

We're on a roll, miss—dammit.

“Okay, Buck. I’m glad.”
He opens his mouth, then shuts it again, more questions clearly desperate to come out. Poor guy. Following the rules is so hard for him.

“Go ahead.”

Rogers shakes his head.

“I want to know what happened last night. And how in the world you ended up living across the street. And how you got to New York. And what happened in DC, after. I want to know everything, Buck. I want to know how this is even possible. You. Here.”

That is too much. Too many words. Barnes shakes his head.

“I’m sorry. Just the first one, then. What happened last night? They were HYDRA, right?”

“Confirm.”

“I don’t have a lot of Russian. But he was trying to control you? The tall guy?”

That is a memory. It carries with it pain, fear, and a lump in the throat that prevents speech. Nod.

“But you fought it off. Like you did when we. Fought.”

Obviously. Nod.

Barnes watches Rogers have a strong emotion. What does one do for that. Especially given that Rogers is clearly trying not to show the emotion rolling through him. Maybe the correct action is to pretend nothing is happening.

“You’re so strong. Bucky. I can’t even. I just.”

Rogers’s voice is hoarse. Barnes knows emotion is difficult. This would be a good time for a run. Or a sandwich. Distraction. Or maybe affirmation. Which is correct.

If only the Olds were still here. Ollie would clean his glasses. Lidia would pour small glasses of alcohol. Esther would hug Steve and tell him it’s okay.

Well. That much Barnes can do.

“It’s okay.”

“What?”

“Strong emotion. You will recover from it and be all right.”

It must be the correct thing to say, because Rogers passes his hand over his face and laughs a little.

“I don’t. God. Thanks, Buck. But I was worrying about you.”

“Healing progressing.”

“That’s good. But I kind of meant everything on the inside.”

That’s more complicated.
“Mission adjustment. It’s difficult.”

“You mean being here? Instead of watching?”

Nod.

“Well, I’m glad. Just to see your face, I can’t even believe it. I mean. You’re here! Bucky.”

Rogers looks almost happy. That’s an improvement. How do we keep this going. How do we not mess this up.

Barnes makes a little smile.

Rogers makes a huge smile. So that’s good.

“Right. What do you need? You want a shower? Some food? How’s the shoulder?”

At least these questions are easily answered. Too bad none of them are “how about 30 minutes alone behind a closed door.”

“My phone,” he says.

His ear feels weird without the earbud in it.

“Expecting a call?”

In this instance, being glared at seems to be what Rogers wants.

“I’ll get your stuff, Bucky. You gonna trust me for ten minutes out of your sight?”

Not really, but Barnes is too wobbly from blood loss and fatigue to do anyone any good. Also, he can’t wear a shirt with his arm strapped up, and it’s fucking cold outside.

“No.”

Note: Rogers really likes sass.

“Them’s the breaks, Buck. I’ll hurry, I promise. Here, you should eat.”

Barnes eats his pear slowly, to make the time seem less long that Rogers is gone, out of both observation and listening distance. Unacceptable. He needs to get back on track. Proximity doesn’t lessen the task of protection. Just adds to the difficulty of protecting Steve from his own fuck-ups.

But Rogers keeps his word. It’s only 4.5 minutes later that Rogers emerges from the front door across the street with a small bundle in his arms.

He doesn’t look before crossing the street, because he is an asshole.

“Gee, who could’ve guessed you’d be watching at the window?” Rogers says. “Here’s your phone. I grabbed some clothes, too. I figure you don’t want to spend every waking moment in my sweatpants until we can get all your stuff.”

Why not? They’re comfortable.

His phone has many text and voice messages. The familiar sensation of the earbud calms him.

“Is that how you listened in? Bugs programmed to your phone?”
Nod.

“Don’t need them now.”

Shrug.

“Okay, Buck. Look. Can I … call a friend? Will it be weird to hear me talk about you? I really want to let him know what happened.”

Flying Sam. He will say useful things to Rogers. And to Barnes too, but Rogers doesn’t need to know about his phone yet.

“Okay.”

Barnes reads his messages while he listens in on the conversation. Building JARVIS called and texted repeatedly, inquiring about his safety. That’s gratifying. Barnes texts back a status report and his thanks for sending assistance. It’s a touchy operation, one-handed and having to be so careful not to shatter the screen with his metal hand. Takes a long time.

It almost makes Barnes feel regret for the Asset’s causing a similar wound to Romanoff, except that the one text not from building JARVIS is from her, and how did she get his number.

Building JARVIS, probably. Mission-assists ganging up on him.

The text is in Russian.

<Call if you need a break from the hovering.>

Which is. Why.

He types back, “thanks.”

Meanwhile, Rogers is 75% more animated on the phone than he has been speaking to Barnes. Why.

The story Rogers gives to flying Sam leaves out several pertinent details. For example: the amount of time Rogers spent with a gun pointed at his face.

Rogers keeps smiling.

“Where is he now?” flying Sam asks.

“He’s here, Sam. With me.”

“You sure about that, Steve? That can’t be safe. You don’t know how he is, not really.”

An excellent point.

“Don’t care. I’m not letting him out of my sight.”

“Steve. Come on, man. It’s definitely a big deal that he keeps breaking his conditioning for you, but you can’t trust it. You don’t know how deep that shit goes. It’s dangerous. He needs to be somewhere he can’t hurt anybody.”

While also an excellent point, this causes the pulse to elevate.

“That’s here. I can take care of myself,” Steve growls, “and him.”
The mission would be so excited to hear that growl. It’s Rogers yelling ‘PROTECT.’

“Come on, Steve, you don’t –“

“Sam. He just spent two months living with a bunch of old people who think he hung the moon in the sky and took half the morning to lecture me about how I have to treat him gently or they’ll kick my ass.”

They said what.

“He’s been living across the street with your old folks?”

“Yes, Sam. Doing home repair and bonding with a cat.”

“That shouldn’t even be possible!”

“Bucky can do anything he sets his mind to,” Rogers says.

That makes the briefing shiver. It doesn’t quite speak or give him anything, but Barnes is so relieved to feel it there, to not be alone in his own head, that he leans over into the side of the sofa. Fatigue levels high.

“Gotta go, Sam, call you later.”

Rogers comes too close. He puts his hands on Barnes’s body. But for the moment, Barnes has no energy for panic. The briefing is still there.

Maybe it feels shy, with its object of purpose so close by.

“You okay, Buck? Something wrong?”

“Tired.”

“You lost a lot of blood. Breathing okay?”

“Respiration unimpaired.”

“That’s not – you don’t have to give me a report, Bucky. I’m asking how you feel. Come on, get your feet up, it’ll make your head feel more clear.”

Barnes would like to cringe away from Rogers’s touch, but he’s too tired. Those hands are gentle, at least, as they tuck the blanket around him and check his shoulder.

“We’re gonna have to take those stitches out tomorrow afternoon or you’ll have them permanently.”

Won’t that be fun.

“Think you can sleep a little?”

Nod.

He doesn’t, though, at first. He lies on the sofa and listens to Rogers resume his conversation with flying Sam from the sleeping loft.

“I can’t believe it, Sam.”

“We agree on that part, anyway.”
“Come up here and see.”

“Now that’s where you luck out, because if I don’t spend Thanksgiving at my mama’s house in Harlem, she will remove me from existence.”

That is positive news. Barnes has some things to say to flying Sam. He can practice them so they will come out right. And it will be a benefit to have an assessment of his emotional state from a professional. The Olds and Steve are not objective observers.

It takes 3.1 seconds for Rogers to convince Sam to let him call Stark to request a private jet from DC. Funny.

“Just stay alive for another week, okay?”

Rogers doesn’t think that’s amusing. Rogers is wrong.

Barnes wakes much later. He guesses 7.75 hours. The phone tells him 0126: close. His internal timekeeping must require adequate blood flow for accuracy. His head feels less full of static, and his small wounds itch, indicating healing.

A glass of orange juice and a sandwich sit on the coffee table behind a note reading ‘EAT THIS.’

Eat, sure thing. He puts the juice into the refrigerator and pours a glass of milk instead. A hot meal would be better, but he doesn’t want to wake Rogers.

Watching Rogers sleep calms the body and mind. Even though he looks like a dope, snuggling one pillow as if it were a lifesaving device.

Between the calm and the nutrition, Barnes is ready to return to sleep, and the hope that day 2 of close proximity will be slightly less awkward.
You guys are THE BEST EVER. Hi, hello! What a pleasure to see so many familiar names in the comments.

Successful method for beginning a day with a sense of normality: identify a need and make a plan.

The need Barnes has identified is for a mocha and a breakfast sandwich. His plan is to stand at the foot of Rogers’s bed and stare until Rogers wakes to go get them.

Barnes would go himself, except that 1. unstrapping his own arm to enable wearing a shirt could cause re-injury, lengthening his time of impaired functionality; and 2. none of the objects retrieved from his apartment have been shoes. Rogers’s feet are bigger, but Barnes has examined the choices available, and a man has to have limits. The terribleness of Steve’s shoes far exceeds those limits.

He has also discovered that cold coffee out of a cardboard container exceeds his limits.

Rogers sleeping the day away has the potential to exceed his limits.

Does using a metal finger to poke someone’s foot through two layers of bedding count as touching? Possibly touching-adjacent. Also effective.

“You okay, Bucky?”

At least, Barnes assumes that’s the question. Most of the consonants were left out.

“I don’t have any shoes.”

Rogers looks confused. It makes no sense that a person given to running at dawn should be so incapable of coherent thought after waking.

“You. What?”

“Mocha and breakfast sandwich required. But my shoes are across the street.”

It is November. Rogers should wear more clothing while sleeping, to avoid a chill. Current sleep pants are thin, plain fabric. Inferior.

“Bucky. Are you telling me to get out of bed and go get you some breakfast?”

“Confirm. Arm wrapping does not permit sufficient clothing, and I don’t have any shoes.”

Rogers actually. Smiles. Confirm: a goal and a plan improve general emotional states.

“Give me two minutes.”

Rogers accepts his mission to go to Starbucks – while wearing the bugged leather jacket – with a wry twist to his mouth but no complaint. He calls flying Sam 2 minutes after leaving.
“He woke me up and sent me out for coffee.”

“And you left him behind? I thought you’d be worried he’d bolt.”

Well, there’s the shoe thing.

“I was informed that he doesn’t have his shoes and he can’t get a shirt on. Sam, it was all I could do not to laugh at him.”

Why avoid laughing. Laughing is an indication of positive emotional state.

“Steve. Just watch yourself, okay?”

“Nope. Gonna watch Bucky.”

Flying Sam doesn’t trust. Even though he is a mission-assist. That would sting, except that Sam’s priority is Rogers’s safety. He and Barnes will find commonality in that.

At Starbucks, Rogers orders both their usuals, and the barista says,

“What, for real? Man, that is awesome! Hey Gael, Running Regular One just got his order and Running Regular Two’s!”

“Yeah! Love is in the air!”

“What?” Rogers says.

Uh oh.

“Bucky,” Rogers says aloud outside the shop, “what the hell.”

Pal, you are not going to ruin my breakfast.

Barnes waits by the door. It’s possible that he might be bouncing slightly on his toes. It’s within the realm of imagination that he makes a grabbing gesture in the direction of the coffee.

Yes. A proper hot drink increases the baseline satisfaction level of the day. Today is a significant improvement over yesterday.

“So I gotta ask,” Rogers says.

“Deny.”

“Um. Excuse me?”

“No asking. Now is the time for coffee and breakfast.”

It sucks to have two cherished food items and only one functional hand. The insertion of delicious food and delicious drink into his face is significantly slowed.

Rogers also appears to consider this day an improvement. He watches Barnes with an expression of amusement.

Good job, Barnes. Improved performance.

“So what is that? Your drink.”
Barnes demonstrates generosity befitting a high-quality protection detail and holds the cup out.
Rogers’s reaction is hilarious: skepticism becomes surprise, becomes greed, becomes more surprise.

“That’s not coffee. Coffee’s a mild form of punishment. That’s dessert.”

You’re a mild form of punishment. You have not been taking advantage of the future’s advances, Rogers.

“Incorrect. ‘Three shot’ indicates three shots of espresso, a highly concentrated form of coffee.”

So many words Barnes, well done.

When will Rogers give the mocha back.

“But it’s covered up by all that sugar,” Rogers says.

“Makes it better.”

“Well yeah, but it doesn’t taste like coffee.”

“So what. It’s good.”

“Okay, that’s true.”

Rogers takes another drink.

Get your own damn mocha, Rogers.

Physical functioning still too impaired to simply reach across and grab the cup back. Also, his hand is full of breakfast sandwich.

Steve takes another drink.

Rogers, you’re killing me here.

“Sure you don’t want to trade?”

What.

“Bucky, your glare is more terrifying than ever.”

Finally Rogers hands the cup over. The target has successfully re-established his status as a pain in the ass.

Unfortunately, even the best breakfast foods don’t last forever, and it’s only 3 seconds after Barnes has leaned back and rested the cup on his belly that Rogers says,

“So any idea why the folks at Starbucks apparently call us the ‘Running Regulars,’ have both our orders memorized, and now think we’re dating?”

“Neither of them said anything about dating.”

Oops. A giant super face can make a lot of giant super frowning.

“You have my clothes bugged?”

Does he think I’m an amateur.
“Confirm.”

“If you’re gonna sound that woeful about it, you shouldn’t have done it, Bucky! What were you doing? You followed me on my run every day?”

Nod.

“Where else, Buck?”

This is so stupid.

“Where. Else.”

“Ideal following distance five to seven meters.”

Rogers turns bright red. Is this anger red or something else. Dammit. The day is going downhill already, and it’s only 0946.

“And?”

Definitely anger red.

“Four times we have shared a subway car to Manhattan.”

“What!?”

Shrug.

“Made my job easier that you never bothered to look up.”

Rogers grips the arm of his chair so hard that the wood creaks. His face is no longer red but pale, eyes and mouth clamped shut.

Wonderful, Barnes. You’re on a regular schedule of upsetting the target every 12-18 hours. Great start. Keep up the close protection, you’re definitely great at it. You don’t even deserve this mocha.

They stare at one another. Eye contact is difficult. Barnes feels exposed. He can remember wishing to lash out, to close eyes that have stared at him. He will not do that to Rogers. He chooses to not.

Mission, you could help me out here.

Silence.

Why is this so hard.

“Okay, look. Since we’re on the topic anyway. How long have you been living across the street?”

I’m growing new blood here, you can’t give me a break?

“A while.”

“How. Long.”

“Within twenty-four hours of your moving in here.”

“What?”
Super surprise is super loud.

“That building offered the optimal combination of surveillance and cover. Plus, Esther bakes.”

Let’s talk about the Olds instead.

Rogers puts his big dumb hand on his big dumb face.

“Jesus, Bucky. You followed me around DC like this too?”

As demonstrated by all the HYDRA mooks very helpfully deactivated for you Steve.

Nod.

“Since when?”

“Since I pulled you out of the river.”

“It was you.”

Voice indicates insufficient oxygen. Strong emotion again?

Nod.

“Bucky.”

Strong negative emotion. Identified: misery. First anger, now sadness.

“Bucky, why? Why did it take so long? Why’d you never just contact me?”

If the mission were coming back, surely this would be the moment. Its favorite person used its favorite word. But no. The mission imperative remains a silent knot of discomfort in his chest.

Dammit. And the day started off so well.

“Protection detail,” he says, because it is clear that Rogers requires him to speak, “close contact detrimental to adequate protection.”

“Protect? Me?”

Nod.

“Bucky, I can take care of myself. Don’t look at me like that, I’m a damn super soldier. You’re the one who needs protecting right now.”

Only as long as functionality is compromised, Captain Delusional of the Can’t Watch My Back Brigade.

“Who gave you these orders? To protect me. Not HYDRA.”

“Self.”

“What?”

“I gave the order.”

There is strong emotion again. Not so unhappy as before. What is causing it.
“How, Buck?”

Why does Rogers want to hear this. It’s not pertinent to current protocols. And he was badly injured that day.

“Please tell me.”

Well. If you’re going to be so polite.


What.

Steve.

Steve, don’t cry, pal. We can stop talking about it.

“Sorry,” he says.

“Sorry? For what?”

“For describing events that upset you.”

“Bucky, no,” Rogers says.

He moves close. But slowly, with hands visible. He sits close. It’s too close, but Barnes concentrates on breathing evenly. He doesn’t want to increase Rogers’s upset.

“That’s not,” Rogers says. “I’m not upset to remember it. I’m just. I thought you didn’t know me. I thought. You were lost. To me. I was ready to scour the world, to do anything. And now you tell me that you never left. You were right here. The whole time. Like you always were.”

Of course that speech results in hugging. On one hand, that means Barnes doesn’t have to say anything. On the other hand, he is keenly aware of the location of every knife within reach, and his left arm is whirring loudly, preparing itself for violence.

One small benefit: the briefing moves again in response to Rogers’s proximity.

“You’re gonna have to learn to protect me from close by,” Rogers says after several minutes of uneven breath and a few shakes.

He pulls back, and Barnes makes himself blink, to reset his higher brain functions.

“It’s difficult,” he says.

“We’ll figure it out,” Rogers says.

Barnes looks at him. Observation and intel from the briefing have told him: Rogers is stubborn. If he is determined to make close surveillance work, they will have to go to ridiculous lengths to achieve that goal.

“Okay,” Barnes says, and the day is not ruined after all by mission difficulty.

It’s a small but palpable victory.

There’s a very welcome shower, for which Barnes only has to inform Rogers 4 times that he does
not require assistance. Even though washing his hair one-handed is obnoxious. Rogers has a very fancy shower head. Much nicer than the one across the street. Unlike the dumpy building, the hot water does run out. That takes 46 minutes.

After the shower, Barnes learns two interesting pieces of information: 1. Rogers feels strongly about the need to wear undergarments (“Jesus, Buck, don’t jeans that tight chafe?”) and 2. Rogers is no good at pulling hair back into a tail. Which is an operation that requires two hands, so hair in the face it is. Just as well: having Rogers standing so close at his back makes violence seem suddenly attractive.

At 1335, the door alarm rings again.

“That’s still the door buzzer, Bucky. When did you even have time to put a knife in your pocket?”

A knife. Poor Rogers, so naïve.

The visitor is the redhead, with bandages and banter. Also, the ability to put hair in a tail, which almost makes her into someone Barnes actually wants to see. And trouble, per her usual protocols.

“I’m glad you called JARVIS for backup, Barnes. It did Stark good to see that. Probably did you good to ask,” she says.

And damn her to a very cold fucking gulag, she stares at him with an expression that clearly means she’s also waiting for the great muscle-bound synapses in Rogers’s mind to find their way into the light.

At the time, she also has a pair of scissors and tweezers at work on the stitches in his shoulder. So nice of her to distract him from the increased pulse and cold sweat of close proximity and medical procedures by getting him in trouble. For the nineteenth time today. Just terrific.

“Wait. Call JARVIS?” Rogers asks.

Barnes can see her laughing at them, under her fake calm.

Sigh.

“Building JARVIS is mission-assist.”

“Am I a mission-assist?”

Lady, you are a menace is what you are.

But she meets his glare with her obnoxious hidden laughing. He’s still growing new blood, still overwhelmed by the developments of the past 38 hours. Perhaps his glare is weakened.

Also possibly his tactical planning ability. And intelligence. Good sense may never have been his strong suit. And the mission imperative isn’t helping him.

“Yes, fine.”

Romanoff looks actively pleased by that. Why.

“What’s a mission-assist?”

Yes, Steve. Definitely latch onto the unimportant parts. Keep that up, maybe I'll get off easy.
“It’s his word for friend, I think,” she says.

Followed, of goddamn course, by,

“Wait. You know each other?”

This time, it’s not so much that Rogers turns red with anger as it is that his face holds on it the promise of knocking one into next week.

“Steve, if you beat him up before I’m done taking these stitches out, I’m going to make you need stitches of your own.”

Rogers looks horrified at the suggestion that he might cause Barnes harm. Romanoff can really work a situation. It’s a problem.

Okay, and in this instance a benefit.

“Sorry, Buck. Sorry.”

And then the tweezers and the scissors go away, and Barnes hasn’t lashed out even once. All the knives stayed where they should. He only sweated a moderate amount. That is fortunate.

Although. It’s possible Romanoff has done all that trouble-making on purpose, just to distract him. Yikes.

His shoulder’s still a mess, even if it’s not actively bleeding. Pain levels moderately high. One of Lidia’s pills may be in order.

But the best news is the unstrapping of his right arm. He lets go a long breath when Romanoff unwinds the tape from around him. She has brought him a sling to use, so he can put on a shirt (slowly, gingerly, but – the worst part – button-down only and therefore a terrible plaid thing of Steve’s). Just having his arm freer releases some of his pervasive tension. The strapping was necessary to prevent damage, but it was restraint. He is free of restraint now. Baseline interior static reduced. Identified: relief.

Also, it’s really nice to stretch his right fingers.

“Better?” Romanoff asks.

Nod.

“Don’t push it, okay? Anyone else would keep you strapped up for another two weeks.”

Undesirable.

“Anyone else would have him in a hospital,” Rogers says, then, “no, I get it, calm down.”

As nice as it is to have more freedom of movement and the stitches out, Barnes still feels wrung out by the time Romanoff leaves. The walls of Rogers’s apartment are close and unfamiliar.

Will this be how it always is, an ebb and flow of comfort and stress.

Sounds exhausting.
Is remarkably exhausting. Example the first:

“You should take the bed, Buck.”

Assess: sleep in that giant bed the smells like Rogers. Potential for actually sleeping: 0.06%. Potential for the briefing going bonkers: 704%. Tempting, if only to get the briefing to speak up. But no.

“Deny.”

“Bucky. You don’t - I’m not saying you have to kick me out of my own bed. I mean. That’s fine, if that’s what you want. But. We could share. If that would help. We used to, in the old days.”

Sure. Like that’s better. I’ve seen you sleeping, champ. Awake you might be Captain America, but asleep you’re Captain Cuddle. No fucking thank you.

“Deny.”

“I won’t -”

Stare.

“Okay, Buck. But at least let me pull the sofa bed out.”

The future is incredible. They put folded-up beds inside sofas. Too bad they can’t figure out an actually comfortable mattress. But it’s nice to be able to stretch out a little.

Example the second:

“I gotta move, Buck. Otherwise I feel like I’m having a full-body cramp.”

Barnes is well-versed in full-body cramps. They are a feature of the post-cryo thaw process. Unpleasant activity, to be avoided.

“Use the gym.”

“Bucky. I’ll break the treadmill. I’m not gonna get in trouble at the park.”

Sure. Because it’s definitely not true that 72 hours previously an entire HYDRA team was across the street.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

Too late.

“You can’t go with, Bucky. Look at you. You’re barely mobile.”

Barnes has an ace in the hole, though. Rogers becomes acquainted with the little stand of trees and low bushes off the running trail in Cadman Plaza Park.

“Every day,” Rogers says, watching while Barnes settles neatly into his usual spot.

“Confirm.”

“Jesus Christ, Bucky.”

It’s not one of those days where Steve has a bounce in his step. But at the end of his run, he looks more relaxed around the eyes.
There are good things as well. They eat at the little café, which turns out to make a superior French toast. Barnes introduces Rogers to the dumpy diner, and he loves it. Mission-compatible, well done, Barnes.

They have dinner with the Olds twice. The Olds are possibly magical. Rogers and Barnes can arrive at Ollie’s door with matching glares after an entire day of misunderstanding and a particularly ill-conceived attempt at dressing oneself that resulted in greatly increased shoulder pain – but by the end of the evening, Rogers has ceased speaking with his teeth clenched together, and even Barnes has laughed once.

Barnes demonstrates a small glimmer of basic intelligence after this and starts regularly suggesting (Rogers might call it “demanding,” but who cares what he thinks) visits across the street.

Adjustment. It takes time to incorporate new routines and parameters. Useful knowledge: avoid setting expectations too high until familiarity and comfort are achieved.

The worst part – worse even than Rogers’s confusion and his own continued physical impairment – is the mission imperative’s silence. That knot of discomfort in his chest remains, no matter what he tries.

Mission.

Hey, Mission.

Come on, don’t sulk like that, you big baby.

Barnes had really thought insulting it might work. There’s too much space in his head. The briefing has made its presence known, but it’s little more than a whisper in the background, so excited by Rogers’s proximity that it only offers up stevestevesteve.

So it’s still just Barnes kicking around in the wide-open spaces of his own brain. Like vertigo, or giddiness.

He places his left hand over his chest, over the spot where the silent mission imperative aches.

“Buck? Bucky, are you hurt?”

Another adjustment: being observed, reactions questioned.

“Not injured.”

“What is it?”

For once, Barnes actually wants to talk about it. Maybe Rogers will have insight. And if not, maybe it will help simply to talk about the imperative. Barnes misses it.

“The mission imperative is upset.”

It’s a bad way to start – this causes confusion.

“The what?”

“Hard to explain.”
Rogers is a good person. He settles into his arm chair, demonstrating patience.

“I’ve got nothing else to do, Buck. You can take a week to explain, if you want.”

A week of talking. Terrible. Surely it won’t take that long.

How to begin.

“I made the new orders, to protect.”

“Yeah, Bucky, you told me.”

“One part of me. The mission imperative.”

“One. Part of you?”

“Confirm. One part of three: mission head, mission imperative, mission briefing. I’m the mission head. The other two don’t talk so much.”

“Wait. Three? What?”

It’s not that hard to understand, pal. Surely you can count to three.

“Confirm. Mission head – the guy you’re talking to right now – the imperative, the briefing.”

“These are. Parts of you?”

Nod.

“The imperative got confused. By the reprogrammer. It accepted the passcode to kill you. It’s upset. Won’t talk to me.”

“You have voices in your head?”

Why do you say that like it’s a bad thing.

“The briefing and the imperative. The briefing downloads memory. The imperative is mission support. But the imperative is upset and won’t talk to me.”

“Your memory? Is a separate part of you?”

You must be saying it wrong, Barnes.

“Confirm.”

“Okay, and what’s the whole ‘confirm’ and ‘deny’ thing?”

It’s a thing?

“Query unclear.”

“Bucky, don’t go all robot on me, I’m not criticizing.”

The technical term is cyborg, Rogers, learn some damn vocabulary. I’m doing my best here.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to change the subject. I’m just trying to understand. There are three of you – in your head, and one part has gone quiet, because it listened to the HYDRA guy?”
See, not that confusing. Easily summed up.

“Confirm. I feel it, here,” he says, and taps his chest, “upset. But it won’t talk. Got too much space in my head.”

Rogers takes time to think about it. Barnes can see a big pile of upset growing in the distance.

He’s going to call flying Sam.

He’s going to say it wrong.

And then flying Sam, who’s already on the fence, is going to think Barnes is bonkers on top of dangerous.

Barnes will say it for the mission: avoid.

“Bucky, I don’t understand this at all. Can I call –“

“No.”

“But I-“

“No. Flying Sam doesn’t know me. You can talk to Lidia.”


Am I supposed to answer all those questions.

“Lidia knows me.”

“Was she a psychiatrist or something?”

“Unknown.”

“Okay, Buck. Okay.”

Rogers clearly doesn’t like it, but it’s kind of him to agree.

And yet again, the Olds demonstrate their value as mission-assists. They go across the street, where Barnes spends a highly enjoyable afternoon receiving the healing vibrations of cat Eleanor’s purring while Esther bakes peanut butter cookies for him. Ollie comes over and the three of them grouse about the cold weather and the inadequate supply of affordable sweaters in Brooklyn. Esther and Barnes set Ollie straight about Rogers’s cardigans and how they are not to be admired.

“You people have no sense of style,” Ollie says.

Barnes, as the only person in the room whose waistband is not hiked up under their armpits, is confident that Ollie is incorrect.

After an hour, Lidia fetches Ollie away.

“We need the benefit of what little insight you possess,” she says.

Hilarious.

Esther turns on her TV. There is a whole network of nothing but cooking shows.
“Esther,” he says, “you’re just showing me this now? I thought you liked me.”

“I do like you, Jimmy,” she says. “I was trying to avoid rotting your brain with television.”

Reasonable. What little brain he has ought to be preserved. But the shows are good. There is a lot more to baking than just cookies.

When is he going to regain function of his right arm.

By the time Rogers, Ollie, and Lidia troop back upstairs, Barnes has a long mental list of recipes to try and even had a short nap. Rogers tries to pet cat Eleanor, but she draws her head back and stares at him with obvious resentment.

“I don’t think she likes me,” he says.

“She likes you just fine on your own,” Esther tells him. “She has her own set of priorities.”

Excellent cat. Barnes scratches behind her ears.

Rogers gazes at Barnes even more than usual during dinner, with an expression that is serious but not obviously sad or angry.

“Good talk?” Barnes asks him when they’re back across the street.

“Yeah, Bucky, thank you. That was a good idea. I don’t know that I really understand, but it helped. Lidia has been through a lot.”

That explains how she knows things. How she is unafraid. But Barnes identifies: sadness, that Lidia has suffered.

“She thinks you’re doing great, Bucky.”

That is useful to know.

Also useful to know, ten minutes later from the sleeping loft, after all the lights have gone out,

“I think so too.”
Barnes has a short list of mission improvements: shoes, increased arm movement, visiting with the Olds to prevent buildup of tension. It has only been 6 days, but already Barnes feels more confident of long-term mission success.

It helps to keep Rogers busy. A busy Rogers is a non-brooding Rogers. A non-questioning Rogers. A Rogers without hugging constantly on his mind. Luckily they happen to know several mission-assists currently living in a demolition zone, so there’s plenty to do.

The continued inability to use his right arm for anything other than inserting into and removing from sleeves means that Barnes supervises while Rogers fixes various holes in the walls. Rogers is not highly skilled in home repair (“Shut up, Bucky, where was I supposed to learn this kind of thing? Of course I know which end of the hammer to hold, you jerk.”), and Barnes identifies: pleasure at bossing Steve around.

Even with fewer holes in the walls, the building remains cold. Ollie has dry-looking red welts on his hands that he rubs consistently.

“Those are chilblains, Buck,” Rogers tells him, “we used to get them all the time. I always had them so bad on my feet. They itch like crazy. Let’s see if we can seal up those windows.”

Which is how Barnes finds himself useful for something other than supervision: standing at the windows in Ollie’s apartment, aiming a hot air gun at sticky sheets of plastic meant to hold out drafts. The hot air gun belongs to Lidia and reportedly is meant for hair.

Barnes is definitely getting one. Wet hair outside during winter is balls.

The conversation going on in Ollie’s kitchen is a further cause of concern. The Olds appear unaware of Barnes’s enhanced hearing. Every word is clear, despite the air gun and Rogers hammering (and occasionally cursing) in the hallway.

“I’ve got about thirty-two dollars in the old holiday tin,” Ollie says, “it’s not much, I know.”

“We know your summer flu was expensive,” Lidia says.

“My contribution won’t be much better,” Esther says, “but those boys deserve a good thanksgiving.”

“Yeah,” Ollie says.

“Maybe I could sell a few first editions,” Lidia says, “to fund the feast.”

With mounting excitement, they make a number of unrealistic plans. It is kind of them, though the reason is unclear.

Rogers and Barnes return to Rogers’s apartment, and Barnes discovers via the internet that “thanksgiving” is the reason why all the spiders have been replaced by turkeys in hats. It is perplexing that after covering everything in friendly-looking turkey cartoons, people then eat one. For a holiday celebrating the genocide of the country’s indigenous inhabitants.

Americans are kind of morbid.

But it is proper to observe holidays correctly. A conference is needed.
“Rogers.”

“Aaaaaa! Bucky, I’m in the shower!”

“So what. You have no non-standard parts.”

“Uh, I know that, but people generally think of bathing as private time.”

Says the guy who practically tried to carry Barnes into the shower 4 days ago. In addition to which, Barnes has a file on that.

“Incorrect.”

“Pardon?”

“Memories identified: tenement apartment, one bathtub, shared water. Conversation.”

Rogers sticks his head outside the shower curtain and drips water all over the floor.

“You remember that?”

“Yeah. I remember some stuff.”

“That’s a – hell of a thing to remember, Buck. Saturday baths.”

Barnes shrugs.

“The mission briefing gave it to me. You got the hot water.”

Rogers has enthusiasm for the mission briefing.

“You always insisted, even when you had a date.”

“Hope you don’t expect that now,” Barnes says.

“No! God no. There’s plenty of hot water to go around.”

“Pretty good future bonus.”

Rogers has dripped a moderate-sized puddle.

“Yeah. Did you come in here to talk about your memory?”

“No, Thanksgiving.”

“Do I have to be damp and naked for this discussion?”

No sense of urgency, this guy. Barnes waits on Rogers’s bed.

“Bucky. Seriously. I can’t even get dressed first?”

“The Olds are spending all their money.”

Rogers pauses, one leg into his shorts.

“What do you mean?”
“For Thanksgiving. They are spending all their money on a meal. And Ollie is going to rearrange his furniture to make a big enough table.”

Rogers sits on the bed next to him, just out of arm’s reach. That’s a kindness.

“We can’t let them do that,” he says.

“Confirm.”

“And in that building, in the cold? You’ve got to get them to come over here, Bucky. And let me buy the food.”

“Confirm.”

Rogers looks at him with narrowed eyes. Putting it together, aren’t you pal.

“I have to do the inviting, don’t I?”

“It’s your home.”

“Come on Buck, it’s your home too.”

That doesn’t even warrant a response.

“Yeah, okay. I’m glad you said something.”

The next morning, Rogers puts on a nice shirt (within the boundaries of his terrible wardrobe) and crosses the street at 1120. At 1138 he returns with all 3 Olds in tow.

“Well, I suppose you have room for us and another nineteen of your closest friends,” Ollie says.

Twenty-four people is too many. Barnes looks at Rogers.

“I don’t think I even know that many people,” Rogers says.

Oh good.

Rogers gives a speech about friends and gratitude, all while making a little sideways smile. By the end of the speech, even Lidia looks ready to agree to anything Rogers might suggest.

Useful tactic, though it requires more talking than Barnes is accustomed to.

“Then it’s set,” Steve says. “Thank you all so much for letting me host, it means a lot to me.”

And the Olds nod a little confusedly, as if they’re starting to realize that they’ve been taken down by the Steve Rogers Charm Bomb.

“Okay, Buck,” Rogers says when they’ve gone, “now how do we feed everyone? No one wants to eat my cooking, and I don’t think grilled cheese is appropriate.”

The best tactics are supported by thorough intelligence. Barnes spends the rest of the day on the internet. There is a bewildering number of menus available.

Even more surprising, it is apparently traditional to make a decoration consisting of a turkey drawn from a tracing of one’s hand. Even kittens do it. Perplexing.

He shows the cartoons to Rogers.
“Why.”

Rogers smiles. That’s a good alternative to uncomfortable pauses, even if there’s no sign of the sunrise smile returning again.

(Barnes sets self-reminders not to be bothered by the absence of the sunrise smile. They are only slightly successful.)

“That’s for little kids, Bucky. You don’t have to make a hand-turkey.”

“I like the cat one.”

“It is pretty cute. But I don’t think Eleanor would agree to it.”

“No.”

“You like cats, Buck?”

“I like cat Eleanor. She is smart and opinionated. And she likes me.”

“Like, nothing. That cat is crazy about you.”

“The mission imperative was afraid of her.”

Where are you, mission.

Rogers makes an expression that Barnes sees often: raised eyebrows, flared nostrils, pinched lips. Barnes has identified his own reaction to this expression: dislike.

“Still no sign of it coming back, huh?”

Barnes shrugs. Rogers doesn’t understand, so there’s no use in trying to explain how bothersome it is to have so much mental silence.

Even if Barnes is not obligated to trace his hand and paint the fingers in primary colors, the traditions required are numerous and specific, including an extensive menu of indigenous foods and an accounting of things for which one is thankful.

He has inadvertently prepared for that one, with his list of good things. That is helpful, to have a jump start, because a great deal of planning is necessary.

“I don’t know, Bucky. I can boil potatoes and scramble eggs, but that’s about it. Shouldn’t we just get the meal catered? I think that’s what Stark did last year, and it was delicious.”

Catered. The holiday clearly requires the experience of home cooking, togetherness, and putting all of the leftovers together onto one sandwich.

Barnes is really looking forward to that sandwich.

“Deny. We are highly trained, intelligent men. We are capable of cooking one meal.”

Of course, they are trained, intelligent men with only 3 working arms between them. Barnes tests the functionality of his right arm with a salad. The action of holding down vegetables and reaching for a head of lettuce is enough to raise baseline pain levels high enough that they cannot be ignored.

Problematic.
“If we look really helpless, maybe Esther’ll help,” Rogers says.

Barnes is confident that because Esther is a kind person, she will assist without the need for mildly deceptive facial expressions.

Regardless, Barnes makes a detailed tactical plan. Given their lack of experience, Barnes chooses a menu called “Foolproof Thanksgiving.” He also sets a task for himself to improve food preparation skills. Some of the menus he found are too complex for his experience and injury, but they sound damn good.

It takes only 13 drafts to work the plan into its most efficient form. The number of supplies required is alarming.

But really. Rogers doesn’t even own cloth napkins. What is he, a barbarian. And he tries to filch one of Barnes’s handkerchiefs. No sense of boundaries.

“Man, I have missed these things,” he says.

Keep on missing them, pal. Or get your own.

There is so much to do that Barnes has not had time for upset. Rogers has not had time to think of any new inadequacies for Barnes to exhibit.

Positive development. Busy is mission-compliant.

Barnes has not forgotten flying Sam’s imminent arrival. He practices what to say, around schedule-writing and trips to the grocer. He practices while sitting under the bushes during Rogers’s runs.

“What are you muttering about, Buck?”

That’s between me and flying Sam, champ.

There are moments that are. Pleasant. In close proximity, there is little opportunity for Rogers to put himself in danger. When Barnes wakes at night, he can climb to the sleeping loft and verify Rogers’s presence.

They watch films of the Howling Commandos together. Barnes had seen these before, courtesy of the spyware he put on Rogers’s laptop, but Rogers tells amusing stories to go along with the films.

“I think sometimes you hated all the newsreel crews,” Rogers says, and Barnes has to lean his head back and focus on slowed breathing, because the briefing is back.

It gives him the download of a pack of useless greenhorns, too busy mouthing off and barking orders at Steve to watch themselves. The pictures roll across the inside of his brain, so clear that he can almost smell the cordite and mud. He can see the irritated glance the Bucky-person shared with Dugan, ‘get a load of these assholes,’ as clearly as if it were happening in the present.

His eyes sting.

Hello, briefing. I’m so glad you’re here.

It takes up some of the space in his brain again. His internal perimeter is closer now. Safer.

“Bucky, what is it?”
“I remember,” he says, “one of them broke his ankle. Yelled so much that it brought the Germans running from miles around.”

“Yeah, Buck,” Rogers says in the gravelly voice that Barnes has learned is a happy version of strong emotion.

“Three of them died. The film crew. Army didn’t send any more after that.”

Rogers clears his throat: the misty-eyed moment is over.

“That is true.”

Another positive development: Rogers learns to get his own damn mocha. And a special celebratory one that has peppermint in it. Barnes tries it. Pretty tasty, but a poor accompaniment to a breakfast sandwich.

Stark calls about Thanksgiving and says,

“What do you mean you’re not coming?” and

“I’ll just triple security and put your soul mate at the other end of the table from me, it’ll be fine,” and

“For god’s sake I think I can afford to feed three extra people who already have one foot in the grave.”

At which point Rogers’s eyes go steely and Barnes leaves off his stare of disapproval, because it is clear that Rogers will not abandon their plan. The phone call ends quickly after that.

“I think he means well,” Rogers says.

Probably. But that’s no excuse for bad manners.

Stark made building JARVIS, though, and building JARVIS is useful, sensible, and generous. Barnes can only presume that the same attributes lie somewhere inside Stark. Far, far deep inside, stunted from lack of light.

The day before the holiday arrives, and Barnes has been so busy that he has not had time to worry or to run his errand. Rogers grumbles at being made to leave early for the airport.

What did you need those extra 10 minutes for, pal, to do your hair? You should be wearing a hat anyway, it’s fucking November.

And then Rogers has to argue with him the whole ride there in Stark’s car.

“Bucky, you don’t need that.”

“It’s polite.”

“But it’s not necessary.”

“It’s polite.”

“Fine. But does it have to be so huge?”
“It’s very polite.”

The plant is pretty heavy. Not that he will (now) say that to Rogers.

It’s important to apologize for wrongs done in the past. He has chosen to reform, and that requires making amends. A gift is a nice complement to an apology. Building JARVIS has assisted with this research. Barnes knows he is right.

Flying Sam stands on the tarmac next to Stark’s plane, looking up at the sky. He used to fly in that sky himself. Before the Asset broke his wings.

Maybe the plant isn’t big enough.

Maybe he could let Rogers do all the talking.

Ugh.

Better to get it over with. Barnes steps forward.

“Where you going, Bucky?”

Flying Sam’s eyes are hidden behind sunglasses, but his eyebrows are raised.

Barnes holds the plant out one-handed, awkward.

“Sorry I broke your wings. And kicked you off the vehicle. And shot at you. Thank you for being a mission-assist.”

Flying Sam’s mouth opens slightly.

Barnes shakes the plant a little. Maybe flying Sam doesn’t understand.

“What?”

Sigh. Listening is important.

“Sorry I broke your wings. And kicked you off the vehicle. And shot at you. Thank you for being a mission-assist.”

He shakes the plant again, for emphasis.

“Bucky, what are you doing?” Rogers asks.

Flying Sam takes the plant. He staggers a little under its weight. Maybe it is too big, after all.

“This is for me?” flying Sam asks.

“Yes. To apologize and say thank you.”

“Bucky.”

“You didn’t have to get me a gift, Barnes. But thanks. It’s really. Large.”

“Philodendron bipinnatifidum. Easy to care for.”

“Thanks, Barnes. I appreciate it. Okay if I set it on the ground?”
“Sure. It’s heavy.”

“It is. Why’d you feel the need to bring me a present?”

“It’s polite. Acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Apology. Demonstration of intention to make amends. These actions minimize risk of rejection.”

“Bucky.”

“You thought I might reject you?” flying Sam asks.

“Risk of rejection is high. My actions took you out of your sky.”

“Aw, Bucky.”

“Hey, Barnes. That’s really thoughtful. I appreciate that. I know you were a different guy then.”

“Thanks.”

Not rejection. That is kindness. Flying Sam is kind.

“You are kind,” he says without meaning to, “you are a mission-assist.”

“A mission assist?”

“That’s what he calls friends,” Rogers says.

Rogers has his hand on Barnes’s shoulder when he says it. The touch is. Not horrible.

“Glad to help out, man. Any time.”

Flying Sam rides with them back to Vinegar Hill, saying,

“No, my mama is deep in pie crust and dinner roll dough today. You do not bother my mother on the day before Thanksgiving unless you’re willing to lose a few limbs.”

Barnes runs through their tactical plan in his mind. He had no intention of starting a day early. Has he planned incorrectly. Did they miss something.

“Hey, we’re almost home, Bucky, you’re okay.”

As a further demonstration of trust, Barnes asks flying Sam to examine his right shoulder.

“Emergency medicine’s more my thing, but I’ll take a look at it.”

His hands are warm, and they do not increase pain levels. His close presence causes internal discomfort, per usual. Barnes stares at Rogers as a distraction. Rogers looks happier. There’s a frown line between his eyebrows, but it’s a small, half-hearted thing.

“I think you’re healing up okay,” flying Sam says, “might be time for a little light rehab. Best I can figure, you’re about a month into a normal person’s healing process? After a week. Damn, the two of you.”

Barnes researches shoulder rehab while Rogers regales flying Sam with the amazing tales of his and Barnes’s thrilling adventures in grocery shopping, home improvement, and visiting the elderly.

“Wait. You followed us around in DC?” flying Sam says.
“Had a base in an unoccupied condominium,” Barnes tells him, “and your neighbor’s hedge provides excellent cover.”

“Are you serious? Every day?”

“There’s a very comfortable tree across the street from the VA center.”

“Dude. You went near my vets?”

Barnes looks up from his laptop at the outrage in flying Sam’s tone.

“They were never in danger, flying Sam. Even before the conscious decision of good-guy, nonlethal, mission objective was only protect. Causing emotional distress by upsetting psychologically scarred military personnel falls outside protection parameters.”

That is a lot of words.

Rogers and flying Sam have to blink a lot at that paragraph.

“Can I ask you some questions?” flying Sam says.

“Confirm.”

Why does that make him frown at Rogers.

“Do you still have a mission?”


Rogers makes a big enough smile that Barnes feels momentarily light-headed with mission success. Or maybe he has stretched his shoulder too much.

“Where’d you get this mission from?”

“Self.”

“What do you mean by ‘good guy nonlethal’?”

“Parameters required for mission success.”

“What do you mean?”

For shit’s sake, flying Sam, you know the guy.

“Can’t make Rogers proud of me if I’m still going around shooting the fucking face off every asshole who makes me angry.”

Rogers and flying Sam jump as if they’ve been shocked. Why.

“Bucky,” Rogers says, looking as if he has a hug coming on.

Flying Sam waves at him.

“Last one, Barnes. ‘Flying Sam’?”

“Name and designation.” He points to himself, “Barnes, flying Sam, pain in the ass target.”
Barnes keeps forgetting how happy sass makes Rogers. Look at all those teeth.

They stare at him for an uncomfortable duration. Barnes goes back to his shoulder exercises.

“Don’t overdo it,” flying Sam barks at him.

Barnes stops.

Well, it’s shitty to take orders, but flying Sam is a trained medical professional.

“I don’t even know what to tell you, man,” flying Sam says, “this should not be possible. Dude clearly has a semi-truck’s worth of issues, but it seems like he’s figuring out how to deal with them. I don’t know how.”

“Bucky can do anything.”

Barnes stares.

“Or,” Barnes says, “the mission requires mental organization.”

“You know this is not gonna be a straight line, right?” flying Sam says – but to Barnes, not to Rogers, “you know that? Things happen, trip you up. You can’t see them ahead of time.”

Like the way Rogers’s close presence often feels like a threat. Like hugging feels like restraint. Like the things his mind sees in his sleep that make him wake up sweating and go look at Rogers to achieve calm.

“I know.”

Flying Sam turns to Rogers, still frowning, but with an easier set to his shoulders.

“I guess maybe I can dial my worrying back a little bit. I definitely do not want to be here the day the two of you get set off at once, but for now, man. I guess you were right.”

And then Rogers is too full of happy vindication to sit still any more. He has to hug flying Sam, and Barnes is able to forestall the same only by waving the arm sling at him. Flying Sam shows Barnes a method for donning the arm sling that is less painful, and they go to lunch.

“This is a hipster white-people place,” flying Sam says, frowning at the café menu and demonstrating notable discernment.

“It’s good!” Rogers says.

That may be true, but it definitely skews too far on the cute side. They go to the diner across the street.

“This is more like it,” flying Sam says.

Barnes likes flying Sam.

“But one,” flying Sam says once they are seated, “can I give you a little health advice?”

Nod.

“You are a trained medical professional.”
“Well, thanks, but all I was gonna say is that you look a little underweight to me. You eat okay?”

“I can eat. I like many foods.”

“Then you should eat more. You’ve got a metabolism like Steve’s, y’all ought to be putting calories away like they’re going out of style. That’s probably why your shoulder’s not healed even more.”

Oh. That is valuable mission information.

“It’s good that there is an eating-based holiday tomorrow,” he says, “we have an extensive menu planned.”

Why is that so funny.

Barnes uses this advice as an excuse to order double pancakes. He has to build up his strength for the battle tomorrow: Barnes and Steve vs. Foolproof Thanksgiving.

He is confident they will be victorious.
Food preparation ought to be a straightforward process, with predictable steps and outcomes. It is merely chemistry and math. It should not require tactical flexibility.

However.

Barnes rises at 0515 to put the turkey’s internal organs, 1 carrot, 2 stalks of celery, and 1 onion into 1.5 L of water over a low flame. That task accomplished, he goes upstairs to pinch Rogers’s toe.

“Did you ever consider maybe a light shake, or calling my name, instead of trying to break my toe waking me up?”

Aw, got a tender foot, pal?

“Time allotted for exercise, ninety-four minutes,” he says.

Rogers opens one eye.

“You’re actually going to let me run today?”

“As long as you get out the door in under twelve minutes.”

Rogers achieves this goal. Barnes sits on a bench in the park and drinks a mocha in between his shoulder exercises. It’s so damn cold that he almost wishes he could run. He plays through the day’s plan in his mind.

Pain levels low.

Stress levels low.

Confidence high.

Obstacle no. 1: Bread.

Barnes proofs the yeast while Rogers showers, and it looks exactly like the picture online. He braces the bowl between his stomach and the wall and stirs in the required amount of flour with his left arm. It forms a “rough, shaggy mass” as per the recipe.

Then Rogers ruins it.

To be fair, there’s no way to guarantee that Barnes could’ve done any better with two functioning hands. Additionally, he’d have to wear some kind of covering on his metal hand or wear bread dough between the plates for the rest of eternity.

First Rogers squeezes the dough, which makes the additional flour fly everywhere. The flour is supposed to be incorporated.

“I think that was too hard,” Rogers says, rubbing flour out of his eyes with the back of his wrist.
He pats at the dough, which continues looking “rough and shaggy” and does not hold together. In the picture, the dough makes a smooth ball. One is supposed to poke it and watch it rebound to a smooth surface.

Rogers mashes the dough.

“I have no idea what I’m doing, Bucky. There’s nothing on there about how to actually knead it?”

Emergency measures are required. Barnes gets on the phone.

“Building. We need to know how to knead bread dough.”

“Certainly, Sergeant.”

Building JARVIS sends Barnes a video of a smiling woman folding and pushing at the dough in a motion away from her body. They watch the video 3 times, and Rogers tries the process. The extra flour mixes into the dough, and after 7.75 minutes, the dough is smooth and slightly shiny. Rogers pokes it, and the indentation pops back out.

“You did it.”

“That was actually kind of fun, Bucky.”

Obstacle no. 2: Lack of proper kitchen equipment.

They put the bread dough aside to rise, and Barnes tops off the stock simmering at the back of the stove with a bit more water. Rogers cleans the large amount of flour out of his hair.

Barnes pulverizes a number of gingersnaps – a wholly satisfying process after the bread troubles – but the rest of the pumpkin cheesecake belongs to the person with two working hands.

“It says ‘beat together until creamy’.”

“I’m pretty sure this was intended for using a mixer, Bucky, not my bare hands.”

“What, those muscles can’t take it?”

Rogers glares pretty bad at that, but it’s nothing on the glare after he breaks the first spoon.

“I told you we should’ve had it catered. This is ridiculous.”

“Stir.”

There’s plenty more glaring (and another broken spoon), but the cheesecake gets into the oven within the required timeframe.

Obstacle no. 3: Steven Grant Rogers’s excessively bad attitude.

“I submit that I have already peeled enough potatoes for a lifetime, and that was before I even went into the Army. Do you know how much money and effort went into making me? I’m a goddamn national hero in two different centuries. I think I should get to be put to better use than peeling an entire fucking bag of fucking potatoes, Bucky.”
Barnes turns the TV on to the Macy’s parade.

“You’re gonna make me listen to all that noise? Seriously? I can’t hear myself think. And what are those balloons even of? A talking sponge? What is the point of that?”

An advertisement comes on for a Christmas sale.

“Since Halloween, I’ve been listening to this crap. Buy this, buy that. Doesn’t anybody go to church anymore? Go caroling? Because apparently the point of Christmas now is three months of commercials for new cars and jewelry. What about feeding the poor? What about taking five goddamn minutes to not have every little thing be bright and loud and expensive, huh?”

Barnes slams his metal hand down on the counter - not hard enough to crack it, but hard enough to make a loud noise. Rogers jumps and glares. He does not look afraid.

That’s good. Barnes doesn’t want to make him afraid. He just wants him to shut the hell up.

“What is your problem.”

“The hell do you mean is my problem, Bucky, you’re the one trying to break my damn kitchen.”

He is going to make a speech, dammit. The time for speechifying is intended to be later, during dinner. And that speechifying is supposed to be about thankfulness, for shit's sake, as the name of the holiday is "Thanksgiving," not "Bitchmas."

"You have done nothing but moan and torture potatoes for nineteen minutes. You want me to take over, pal? Figure out how I can hold the damn things and I will fucking take over. But what. Is your problem."

Rogers continues to glare at him, but his sense of guilt is never far below the surface, and Barnes can see it beginning to rise to the top.

"Did you eat breakfast?"

Breakfast was not in the tactical plan. It is a significant oversight.

"I am not having a blood sugar-related fit, Bucky."

Except you are, champ.

"Eat a sandwich, Rogers."

"What?"

"Eat. A damn. Sandwich. Steve. Sit on your sofa and watch a marching band and get the hell over it."

Rogers slumps miserably to the refrigerator and makes a sandwich of suffering. He mopes to the sofa and slouches down to chew with sadness.

Barnes works out how to hold potatoes down with a fork well enough to quarter them and get them into a pot of water without killing his shoulder. By the time he's done, Rogers's posture has visibly improved, he keeps glancing at the kitchen as if he wants to talk, and his ears are pink.

Barnes takes him the rest of the gingersnaps as a reward for good behavior.
"Sorry I was such a jerk, Bucky."

"I'll think about forgiving you."

Sass really does work with this guy.

Obstacle no. 4: Dead time.

The cheesecake comes out, the potatoes are mashed and set aside, the turkey and its temperature sensor have gone into the oven, the dough has been shaped into balls and left to its second rise, and the Olds aren't due for 75 minutes.

As it turns out, Rogers in Grumpy Mode was correct about the parade: it's loud and repetitive.

Setting the table takes 13 minutes. Tearing bread and pan-frying sausage for the stuffing takes 20 minutes.

There's still nearly an hour to wait.

This should've shown up more clearly in the tactical plan.

Fortunately, Rogers has the same cooking channel as Esther. Unfortunately, Barnes learns that Foolproof Thanksgiving contained an error on the menu and they were supposed to make pie, not cheesecake.

Great. Dessert is ruined.

Obstacle no. 5: Barnes is a damaged dumbass.

_Finally_ the Olds arrive: 8 minutes before the agreed-upon time. Their arms are full of items: bags of empty plastic containers, full bottles, and small boxes. The containers are put aside, but Lidia pours out sherry for everyone, and Esther's little boxes contain snacks.

"Football on Thanksgiving is a law," Ollie says, taking over the television.

Another thing not mentioned in Foolproof Thanksgiving.

"Ooo, cheesecake," Lidia says as she noses through the kitchen, "much better than boring old pie."

Okay. Maybe dessert isn't totally ruined.

The Olds examine and comment on all the food preparation and declare themselves satisfied. The scent that comes out of the oven when Esther peers at the turkey is so enticing that Barnes reels a little. Note: he also neglected to eat breakfast.

Assessment: better eat some of those snacks.

It is a highly enjoyable span of time. Barnes learns some American geography, and that professional sports teams like to name themselves after large cats. Also that he is not allowed to root for the Detroit Lions, which is a shame, because their outfits are a pleasing shade of blue.

He will root for them secretly.
Esther's snacks are highly superior and amenable to experimentation: 2 kinds of cracker, 4 kinds of cheese, 2 kinds of olives, and a paste made from legumes that Barnes would like to eat in large amounts with a spoon.

Olives: outstanding food product.

Barnes spends a pleasurable 23 minutes assembling crackers, cheese, olive, and bean paste into different combinations in an attempt to find the optimal combination.

Sadly, the precariously balanced snack tower in his hand goes flying when the noise sounds - a rapid series of beeps. Identified: countdown sequence of an explosive device. Now Thanksgiving is really ruined, thanks HYDRA.

"Get down!" he shouts, and moves.

He kicks out, sending Ollie to the floor and the sofa cushion after him to provide some measure of cover. On his way to Esther, Barnes knocks Lidia sideways, toward the coffee table. Esther he grabs around the waist with his metal arm in mid-dive, rolling behind the sofa, where he curls his body over her, metal hand shielding her head.

The beeping continues.

And continues.

"Oh!" Lidia says, and a huge laugh rises out of her.

Barnes looks up, still curled around Esther. Lidia did not fall sensibly behind the coffee table. She's in the middle of the floor, her skirt hiked up so that the rolled tops of her stockings show, and one of her shoes is off. She has her hands on her belly, and she is absolutely howling.

Steve has maintained position by the oven, next to the source of the beeping. Which continues. His face looks like it's trying to do 7 things at once.

"Jimmy!" Lidia laughs, "oh you sweet thing."

"Is the coast clear?" Ollie asks.

No. The beeping continues.

"Bucky. Buck. It's the thermometer," Rogers says in a strangled voice. "It's the. Turkey."

Then he laughs, high and loud, which sets Lidia off again.

"Oh for pity's sake," Ollie says from the other side of the sofa.

"Bucky! The goddamn turkey is done!" Rogers shouts, bent in half with hilarity.

The beeping continues.

What is going on.

Esther trembles against his chest. Barnes looks down, and she has both hands pressed against her mouth. Her glasses are askew.

She too is laughing.
There is a click from the kitchen, and the beeping stops. The silence is not followed by an explosion. Just more laughter.

Barnes climbs to his feet and helps Esther up. She pats her hair and glasses back into place without looking him in the eye. The corners of her mouth continue to twitch.

Ollie is a shambles on the floor, with his 15 hairs splayed out and the sofa cushion lying at an angle across his body. Barnes hauls him up and replaces the cushion.

Rogers and Lidia are still laughing.

On one hand, laughter is a sign of positive emotional state. On the other hand, Barnes feels like a dope without even fully understanding why yet. On the other other hand, there is apparently no explosive device and therefore no danger. On the other other other hand, the turkey has had several extra minutes of cooking time and might be ruined.

He needs to be a quadruped to handle all the facets of this situation. Preferably a tiny quadruped, like cat Eleanor, capable of hiding under the dining room table for a while.

"Well," Ollie says, "I can't say that I remember the last instance where I spent any time on the floor."

That sets Lidia off again.

Rogers regains the presence of mind to at least remove the turkey from the oven. It's attractively brown and shiny and not at all resembling a charcoal briquette.

Respiration returns to baseline.

Assessment: overreaction by approximately 9 million percent.

Also, he landed on his right shoulder while rolling with Esther. Lidia is in hysterics, Ollie is still glowering, and Roger's won't look at him.

Has he ruined Thanksgiving.

He looks at Esther.

"Oh, Jimmy, it's all right."

Rogers approaches quickly. Barnes cannot help flinching. You know, just to ruin Thanksgiving a little more.

"What did you think it was, Buck?"

"Explosive device."

"Oh no!" Esther says, and takes his arm.

"Completely understandable," Lidia says from the floor.

Which can't really be true, or else why would she be laughing so hard.

"We should've tested the thermometer beforehand, so you wouldn't be surprised," Rogers says.

It seems obvious in retrospect.
Barnes shrugs with the wrong shoulder and hisses in discomfort. Rogers and Esther both reach for him, with identical expressions of distress. Only Esther is within arm's reach.

"Now, you landed on that shoulder, didn't you?"

Nod.

"That's well past enough excitement for you. Sit," she says, propelling him to the sofa. "You're on football duty with Ollie."

"But dinner isn't ready."

"Steve, Lidia, and I will take care of it."

Except he is co-hosting, and it's rude to put guests to work.

"Don't argue with me, Jimmy. Do as you're told."

Pain levels moderate. Social discomfort high.

He does as he's told. For the moment.

Barnes eats more snacks. According to the internet, olives have a high fat and fiber content, which is probably why eating them is soothing.

"I think you're probably good for me, Jimmy," Ollie says during an advertisement.

Barnes stares at him.

"All this flinging me around on a regular basis really gets the old heart pumping. Clears out any cobwebs in my arteries."

Human bodies don't work that way, Ollie.

Barnes gives him a cracker and cheese.

Steve and the women have a quieter time in the kitchen without his presence, which is definitely not in any way totally unfair. Lidia makes the salad, and Esther makes the Brussels sprouts.

"Who found this recipe? I've never made them like this before."

"This is all Bucky," Steve says.

"Hmph. Smells delicious."

Steve gets a highly contradictory lesson from the two women in the fine art of gravy making. Barnes wants to implode on himself that he's missing out. Gravy is so important.

Then the Detroit Lions win (excellent), the rolls and potatoes come out of the oven with a scent that makes everyone say "ooo," and Thanksgiving is ready.

They jockey around the table. Everyone seems to want to sit next to Barnes. Why.
"Hush up, Ollie, you've been sitting together on the sofa for half an hour. Let someone else have a turn," Esther says.

"I suppose I can find it in myself to be the token adult in the room," Lidia says.

Which is how he ends up sitting between Esther and Rogers.

"When do we say the things," he says.

And they stare at him.

Do these people not actually know how to do Thanksgiving correctly. Has he ended up with a crowd of the holiday-deficient.

"The things we're thankful for," he says.

"People do that?" Steve asks.

"Oh!" Ollie says, "I haven't done that since I was a kid. We used to make it like saying grace, before we ate, and hold hands."

So they do that, even though Rogers tries to hold his elbow before he gets his arm out of the sling. Rogers's hand is approximately the temperature of a furnace. It's funny to see Ollie's little wrinkled hand swallowed up by Steve's other palm.

"Your house, Steve, you have to go first," Ollie says.

Rogers turns bright red and clears his throat twice.

"Uh. I'm really thankful for. This," he says, staring around the table at them all, and almost, almost making the sunrise smile. "Everything and everyone here. Just. This."

His voice sounds a little hoarse, and he gives Barnes's hand a small shake.

"The defeat of rat bastard landlords!" Ollie shouts, and they laugh. "A cozy Turkey Day, and the hope that the Lions will lose next week."

"That Steve hosted so I didn't have to sell any first editions, and the fact that we didn't blow up," Lidia says.

She winks at Barnes's glare.

"Oh, my, this has been a big year," Esther says. "Last year it was just the three of us and one scrawny little bird -"

"Remember when Eleanor jumped on the table and ran off with an entire wing?" Lidia laughs.

"Why do you think she isn't here?"

She squeezes Barnes's metal fingers.

"This is better. I agree with Steve. I'm thankful for this."

And then they're all staring at him.

This was your idea, Barnes. Suck it up.
"I have a list," he says, "of good things. Didn't really remember about good things, at first. The first thing on the list was a mocha."

They laugh. Good.

"Hot baths, grilled cheese. Things that are good no matter what, even when the mission's hard or bad stuff happens. Got a list of good things and a list of people to tell them to. That's what I'm thankful for."

And then everybody sniffs a little bit, and Rogers hugs him around the shoulders (ouch), but in the moment, it's not too bad.

Not with that scare earlier as a direct comparison, anyhow.

Despite all the obstacles, Foolproof Thanksgiving turns out to be an excellent guide for dinner preparation by two morons who have no idea what they're doing and only 3 hands. Everything is delicious.

They eat until everyone groans (even Rogers), then crowd around the television to watch yet another cat team (Panthers) demolish a non-cat team (Cowboys), as is appropriate. Barnes and Lidia put their feet up on the coffee table and stretch out. Esther sends Rogers across the street to fetch her coffee maker so they can all have a hot drink with their cheesecake. By the third quarter of the game, Esther and Ollie are sound asleep.

"Do you have a blanket for him, Steven?" Lidia asks. "Poor Ollie is cold all the time, at home."

Steve covers both him and Esther, and the rest of them watch football very quietly.

"I have no idea what's going on," Barnes says – not that he doesn't enjoy it. The field is very green.

"This game is unfathomable," Lidia says, "starting with the fact that it's called 'football' and they're hardly ever allowed to use their feet."

"Exhibit A why baseball is better," Rogers says.

"Deny," Barnes says.

It's funny to watch Rogers be outraged while trying not to awaken sleeping old people.

They pack up containers for the Olds and walk them home in the dark. Ollie had gotten pink-cheeked and smiling during the day at Steve's apartment. It's distressing to see how quickly he goes silent and shivers when they get inside the dumpy building. Barnes and Rogers have made many repairs, but the building is intrinsically drafty.

It's a puzzle to work out.

Despite the satisfaction of a non-ruined holiday and cat teams winning games, Barnes's brain rebels against the stressors of the day by showing him images in his sleep: explosions, bodies going to pieces, confusion and noise that he cannot escape.

"Bucky!"
Barnes opens his eyes in time to watch Steve vault down from the sleeping loft like a frantic gymnast.

It's a damn good thing the gym is on the first floor, or the sound of his landing would give the neighbors a heart attack.

Rogers stands over him, breathing a little heavy, eyebrows drawn together.

"I'm awake," Barnes says.

"Bad dream, buddy?"

"Yeah."

"Midnight snack?"

It's actually 0214, but.

"Yes."

They make tiny sandwiches of leftovers, piled on the excellent dinner rolls that they made themselves with their impressive food-preparation skills.

Two more things to add to the good list: Thanksgiving leftovers piled on one sandwich, and immediate assistance to make bad dreams go away.

Pretty good first holiday.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to guinevak for her most excellent beta skills!

(Several of my personal biases are evident in this chapter.)
Happy New Year to those of you on the Gregorian calendar! I'll try to get the holiday-related chapters up without getting TOO far past them all.

Thanks, as always, for being the most excellent of commenters. May 2016 heap joy on your heads.

xoxo,

owlet

The day after the holiday is grey and windy. Unpleasant for stillness, so Barnes wears his running clothes and is lapped 34 times by Rogers as he walks. He would reclaim his dignity by running, but running jars his shoulder. Recovery is annoying.

Being lapped by a sprinting giant starts out irritating, but Rogers is so happy that Barnes can't keep it up. Happiness is mission-compliant.

"Hi, Buck!" Rogers says 56% of the time. Also: "doing okay?" (24%), "on your left" (14%), "terrible day, isn't it?" (3%), and "man that tea's gonna taste good" (3%).


Barnes is collecting data to determine whether it is hilarious or maddening to endure the reactions of the Starbucks employees every time he and Rogers enter the shop together: the enthusiastic "hey"s, winks, and remarks such as "you guys have a good day now" and "enjoy" said in tones suggestive of some sort of touching-related agenda.

On one hand, no way. On the other hand, it makes Steve's face do highly amusing things.

They pass by coffeeshop Pronoun, whose sign says, 'Make Up for Yesterday's Excesses with a Wheatgrass-Algae-Kale Frappe!'

People drink grass in the future.

Deny.

"Every time I pass this place, I think it looks nice, until I see their specials board," Rogers says.

"Agreed."

Barnes can interpret the look Rogers gives him. It is 'I still can't believe you followed me around and some day I'm going to smash your face in, but right now the day is too excellent for hitting.'

On that count, recovery is pretty convenient.
And in the afternoon, flying Sam returns for another visit. Barnes can see flying Sam watching him. Still assessing. Protecting Rogers.

Rogers tells flying Sam about the incident with the thermometer alert. It makes flying Sam's eyebrows bob up and down, and he purses his mouth.

"How'd you handle that, Barnes? Afterward, I mean."

"Esther put me on football duty with Ollie. Ollie said football's a required activity. Ate snacks. Focused on returning to baseline."

"How'd you feel about it?"

Query unclear.

"Like a dope."

"So you're upset with yourself?"

"No."

Flying Sam rolls his eyes and gestures. Ugh, so many words.

"Severe overreaction. Could've caused awkwardness if Steve and the Olds had not chosen to be amused. I'm not good with surprises. Logical response to long-term experience and HYDRA coming after me two weeks ago."

Flying Sam shakes his head.

"How are you doing this?"

Shrug.

"Unknown."

"As I keep saying," Rogers butts in, radiating smugness out of every pore, "Bucky can do anything he sets his mind to."

He smirks.

"Because he is more stubborn than a bulldog with a rat."

Is that a compliment.

Assessing: given Rogers's own considerable obstinacy, it probably is.

"Thanks."

Rogers and flying Sam laugh. Good job, Barnes.

Sigh. Confirm.

But he can see that it will take time and more input for flying Sam to attain comfort. His words are kind, but his eyes are sharp, like his codename.

Flying Sam has seen many people recover from past physical and emotional injury. What does he know that Barnes and Steve do not.
"Ollie says that I have the battle fatigue," Barnes says.

Flying Sam blinks several times.

"They call it PTSD now. Post-traumatic stress disorder. But yeah. I'd say so, after everything you've gone through."

"Can I recover."

"Bucky," Steve says.

Flying Sam looks surprised.

"I don't know, Barnes. Depends on a lot of different things. How much work you can put into it. And I read that file on you, man. There's no telling what kind of damage there is in your brain."

That is not the optimal response. Barnes identifies: disappointment.

If he always jumps at shadows and cringes away from touch. If his memories remain separate from him.

If Rogers tires of it all.

Mission. I need your help.

But the mission says nothing.

"You okay, Bucky?"

Unknown. What defines okay.

"Hey. Barnes," flying Sam says.

He reaches toward Barnes's arm but stops before he touches. Which of course Rogers sees, and which of course makes Rogers frown.

"Hey," flying Sam says again, "everybody's recovery is different. A lot of it's in your control. You just keep trying until you find the things that make you feel safer."

"Like the Olds."

That must be a good answer, because flying Sam smiles briefly.

"Right. Like the famous Olds, whom I haven't met yet. You've got them, and you've got Steve. That's a better start than most people have."

That's encouraging. Flying Sam knows many things that lessen worry.

"Do I also have you."

Boy does that make Rogers happy. Why. Flying Sam merely looks surprised.

"Well, I can't be your therapist, man. The ethics are squirrely. You can't counsel someone you know personally."

"Don't want therapy."
"Barnes. You're gonna need therapy."

Barnes has had therapies. Therapies are to be avoided. He finds it hard to believe that flying Sam would administer therapies. Flying Sam is too kind. Additionally, there was no sign of therapeutic devices in the VA building, and none of the vets walked funny or screamed outside their talking sessions. No one left the building with fresh bandages. Those are standard sequelae of therapies.

"Deny."

Flying Sam looks up at the ceiling. Barnes looks up too, but nothing has changed. It's still ductwork and cement.

"Yeah, okay," he says. "Yeah, you can call me about stuff if you need help."


"Texting is better."

Flying Sam has highly mobile eyebrows.

"How do you text with that thing?"

"Sam," Rogers says, as if Barnes would be surprised that he has a metal arm.

"I have excellent fine motor control," Barnes texts to flying Sam, then says, "also, I usually use my right hand."

Flying Sam's text alert is a song. It is not one of the standard ringtones supplied with the phone, which means that he programmed it in himself. His knowledge base is so impressive. It makes Barnes wish he were better at asking questions.

"Wait," flying Sam says after grinning at the text, "how do you have my number?"

"Well," Rogers says, "I guess I'll go across the street and get everybody wrangled for dinner!"

And sprints for the door.

Thanks a lot, Rogers.

"That dude loves ducking out of uncomfortable conversations."

Assessment: 3000% agreement.

"Confirm."

Flying Sam laughs.

"Okay, man, I won't ask how you have my number. But it's polite to ask, all right?"

Courtesy is important.

"Okay."

They go to dinner at the little café with the Olds, whose Thanksgiving calories have gone straight to their brains, making them 18% funnier even than usual. Lidia tells the story of Barnes's overreaction all over again, with a great deal of arm-waving and exaggeration.
"Oh, Lidia, we did not fly through the air like action heroes," Esther says.

"You kinda did."

Rogers. Such betrayal.

"Probably landed on your bad shoulder too, right?" flying Sam says.

"Yeah."

"That's how it always goes. Like the universe has to kick you while you're down."

Judging by everyone's smile, that's a joke, but Barnes doesn't get it.

Then Esther and Sam compare menus from the day before. Flying Sam's family must be enormous: there were 17 dishes. They made bread out of corn.

There is so much Barnes doesn't know.

"Keep it up, Barnes," flying Sam says at the end of the day, "you've got a good start."

It is a good start, and there are many small indications of mission compliance. No further sign of HYDRA (for the moment), and setting a routine with Rogers. There's too much exercise in said routine, but Barnes is hardly surprised by that. His shoulder slowly regains strength. Pain levels lessen.

Rogers demonstrates uncharacteristic patience. He asks questions one or two at a time. Many of them start with 'do you remember.'

Mostly, Barnes does not. Even when he does have snatches of memory downloaded by the briefing, sometimes they feel close and fragile, as if speaking of them might make the images break into pieces and fade away.

He shrugs a lot. Rogers pretends not to mind.

The cold and the rain keep them indoors too much. Even visiting with the Olds can't take the whole day, and Rogers does not share Barnes's desire to sit still in a chair and read all day. Rogers is looking a little squinty around the eyes by the fifth day after Thanksgiving.

And Barnes does not have time for it. There's yet another damn holiday coming up. He has research to do.

So he is almost glad to see the text come in from the redhead reading, 'ETA 4 min.'

She'll definitely shake up the proceedings, anyhow.

After 3.5 minutes, Barnes braces himself. Rogers only has time to say “Bucky?” once before the door buzzer goes off, and success: Barnes has not produced even a single knife.

“How’s the shoulder, Barnes?” she asks.

“How’s the shoulder, Barnes?” she asks.

“Great. I’m going to borrow Steve for a sec.”
There is no logical reason to have a conversation in the bathroom. How do they both fit. She probably has to stand on the toilet.

And it’s not as if he can’t hear every word, even when they whisper.

“What are you trying to say, Natasha?”

“That even the sainted Captain America needs two minutes to breathe.”

“He’s not a burden.”

What.

“Steve. What about you?”

“I’m fine.”

“In the whole time I’ve known you, you’ve maybe been fine for half an hour total, and only when cake was involved.”

What kind of cake.

“Come on.”

“Just go for a run, Steve.”

“Only if Bucky says it’s all right.”

“It’s okay,” Barnes calls out.

All noise in the bathroom stops. After 20 seconds, the door opens abruptly, and they march out, both with angry expressions.

Why is Romanoff not laughing. Romanoff not laughing means nothing good.

“You’re sure, Buck?”

Shrug.

“Keep your phone on and wear the grey sweatshirt.”

“Jesus, Buck.”

But he does. Barnes puts his earbud in. He waits for the slam of the door downstairs before he takes a breath to face whatever problem she has brought with her.

“What.”

Romanoff blinks.

“You have me alone,” he says. “Bad news?”

He can think of a large number of bad news items: a new HYDRA cell, the government coming after him, another batch of intel about the nefarious deeds of his past. Information that he carries a bomb in his head or a canister of nerve gas in his arm.

She frowns.
“No, Barnes. Why do you think that?”

“You’re not laughing. You usually laugh, even if it’s just on the inside.”

She sighs and sits down.

“I’m sorry, Barnes. I’m just grumpy.”

Oh.

“Okay.”

They sit for 75 seconds.

“Do you want to bake?”

Romanoff’s gaze is a little like cat Eleanor’s as she tilts her head to the right.

“Why would I want to bake?”

“Calming activity. Methodical progression of steps with a defined ending. Like cleaning guns. But my gun oil is across the street.”

There’s her secret laugh. Well done, Barnes.

Sigh. Confirm.

“I hate to cook,” she says, “but I’ll watch you.”

“Accept.”

Romanoff sits at the kitchen island and watches. Her gaze has less weight than Rogers’s. She is testing him, but she has no expectations. Her task is to ensure that he is not a danger. It’s a reasonable task.

“Peanut butter or chocolate chip.”

“Why not both?” she says.

She might be a brat, but she’s a highly intelligent brat.

While he mixes, she rummages through Rogers’s cabinets, watching sidelong as he edges out of arm’s reach every time she moves. She finds what she’s looking for and makes tea: two mugs. She turns down milk for hers but adds sugar. She sits down again, 1.1 m away.

Peanut butter cookies with chocolate chips: approved.

“I think we were trained by some of the same people,” she says in a voice so light and careless that it is an obvious tell.

She is slippery in a way he is not, but there are similarities in –

Wait.

No, wait.

Statement: trained by the same people. Self trained by HYDRA. Conclusion: she was also HYDRA.
Where is Steve.

Pulse: increased 32%. Respiration: increased 28%. Weapons on person: 6. Location: kitchen, items suitable as weapons, 43.

“Barnes,” the woman says from 3.8 m away, “tell me what’s going on in there.”

Internal structures of metal arm tightened. Points of egress: front door, living room window, bedroom window. Run west, away from the Olds. Where is Steve. Run away from Olds, hide, regroup to locate target, protect.

Protect target. Protect self.

“Barnes,” the woman says, then, “soldier. Report.”

The mission is not here to help him.

“Report.”

“Intelligence acquired,” the soldier reports. “Assumed ally revealed to be former enemy. Probability of infiltration –“

Probability unknown. Conflicting data.

“Probability undetermined. Return to HYDRA refused.”

No code has been used. Self retains control. Options: 1. Query for further information. 2. Run. 3. Knife positioned to the left of the sternum between the fifth and sixth ribs, 3 kg of force exerted.

Self retains control. Choices remain.

“Barnes,” the woman says from 2.2 m away, “what you’re doing now. What’s going on inside. I did that too.”

“Probability of infiltration.”

“Zero percent, Barnes.”

Recall: this woman tried to help Steve walk out of the hospital, though she is half his size. She did not interfere when he tore apart the tank and the chair. She directed building JARVIS to assist him.

She is still here, 1.8 m away.

Barnes sets down the knives in his hands, and Romanoff relaxes her stance.

“I thought you knew,” she says. “I figured you’ve read all the HYDRA files I dumped on the internet.”

Pulse decreasing. Respiration decreasing. Identified: tunnel vision, body chilled by sweat.

“Only remember the ones about Steve.”

“That’ll get easier,” she says, “you’ll get into the habit of remembering things, and it won’t take so much effort.”

That will be nice if it’s true.
“Ask Steve to tell you about me. He’ll gloss over too much, but you’ll believe him more.”

“Okay.”

“Barnes.”

He forces himself to meet her eyes. Her expression is sad.

“I’m sorry,” she says, as if she were the one who just stood around brandishing knives.

He feels very tired all of a sudden.

The oven timer goes off. The distraction is welcome, though by the time Barnes is done lifting warm cookies off baking sheets, the discomfort of his shoulder is such that his hand shakes.

“Let’s sit down,” Romanoff says, “I’ll take the plate.”

Rogers’s voice crackles over the earbud:

“On my way back, Bucky.”

Barnes puts the knives away.

“You did well,” she says when they’re seated, well out of arm’s reach from one another, the plate of cookies in the middle of the coffee table like a truce.

“Self-control is another thing that gets easier with time. But you did well, just now.”

Doubtful. But neither of them is dead, at least. Rogers would be upset to return from his run and find either or both of them killed.

“If things get out of hand, you can let me know,” she says, “I’ll help if I can.”

There is no secret laughter when she says this. Instead, she still looks sad. What is the sadness. Conjecture: she is disappointed in his violent behavior. It is kind of her to compliment him and offer to assist him despite her disappointment.

“Thanks,” he says.

Rogers returns from his run with Starbucks, which Barnes definitely doesn’t deserve, but the gesture is so kind that Barnes’s eyes feel a little prickly. Pulse returned to baseline. Respiration returned to baseline.

“Who made cookies?” Rogers asks.

Vocal tenor indicates happiness.

“Barnes, of course. You wouldn’t want to eat anything I baked.”

“Jeez, maybe you need to come over and make me go for a run more often.”

Only if there aren’t going to be any more episodes of upset.

She will probably say no, anyhow.

“Any time, Steve,” she says.
Romanoff is a very confusing person.

“And another thing you should know,” she says when Rogers goes to shower, “Stark has this neighborhood crawling with security.”

“Stark?”

He doesn’t mean to say it aloud. But really. Stark?

“I’ll tell him how surprised you are, he’ll hate it,” she says with a grin. “But you’re not the only one looking out for Steve now. It’s okay to take a little time to look out for yourself.”

“How good are they.”

She laughs.

“You’re a tough damn customer, Barnes. Ask JARVIS to send you their schedules. But I think you’ll approve. There’s a pretty tight net around Vinegar Hill. They already caught a couple of single operatives.”

Shit.

“Designation.”

“One was surveil only. The other was armed to his teeth with semi-automatics and hollow-point magazines.”

And he didn’t even know. How many more will there be.

She said caught, Barnes.

“Sorry,” she says, “I thought that would be good news. To know you have backup.”

Backup that he knows nothing about. Who trained them? How much experience do they have? Who did the vetting?

“Don’t glare at me, Barnes. You may not think much of Stark, but these people were hand-picked by Maria Hill. You haven’t met her yet, but you’ll love her. She’s terrifying.”

Anyone the Widow thinks is terrifying might pick suitable security.

“Just ask JARVIS,” Romanoff says, “god, you’re a sourpuss.”

“Oh yes, Sergeant,” building JARVIS tells him later via the earbud, “I would be happy to provide you with personnel files and schedules. I think you’ll approve of Ms. Hill’s choices. We are doing everything possible to assist your recovery by ensuring your and the Captain’s safety.”

And the setup is actually. Not bad. Barnes texts a couple of suggestions regarding empty buildings and that one spooky alley over by the docks, and the patrol routes are updated almost in real time. The people are a mix of ex-military, police forces, and one kindergarten teacher (who is actually former Mossad).

The Olds’ building is part of their priority watch-list.
Is this Stark. Or Romanoff. Or this Hill person whom he’s never met. They are protecting Steve, and him, and even the Olds, without asking anything in return.

It is. Gratifying is not the correct word. He feels shy in the face of it. He does not understand, but it’s always good to have backup.

He hopes they will make in time if he’s the one who poses the danger. In the meantime, he regulates his breathing. He sets for himself the task that flying Sam suggested: determining the parameters that produce safety.
The calendar is planned inefficiently. It makes no sense to have major holidays crammed so close together. There are so many tasks to perform. And Rogers feels no sense of urgency. December 1 comes and goes with no sign of decorating or gift-buying or changing playlists to the correct music.

Even at the grocer, where the loudspeaker is playing the song about hanging evergreens on the walls while laughing, and Barnes stands next to a display of snack items in red and green packaging, staring pointedly, Rogers only says,

"If there's something on that rack you want, Buck, get it. I don't want to hang out here all day."

Barnes's last straw is the card from Stark. It's so big that it barely fits in the mailbox, and when Rogers opens it, an alarming amount of snowflake-shaped confetti fountains out, all over Rogers's shoes.

"What the hell?" Rogers says, then "ugh, Tony's Christmas party. I guess I have to go in the interest of team solidarity. Great."

Barnes gestures for the card. It's extremely fancy: raised silver gilt text and images on thick cardstock. The invitation is printed with Rogers's name and has "+1 evil boyfriend" written to one side in spiky black handwriting.

What.

"You do not have to go, Bucky. I strongly recommend against it, in fact. Unless you like crowds and loud music."

Sounds like a recipe for catatonia or a knife outbreak.

"Deny."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. 'Evil boyfriend.' Jesus, Tony."

Stark obviously has hostile feelings toward Barnes. Understandable, if problematic.

Nonetheless, watching Rogers kick glitter off his shoes unlocks some words.

"When do we put up our tree."

What does that startle you, champ?

"You want a tree?"
What.

Of course I want a tree. With lights on it. And gifts. Gifts are on the list of good things Steve, what is your problem.

"You don't want one."

"I dunno, Bucky. It seems like a lot of fuss for just one day."

And the briefing gets mad. Barnes was previously unaware that the briefing was capable of emoting, but his brain feels hot with its anger, and it throws images at him in such quick succession that he has to sit on the floor by the mailboxes in that pile of confetti.

"Bucky?"

- standing close together with a tiny baby Steve, staring up at a lighted shop window piled high with toys
- a half-bare little twig sitting in a saucepan, hung with newspaper cut into seasonally appropriate shapes and small drawings, with a bright red sock draped over the top branch.
- a barn, an overturned horse trough with an alarming number of candle stubs stuck to the top, Rogers grinning hugely as he pulls a couple loaves of fresh bread, a bottle of brandy, and half an honest-to-god ham out of an ammo locker. Cheering. Dernier singing in a clear tenor.

"Bucky! What is it?"

Barnes glares up at him and lets the briefing’s anger color his voice.

"Steve. You love Christmas, you asshole."

Then Steve sits down too.

Oops, did we go too far. He looks a little damp in the eyes.

"You remember that?"

Barnes describes the pictures.

"Bucky. Wow. I can't. Wow."

Rogers messes with his hair, sighs heavily, and looks at the ceiling.

It's comforting to know that he also sometimes has to take a minute to compose his words.

"I did love it," he says. "God, those are some of my best memories. You and me parceling out our oranges and peppermint sticks, trying to see which one of us could make them last longer."

The briefing tells him: always, always Steve. And whatever he had left, he would break in half to share with the Bucky-person.

"Walking back to our apartment from Christmas dinner with your folks, wearing brand-new socks with no holes in them for once, carrying boxes your ma filled with enough leftovers for us to eat like kings for days."

He looks at Barnes. How does his face manage to look so happy and so sad at the same time.
"Christmas 1944, you scared up a pair of actual pre-war silk stockings. You could've traded those things for half your weight in food or booze, but instead you gave them to me to give to Peg."

His face turns red, and he clears his throat.  

"She was, uh, really happy to get them."

Good job, Bucky-person. Very generous.

"That was the last Christmas, Buck. You and me and Peg. We ran the mission on Zola's train on the twenty-eighth of December."

Oh. Steve.

"Spent a few months razing HYDRA to the ground – or so I thought – and went into the ocean in March. Next I knew, I was here. Surrounded by a bunch of strangers. It just all seemed so loud and crass. And I didn't feel like celebrating. What was there to celebrate?"

"What did you do."

Rogers shrugs. Barnes is not fooled by that shrug. It is not nonchalance. It is dismissal of strong feeling. He himself shrugs a lot.

"Stayed inside. Ordered pizza. Tried to find something on TV that wasn't a Christmas movie."

Mission-noncompliant. But injuring Steve by insisting on celebration is also mission-noncompliant. What is the correct action.

"How do you feel about not sitting on the floor in the foyer?" Steve asks.  

"Good."

He pats a lot, but Barnes is suspicious that he still has snowflake-shaped confetti stuck to his ass.

They gather their groceries and climb the stairs. Mission conundrum. To ignore the holiday is to suppress potential for enjoyment. But to force Rogers to celebrate is unethical.

"You really want a tree?" Rogers asks as they put the groceries away.

Another live plant in the apartment, hung with lights and festive decorations. Aesthetically pleasing.  

"Yes."

"Thanksgiving seemed to stress you out, Buck."

Stress is a logical response to new experiences, even if they're enjoyable.  

"But it was good."

A little of Rogers's tension lets go.  

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

"Okay, Bucky. We can get a tree."
Assessment: highly enjoyable activity. They walk north and east, until they find a small corner lot stuffed with conifers. The scent of evergreen is heavy on the air, and it fills Barnes's head with conflicting images: cold and snow, candlelight, reliable cover.

"Did I climb pine trees sometimes," he asks.

"You did, Buck. So you could see better. Saved our asses a hundred times from the tops of trees.”

Good.

It’s pleasing to stand surrounded by trees, even despite the cold.

“Okay Buck, you're in charge here. Are we going for small and sensible or big and outrageous?” Steve asks.

And he seems pleased to follow Barnes around the lot. His hands are shoved deep in the pockets of his jacket, and his smile is broad.

Rogers is a superhero, and this is effectively Barnes’s first experience of the holiday, so the tree must be suitable. He pulls trees out into the walkway to examine them. Must be challenging for people without a high-power metal arm to give each tree a sufficiently good shake.

“Maybe you oughta take every tree in the place, spread them all out in the street.”

Aw, you bored, Rogers?

The idea of a 2.7-m monstrosity is appealing. Rogers’s apartment has the ceilings for it. But there is one – just over 1.5 m tall and over 1 m wide – so fresh that its needles are soft.

Plans and logic are important to missions. They lend focus. But there is a role for instinct. Instinct is the part below consciousness that sees everything, that can predict correct action even when it’s not obvious.

(Mission. Please come back.)

Instinct tells him that this little tree is the correct choice.

“This one.”

“It’s a good little tree, Buck.”

“Yeah.”

Barnes pays for it with cash from his duffel. Feels good to use stolen HYDRA funds to purchase something intended solely to bring happiness.

It takes another 6 minutes for them to agree on white vs. multicolored lights. And while yes, the argument is sound that multicolored lights are more cheerful, white lights are classier, shut up, Rogers.

They set the tree up on the eastern side of the apartment, where Esther and Lidia will be able to see it from their windows.

“Okay, Rogers?”
It’s not the sunrise smile. But it’s a good smile just the same.

“How do you trust,” he texts to flying Sam.

“You practice. You take it slow.”

Then Rogers comes downstairs one morning wearing the sheep pants, and Barnes feels several internal parts of himself relax. Barnes knows he’s staring, but he can’t help it. He feels more secure just to look at them, with their dumb little fluffy cartoon ovines. For a minute it’s okay that the mission remains silent, because he has the sheep pants to assist him.

That’s important information, especially the following day, when they discuss a trip to Manhattan to look for tree ornaments and Barnes has a meltdown at the mention of Rogers’s friend Dr. Banner, even though it turns out that he is not a cutting-open-and-injecting kind of doctor or a make-headaches-and-passcodes kind of doctor, but something else.

Would he have freaked out if they had had the conversation while Rogers was wearing the sheep pants. More data is required.

They visit with Banner, who is not only a calm and friendly person but also green-thing Hulk: the one who ought to be taking point on all Avengers missions and not Steve.

They look at the apartment Stark made. Here is where Stark’s better nature shows: in a well-lit, comfortable space with an excellent view of Central Park and furnishings that suggest historical times while maximizing comfort. It is an ostentatious display of kindness.

Barnes goes in search of the tub he heard Rogers talk about, back in the days before contact. He remembers the desire to see a tub large enough for superheroes. And the tub is very large indeed. He lies down in it. He can just lie flat. That would be enjoyable, lying submerged in hot water. Showers are okay as long as they’re hot enough to boil shellfish, but a bath in this thing would be worthy of the good list.

“I see you like the tub,” Rogers says.

“Confirm. This is a nice place. It was kind of Stark to make it for you.”

“Could you see yourself living here?”

“Negative. Prior surveillance revealed that I am not welcome here.”

“I’m entirely certain that Mr. Stark is not fixed on that issue,” building JARVIS says in his ear, “and I would consider you and the Captain to be most welcome additions to my inhabitants.”

At the same time, Rogers says, “I’m pretty sure we could change his mind if you wanted.”
“Thanks,” Barnes says, mostly to building JARVIS.

Rogers narrows his eyes like he knows what’s going on.

“Let’s walk,” he says.

They walk to a fancy department store so crammed with people that Barnes starts to sweat. The totally obvious security detail that followed them out of building JARVIS is close by, but they are no help against the people crowded around. Stepping on his feet. Knocking into his arms and back.

And he only brought 5 knives.

“Hang on,” Rogers says, and pulls Barnes sideways by the sleeve.

They slide into a narrow space between 2 rows of Christmas trees, too tight for foot traffic. He’s still surrounded, but it’s by plastic and tinsel.

Improvement.

“Better?”

“Yeah.”

Barnes mops his face with his handkerchief. Rogers stares at the handkerchief with a desperate longing that will never be fulfilled.

There is an Avengers tree. It's hung with, among other things, tiny glass Stark heads and shields. Hilarious.

“Don’t even think it, Bucky.”

Barnes slips a shield into his pocket.

Otherwise they choose an assortment of ornaments in red, green, and silver from the baskets on the floor around the trees. It’s a pleasant interlude before they have to muscle their way back out to pay. Barnes is so distracted by the press of bodies that he inadvertently steals the shield ornament.

Well. That’ll be a fun conversation.

When they leave the store, Barnes remembers what flying Sam said about things that increase the feeling of safety. The F train does not fall into that category.

“Rogers. You hungry?”

“Uh, sure.”

Two broad, long-legged men moving with alacrity cause the sidewalk crowd to part in a pleasing manner that allows them to arrive at the Japanese restaurant in short order.

“The Lucky Carp,” Rogers says in a tone of skepticism, “looks like a dive.”

“Respect the Carp, Steve,” he says as he opens the door.

“What?”

“Hey!” the old man yells as Barnes enters and takes his seat at the sushi bar, “where you been?
Christmas is coming. How am I supposed to buy my daughter presents when my customers don’t come in and pay?"

Barnes feels so much calmer already that he makes a little smile.

Rogers sits down next to him. The old man looks at Rogers, blinks rapidly several times, then looks at Rogers again.

“I got Captain America sitting at my sushi bar,” he says.

“Yes sir, Steve Rogers,” he says in his Professional Voice and reaching out his hand.

The old man shakes hands, accompanied by a great deal of blinking and a faint, “Toshiro Hayashi.”

Then the old man frowns and smacks Barnes’s hand with his towel.

“You! Big scary-looking guy like you, bringing Captain America into my restaurant.”

He shakes his forefinger in Barnes’s direction.

“I knew I liked you.”

Feeling of safety: achieved. Barnes makes a bigger smile.

“Two usuals?”

“Yes.”

“Bucky,” Rogers says, “You have a usual?”

“Confirm. It’s good.”

In lieu of smashing Barnes’s face, Rogers drinks his tea. Good job, Rogers. Then the soup’s arrival inspires him to give up his thoughts of covert surveillance and his objections to such.

By the end of lunch, Barnes has regained his equilibrium and Rogers has demonstrated proper appreciation for the Lucky Carp’s food and personnel. Rogers lets all the Hayashis (father, daughter, and grandson) take a picture with him and he signs a menu.

“All that time I worried about you, Bucky, and you were out here making friends with every old person in the five boroughs.”

That is a vast exaggeration. But it’s true that the elderly make exceptional mission-assists. Especially in the food department.

“Speaking of old people,” Rogers says, wriggling in a highly suspicious manner, “I’m worried about Ollie. I mean, Esther and Lidia too, but mostly Ollie.”

“The cold bothers him.”

“Yeah, Buck. I remember what that’s like. How tired it makes you all the time, to never feel like you can get warm.”

Barnes has seen it: the way Ollie always falls asleep on Steve’s sofa, and the chilblains on his hands. His pale face suggesting sub-optimal health. He remembers the constant tug of annoyance and discomfort, before he purchased sufficiently warm clothing.
“How do we help.”

Rogers’s expression is sly.

“Let me show you something when we get home.”

They return to the apartment and drop off the bags of ornaments. Then Rogers cocks his head sideways, and they walk to the next door down the hall.

Rogers flips through his keys and unlocks the apartment.

Curious.

The apartment is empty. It’s larger than Rogers’s, with a sleeping loft at either end, each of them walled off for greater privacy, and a second bathroom and extra storage under the second.

Why does Rogers have a key.

“So while I had no idea that you were listening to every word and following my every move,” Rogers says with a sarcastic twist to his mouth, “I did get the hint from the tied-up bad guys in Sam’s yard that you were in the area. When I moved up here, I kinda thought that if I provided an empty space nearby, maybe you’d end up there.”

He shrugs.

“Like a mousetrap.”

Thanks for that, asshole.

It’s a much nicer apartment by far than the one in the dumpy building across the street. But for fuck’s sake, Steve, you can’t watch from a vantage point with no overlooking windows. Do I look like a complete idiot.

“Should’ve baited it with peanut butter,” Barnes says.

Rogers rolls his eyes, but his amusement is plain.

“Anyway, I was thinking. If you wanted to move to Manhattan. If you wanted. We could work it out. Try to convince the Olds to move in here, where they’d be more comfortable. Ollie in my place, Esther and Lidia here.”

And with a landlord consisting of a highly-rated corporation, not a dirtbag with shady connections. And a front door that consistently locks.

“Safer too.”

“Yeah, safer too.”

But to leave this place. To live in Manhattan with the crowds.

“Think about it, Buck.”

There’s a damn lot to think about when you stay awake all the time and interact with people.

“Okay.”
The tree looks real nice with all the decorations on it. Rogers predictably makes a long, boring speech in response to the discovery of the purloined shield ornament. Whatever, Rogers, too late now. Barnes hangs the thing front and center.

Rogers doesn’t move it.

Victory.

So they both set about their individual lists of stuff to think about. Barnes has it far worse. His list consists of:

- the Olds’ comfort and health
- whether to move to Manhattan to increase the Olds’ comfort and health
- what to purchase for everyone’s gifts
- how to purchase gifts when he is alone only for the periods of time required for bodily functions and hygiene
- what will be the next thing that sparks an inappropriately violent response

Rogers’s list:

- going to Stark’s party

It’s unfair, except for the fact that Barnes has worked it out that the Olds and cat Eleanor will come over that evening for dinner and Christmas movies. That will be excellent, and Rogers is right to be upset to miss it in favor of champagne, weird finger foods, and a million people talking to him.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance of rescheduling movie night? You could come with me to the party.”

About as much chance as of getting a suntan in Yakutsk.

“Sorry, pal.”

“You’re not sorry.”

Nope.

It’s highly amusing to listen to Rogers moan about going to the party, as if he were not a grown man with autonomy.

“Ugh, and I have to wear my tux.”

Rogers in a monkey suit. Excellent.

“Let me see it.”

“What? Why?”

A rude comment seems appropriate in this instance.

“You’re representing this household. Have to make sure you don’t make me look like a dumbass by association.”
Rogers makes a face that is intended to express irritation but is far too pleased to achieve it.

The tuxedo is horrible.

“What. Is that.”

Don’t act like you’re surprised, Rogers, you are not that dumb.

“What’s wrong with it? It’s fine.”

“Pal. You wear t-shirts in toddler size. Why are you wearing a suit cut for an elephant?”

“I do not wear baby shirts, Bucky. I just don’t like stuff flapping around me when I run, you don’t –“

“Shut it.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m going for reinforcements. You’d better still be in that monstrosity when I get back.”

“Monstrosity?”

Confirm, pal. That thing is 3 sizes too big, easy. Three years this guy has been back in the world, and who’s been taking care of him?

Big fat no one.

Across the street, Barnes climbs the stairs two at a time and pauses only long enough for Esther to squeak out half a syllable before opening the door.

“Do you sew?”

“No, Jimmy. I think Lidia does.”

“Thanks.”

He’s halfway down to the second floor before Esther calls out over cat Eleanor’s yowl of protest,

“Is everything all right?”

“Tailoring crisis.”

Lidia is curious enough that she moves more quickly than he has ever seen her to grab a small, flowered bag.

“Oh my,” she says at the sight of Steve standing in his living room in the giant tuxedo.

“Lidia,” Rogers says, “will you please tell Bucky there’s nothing wrong with this thing?”

“Oh Steven,” she says, “you sure you want me to lie to you like that? You look like a little boy wearing his papa’s suit.”

Ha, Lidia.

Rogers deflates. It makes the tuxedo look even more like a set of black drapes wrapped around him.

“It’s that bad?”
“Horrible,” Barnes tells him.

It is almost as much fun to watch Lidia boss Steve around as it is to do so himself. She’s a tall, solid lady, but it’s still like watching a bird try to boss a horse.

Ollie and Esther are not ones to pass up an opportunity to be nosy – they ring the door buzzer 4 minutes later, having given Lidia just enough time to get Rogers up onto a chair and start making chalk marks on his trousers while he wriggles and grimaces.

“My god, son, who talked you into that?” Ollie says.

“I’ve worn it four times and nobody said anything. It can’t be that bad,” Rogers grumbles.

“They felt too sad to say anything,” Esther whispers.

Poor Rogers.

Lidia takes 3 days to work on Rogers’s suit. Every time they see her she’s sewing, muttering to herself in a variety of languages.

On the day of Stark’s party, Barnes spends the afternoon preparing snacks and moving the litter pan he bought for cat Eleanor around in an attempt to maximize the balance between access and privacy. He fluffs throw pillows and sets blankets nearby for any elderly person who might find themselves inadvertently napping.

“I wish I were staying here instead,” Rogers says, “you’ll have more fun.”

“Yes.”

“Thanks for your sympathy, Buck.”

The Olds arrive at 1730 with Steve’s suit, several bottles of wine, a pan of shepherd’s pie, and a wicker basket full of howling cat. Cat Eleanor jumps out of the basket, cries out once, and scrambles under the sofa.

“Don’t worry, Jimmy,” Esther tells him, “she just needs a few minutes to adjust.”

Barnes has prepared for her discomfort. He sets down a wool mouse, 2 tinsel balls, and 4 ‘crunchie dental fishie treets’ on the floor in front of the sofa.

“You spoil that beast rotten.”

Ollie is one to talk. Barnes got a whole bottle of blue cheese-stuffed olives just for him.

Rogers makes a nice speech to Lidia, thanking her for her hard work. But 2.5 minutes later, he pokes his head out of the bathroom with a frown.

“Oh dear,” she says in a dry tone, “better let me see.”

“Nobody laugh,” Rogers says when he steps out.

Well it’s about time someone got that man in decent fitting pants.

“Good. Heavens.” Esther says, sounding as if she might lose consciousness.
Ollie clears his throat loudly.

“No, it seems my work is perfect,” Lidia says. “Turn around.”

Esther squeaks. Her cheeks are very pink.

Barnes vows never to wear anything other than fitted pants again.

“And the jacket.”

Lidia helps Steve on with the jacket, now slim at the waist, with sleeves that no longer hang below his knuckles. The tuxedo fits in a way that makes Rogers look even taller and more broad-shouldered than when he’s in his tactical gear.

“I feel as if I should sing America the Beautiful.”

“Esther! Jeez.”

“Well, Steve, I am not a disgusting pervert like some other people in the room, but I’ll tell you that you spruce up real nice.”

“Thanks, Ollie. So I’m not gonna embarrass the household?”

“You’ll do okay.”

Barnes lifts his sheet of building JARVIS’s sticky bugs from the coffee table and makes no effort to hide that he peels one off and sticks it to Rogers’s lapel.

“Bucky. Are you serious?”

What a question.

The final half-hour consists of Rogers grousing about having to go to the party, Ollie grousing at Esther and Lidia for ogling Steve, and Esther and Lidia giggling.

It’s okay, though. Cat Eleanor emerges from under the sofa long enough to eat her treats. Barnes puts down some more.

“Have fun,” he says when Rogers’s car arrives.

Rogers scowls as if he can tell that Barnes is sassing him.

Oops.

His evening is excellent. Ollie gives Barnes a cribbage lesson over snacks, and cat Eleanor comes out during dinner. She sniffs everything, walks along the back of the sofa, and flops down in the middle of the floor.

While they eat, Barnes listens to Rogers at the party, courtesy of building JARVIS’s signal boost.

“Merry Christmas ladies, Rogers didn’t show up in his potato sack!” Stark says, then, “stay away from Pepper.”

“Aw, great. Now all I need is for Thor to show up, and the whole world’ll forget I exist. As usual.” That voice is familiar. Romanoff’s arrow guy. So the feminine laughter in response to that could be
Romanoff. The lady laughs aloud. Will wonders never cease.

Another female voice:

“Why Steve Rogers, you look obscene. Hold still, I’m putting my hands on you.”

What.

“Maria. Stop,” Rogers says.

“Oh calm down, I’m not serious. I mean, I am going to check out these goods, but I’m not serious about it. You know I’d snap you like a twig.”

This Maria Hill person gets more and more interesting. Barnes can’t decide whether he wants to kill her or make her his best friend.

(Second best, mission. I remember.)

Poor Rogers, stuck in a crowded room with crappy background music and endless small talk. If he paid any attention to the yammering in his earbud, Barnes would go to sleep from sheer boredom. Meanwhile, Barnes learns valuable information.

“Tonight’s movie and the rest of our catalog are available for purchase online at our web site,” the announcer says, and Ollie responds,

“Thank goodness for online shopping. So much better than the days of schlepping up and down trying to find what you need and then hauling it all home.

“Not to mention all the rare books available in other cities,” Lidia says.

This is a solution to his gift-shopping problem.

“How do you do that.”

While the unfortunate sailor in the movie makes the unwise decision to dream about fine foods while lost at sea, Ollie pulls up a web site and demonstrates how to search for items, enter a credit card number, and place an order.

It is possible to live one’s whole life in the modern world without ever going outside. Ingenious. Of course, secret ex-assassins back from the dead have no official identity, and thus no cards linked to bank accounts.

He does, however, know the numbers of a great many HYDRA bank accounts: sources of assistance that were always included as part of initial mission programming. And he has a mission-assist that is probably capable of obtaining that money for him.

“Certainly, Sergeant,” building JARVIS responds to his text, “it will take several moments to ensure that the withdrawals will not be traced.”

Six minutes later, Barnes’s phone vibrates with building JARVIS’s message:

“You are now in possession of approximately seventeen million dollars of former HYDRA funds.”

That is. A great deal more than anticipated.

“Do not worry, Sergeant. The money was sent through a series of networks so convoluted even I
could barely follow myself. I left 3.14 units of denomination in each account. It seemed appropriate to make a statement.”

No kidding.

“You’re a real pal, building,” Barnes texts.

“I am pleased to be so.”

Building JARVIS sends the account number and accompanying fake billing information, and Barnes finds himself able to buy pretty much whatever he wants short of a fighter jet.

By the end of Christmas in Connecticut (good), he has a plan of action. By the end of the version of A Christmas Carol made with puppets (surprisingly affecting), he has completed his gift shopping. His idea for Steve seems so logical in retrospect. It’s amazing he didn’t think of it right away.

When Rogers returns home, Ollie is asleep in the armchair under a blanket, and the women are leaned against one another on the sofa, snoozing. Barnes has piled throw pillows on the floor and sits with a lap full of cat Eleanor, watching a highly enthusiastic English lady with a lot of cleavage make a yule log cake.

Rogers looks tired and harassed when he opens the door, but he takes in the scene, and his face relaxes into a smile.

“I’m glad to be home,” he whispers.

Barnes pats the floor next to him, and Rogers flops down. When the Olds wake up, the plate of brownies is empty, cat Eleanor is stretched out with half her body in Barnes’s lap and half in Steve’s, and they have learned a great deal about the Christmas food traditions around the world.

Highly satisfactory.
Online shopping is satisfying on several levels. It is satisfying to anticipate the pleasure of mission-assists to receive gifts. It is wholly convenient to request gifts from the comfort of the target’s sofa. And, of course, it is pleasing to know that HYDRA funds are being use to increase the enjoyment of ordinary citizens and HYDRA’s enemies, instead of to sow disaster and violence.

“What is this?” Rogers asks when the boxes start to arrive.

“Christmas gifts.”

Rogers’s face looks highly amusing when it registers surprise. Those eyebrows have a great deal of forehead to cover.

“That is a lot of boxes, Buck.”

Barnes has seen the displays and advertisements.

“A lot compared to what.”

Rogers blinks at him, then laughs.

“A lot compared to 1941. So I’ll just shut my mouth.”

Wouldn’t that be a Christmas miracle.

“Don’t worry, Rogers. They’re not all for you.”

That earns another laugh.

Because it is a season for giving, Barnes lets Rogers help wrap the gifts for the Olds. The one for cat Eleanor arrived in a box nearly tall enough to stand up in. They stick a bow on top of it and hide it in the coat closet. Too much wasted paper, otherwise.

Wrapping is a satisfying activity, involving straight lines and accurate proportions to prevent wasting paper. Rogers teaches him how to drag a ribbon across the open blade of scissors to make the ribbon curl. Barnes adds more ribbons to everything.

He shifts the packages around under the tree frequently: the boxes for Rogers add appealing uniformity when spaced out, but it makes Barnes’s face want to smile to stack them in one tower. Looks ridiculous.

Rogers shakes them frequently.

“What the hell could you possibly get me eight of, plus one tiny thing?”

Barnes identifies: anticipation. He thinks Rogers will find the gifts amusing. He hopes. There are only 3 boxes for him, but one is large and heavy and clearly contains some kind of equipment.

It’s tempting to rise in the middle of the night and open one edge of the wrapping to find out what the equipment is.
The 2.5-week span itself feels like a gift. There are no more loud noises or surprise revelations that challenge Barnes’s sense of safety. His right shoulder regains near-normal functionality. The security detail reports from building JARVIS show acceptable protection levels, and Stark calls Rogers to prattle for 6 minutes about the decreased North American HYDRA activity.

“It ruins Christmas for me a little bit that even those assholes celebrate it,” Stark says.

“Nah, it’s normal,” Steve says, “Nazis did the same thing.”

It can’t last. The bad guys will return to their villainy. And like flying Sam and Romanoff said, his own trouble spots won’t be going away any time soon. Mission’s still gone, still nothing more than a sensation of tightness in his chest.

But for now, Steve’s apartment is fragrant with pine and lit up at night, with affection and generosity wrapped in shiny paper underneath, and they see the Olds every day. And with one holiday meal under his belt and two working arms, Barnes feels only 8% increased stress levels about the prospect of Christmas dinner.

Barnes decides that he likes Christmas. The music is nice, too. Rogers sings along. The sound causes Barnes’s muscles to soften and his mental worrying to quiet.

“You always had a much better voice than mine, Buck,” Rogers says. “And you loved to sing.”

Barnes shakes his head. No way he’s going to warble in front of Rogers. He might sound terrible. The briefing has nothing for him on the subject.

He tries a little one day, when Rogers is in the shower: one of the slow religious tunes without too fancy a melody. It’s not a disaster, but his voice sounds scratchy. Partially successful experiment, no need to obtain further data.

The weather continues cold. With his good sweater and coat, Barnes doesn’t mind, but even Lidia is starting to look tired. The dumpy apartment building cannot maintain heat, even with the radiators going 24 hours a day.

They visit Esther and find her sitting on her sofa under a blanket.

“How can cat Eleanor be cold, with all that fur. But there is frost on the windows.

In the kitchen, he watches the steam from the kettle billow into the chilly, dry air. He thinks about the empty apartment across the street.

He thinks about the high security level inside building JARVIS, where few things short of a coordinated bombing attack could get through to harm Rogers (or himself). Where there are superheroes on site capable of preventing harm to Rogers if Barnes is the one trying to cause it.

He thinks about the way the Olds rub their hands together when they arrive at Rogers’s apartment, and how Lidia takes off her shoes and stands on a heat register.

It is a problem with an obvious solution. The solution makes a sensation like falling in his gut. But
the Olds are important. Their well-being must be protected. They are sub-targets. Rogers would agree.

Sometimes personal comfort must be sacrificed for the benefit of the mission.

Right.

He takes the tea (and the cookies – they were sitting out, surely Esther doesn’t expect him to ignore them) into the living room.

Rogers has a large lump under his sweater and a facial expression mingling delight with terror. One hand is pressed at the top of the lump, performing a motion suspiciously like scratching cat Eleanor’s head.

What.

“I’ve been abandoned for warmer climes, Jimmy,” Esther says with a grin.

“I do run pretty warm,” Rogers says. “It’s the metabolism.”

There have been numerous instances in which Rogers has been an enormous pain in the ass. Getting out of the hospital in DC and launching straight into calisthenics, for example. Running every day. Wandering around New York City as if the world were not full of villains looking to capture or kill him. Eating >50% of any given batch of cookies.

But this.

This is beyond the pale.

“Esther,” Rogers says, “please don’t let Bucky kill me.”

“Jimmy, if you break my teapot and use it to murder my friend, I’ll never speak to you again.”

Betrayal on all sides.

The lump under Rogers’s shirt moves, and cat Eleanor pokes her head out of the neck opening. She looks at Barnes.

“Mrrrt,” she says.

Barnes does not speak cat, but he can tell irritation when he hears it. He sets the tea tray down with a thunk and takes his own mug of tea to the armchair. Beings so willing to abandon him without a thought can reach for their own damn mugs. They can even, if they have a speck of empathy, stop their damn laughing.

“Sorry, Bucky.”

Rogers isn’t really sorry. If he were, he wouldn’t smile like that.

“Oh, Jimmy,” Esther says.

He drinks his tea. Tastes terrible.

After 3.5 minutes, Rogers says “ouch,” and cat Eleanor climbs down out of his sweater.

If she clawed him on the way out, perhaps cat Eleanor is not wholly awful.
She walks over to Barnes and applies a layer of hair to his lower legs. Then she jumps on his knee and gives him a short lecture on his behavior, making a few holes in his thigh for emphasis. Not that he feels in the least bit repentant. She should maybe think about her own behavior for a minute.

Once she’s been purring in his lap for several minutes, though, he’s willing to overlook her lapse. And maybe forgive Esther for that murdering comment. And maybe eventually forgive Rogers. Maybe.

But Esther continues to sit under the blanket, which she has pulled up to her chin. She works her fingers through the gaps in the knitwork and clutches her mug, holds it under her face to catch its warmth. Rogers sees Barnes frowning and slides over to sit closer to Esther. But it just solidifies Barnes’s idea. It can be another gift for the Olds.

They go back across the street, and Barnes feels his nose thaw in the steady warmth of Rogers’s insulated, centrally heated apartment. With two solid locks between them and the street. With locked mailboxes and a phone number staffed 24 hours a day for repairs and emergencies.

“We should move to Manhattan,” he says. “We should move the Olds in here.”

Rogers has been spreading peanut butter on bread, but he goes still for a full 27 seconds, his head ducked down.

You can believe it, pal. I said it out loud.

“You sure, Bucky?”

“I’m sure. It’s too cold over there. Too unsafe.”

“What about you? Are you going to be okay living in Manhattan? Living with all those people around?”

Shrug.

“Don’t know.”

The thought of it makes his throat feel closed up. But the Olds need it.

Focus on the good stuff, Barnes. Building JARVIS. The gym. That tub.

“We’ll make it work, Buck.”

Sure thing.

Rogers calls the efficient real-estate agent of Stark’s who found the apartment for him and makes an appointment for her to come over. Barnes considers best how to deal with a stranger’s arrival. He could monitor from across the street. Or he could suck it up and deal. She’s just one lady. It’s not like she’s HYDRA.

He decides to be reading when she arrives. So he can monitor without having to interact.

“Oh,” the young woman says when she catches sight of Barnes.

She’s small, with dark hair and thick-framed glasses, and her eyes don’t seem to know where to rest.
“That’s a friend of mine,” Rogers says.

Barnes lifts his book in greeting.

Rogers launches into his speech about the Olds. He takes the woman’s elbow and points out the building across the street.

“You can see what bad shape it’s in,” he says.

“Oh yes,” the woman says.

But she appears to be made nervous by Barnes’s presence. He watches her through his hair as she follows Rogers, murmurs at him about security deposits and leases.

Barnes makes note of the gun under the sofa cushion and the 5 knives within arm’s reach. The woman is creeping him out.

“So I was hoping,” Rogers says, “that we could work out some sort of thing where it looks like my friends are paying the rent, even though I’ll cover most of it.”

The woman says nothing. She frowns back and forth, from Rogers to Barnes and back again, and her fingers fidget with the edge of the folder she carries.

For shit’s sake.

“Is everything okay?” Rogers asks.

“Oh! Oh, sure,” the woman says in a chirpy voice, reaching into her voluminous handbag, “everything is just great, Captain Rogers! Also, I just wanted to say, sputnik.”

What.

Barnes feels his eyes rolling back in his head, and the muscles in his neck go slack.

Are you even fucking kidding me here.

This is going to be terrific. Great job, Barnes. Wonderful work, security people. How is it that Steven Grant Rogers and James Buchanan Barnes are the only 2 humans in all of history who can never catch one goddamn fucking break.

His body’s slowly collapsing, but anger is a still point of heat inside his chest, even while his brain tries to short out.

And then the anger is no longer still, nor a point, but a bonfire, rising up from under his sternum, so big that for a couple of seconds he can’t breathe, and his brain feels too tight.

But his brain is not too tight. He brain feels the correct size for the first time in a month, and he identifies emotion: joy.

CODE INVALID OVERRIDE

Mission!

CODE INVALID OVERRIDE SELF MAINTAINS CONTROL

Mission, you’re back!
Thanks, pal. You’re a lifesaver.

Barnes snaps his book shut. The woman has a gun pointed at Rogers, who wears a facial expression of deep disappointment. She is staring at Barnes with a grin that suddenly seems not so secure on that smug little face.

Poor thing.

You are correct as always, mission.

“Sputnik!” the woman says, “sputnik!”

“Aw, sweetheart,” Barnes says, “that shit doesn’t work on me anymore.”

Confirm, mission. Confirm, confirm, confirm.

“But that’s not fair!” the woman says.

Poor little numbnut.

Barnes goes back to his book while Rogers pulls the gun out of her hand and secures her wrists with her purse strap. She tries to bite him a couple of times, but for pity’s sake, if Rogers can’t handle himself against one tiny real estate agent, maybe he deserves some teeth marks.

Okay, mission. You’re the boss.

Barnes wants to laugh.

“Bucky. A little help here?”

Barnes calls building JARVIS to alert the security detail.

“Sergeant. Please accept my deepest apologies for this oversight.”

Poor building. Poor Stark. Neither of them responds well to the knowledge that a trusted consultant defected to HYDRA. She tells Rogers all about it, weeping on the floor under the onslaught of his how-could-you-have-failed-your-country-this-way face, while the security detail grimace at one another and trip all over their own feet in embarrassment.

Highly entertaining.

“It was just so much money!” she yells.

Too bad they hadn’t tried to pay her out of one of the accounts building JARVIS emptied for him.

Later he’s going to freak out about yet another HYDRA goon standing in his home, but for the moment, having all the parts of his brain back to working order is too great a relief. He reminds
himself not to smile as the security detail packs up the real estate agent for transfer and sweep the apartment for bugs. That’s the end of the ones Barnes had placed before contact, but no matter. He’s on site now.

He sidles close to Rogers. It’s okay to stand close, at the moment. All is right inside his head. Proximity cannot upset him.

“The mission is back.”

Rogers turns to look down at him. The briefing, also happy to be back to full staff, gives him images of standing close like this, talking so that no one else could hear. In some of them, he looked down at Rogers, instead of looking up.

“Yeah, Bucky?”

Whatever Barnes’s face is doing (trying hard not to smile), it prevents the pinchy face Steve usually gets at any mention of Barnes’s internal configuration.

“Yes.”

Rogers grasps his bicep, and it’s okay. It’s okay, acceptable touching.

“I’m really glad, Buck. Really glad.”

Rogers calls flying Sam to crow about Barnes’s successful staving off of yet another round of attempted reconditioning.

‘ARE YOU OKAY’ flying Sam texts to him.

CONFIRM

He thinks how to phrase it.

‘Got into a good place in my brain.’

‘Good job, man,’ flying Sam texts, ‘let me know if you need anything.’

He is an excellent mission-assist.

CONFIRM

Yes. Confirm.

Potts turns out to be the really scary one. She calls Rogers 2 hours later, her voice still full of frozen steel, to inform them that she obtained a detailed confession with names, dates, and dropoff points. She also cleared their plans with the building management company.

Barnes really likes Potts.

An envelope arrives via messenger the next day with new leases drawn up in the Olds’ names. Rogers folds them up and sticks them into red envelopes, the Olds’ names written in his best artist’s flourish. Barnes adds ribbons.

With the mission awake, Barnes feels prepared to deal with any contingency. It is as if the holiday
has arrived early.

The Olds come over on Christmas Eve, so Rogers can make up for having missed movies and snacks. There is an apparently endless supply of films available about the holiday. Lidia makes a vociferous case for modern ones on a channel called “Hallmark.”

“No way,” Ollie says, “I do not want to watch any garbage about some poor girl falling in love with a secret prince.”

DENY

“Monarchies are inherent oppressors of the working class,” Barnes says by way of support.

“Agreed,” Rogers says.

Poor Lidia, out of luck. They watch old movies instead. Barnes particularly likes the one about the old buddies from wartime where one has to do everything the other one says because of a lifesaving sacrifice. He stares at Rogers a lot during that one. Makes Rogers’s ears turn pink.

“Does anybody ever go to midnight Mass anymore?” Rogers asks around 2100, just about the time the Olds are looking ready for a tuck-in.

“As a Jew, no,” Esther says in a tone that sounds sharp, but Barnes knows it’s a joke.

“And Lidia’s a heathen atheist and I can’t stay up that late,” Ollie says. “But there’s St. Ann’s up the street. Or Grace Episcopal if you run Protestant.”

“I was just curious,” Rogers says. “Seems like church was a bigger deal back in the day. Nobody ever asked whether you believed or not. We all just went.”

“It’s the cynicism,” Lidia says. “Between the Holocaust and the Cold War and terrorism, nobody wants to believe in hope anymore. It seems too risky to reach out and try to make yourself part of a community.”

And they all look so sad, Rogers and the Olds. Mission-noncompliant. It is Christmas Eve. They have eggnog, and warm feet, and people singing on the television.

“We are a community,” he says.

CONFIRM

Esther smiles at him first. Her smile is infectious. A good kind of catching.

“We are, dear heart. You’re right about that.”

She tucks herself close against him to watch the end of the movie, and he doesn’t mind it.

“That was really good, what you said,” Rogers tells him after they’ve sent the Olds home and Barnes is preparing breakfast for the next morning. “About us being a community.”

“Thanks.”

Rogers leans against the counter, pretending to be Mr. Super Casual and failing utterly.

You sure about this moving thing, Buck? You gonna be okay not having them within walking distance?”
Barnes considers while he pours batter over pieces of bread. There are many potential difficulties, sure. But ultimately, the Olds can’t keep living in the dumpy building. It will have a negative effect on their health. Then they will die, and he won’t have any access to them.

AVOID

Confirm, mission.

“It will be helpful for them,” he says.

Which makes Rogers frown. Why.

“Okay,” Rogers says.

Barnes wakes at 0543, registering anticipation at opening the 3 packages with his name on them under the tree.

When will Rogers awaken.

Barnes waits on the sofa bed, listening, for 12 minutes but hears no evidence that Rogers is also awake. What is the proper action. Does he wait. Is it acceptable to wake Rogers.

Maybe it would be good to check and see how Rogers is doing.

CONFIRM

That settles it. He rolls out of bed and moves silently to the stairs to the sleeping loft. The noise his foot makes on the second stair is too faint to be heard by standard human ears, but,

“Bucky? You awake?”

Identified: relief.

“Yes.”

And Rogers appears at the top of the stairs, tousle-haired and grinning.

“Thank god, I’ve been waiting for half an hour. Merry Christmas!”

The target is identifiably happy.

Mission-compliant.

“Merry Christmas.”

It’s a good phrase to say. Barnes means it. Christmas may be a soft, civvie holiday full of sentiments that leave no room for attempts at world domination, torture, or general evildoing. But it’s a holiday meant to make space for kindness. And he has learned that kindness is a type of safety. That kindness can be a safe haven inside for the self, to protect the self and give it strength to stand up to cruelty.

It’s like a day made of sheep pants. Which is hilarious.

“You’re the master of ceremonies, Bucky.” Rogers says. “What do we do first? Breakfast? Presents?
Please say presents; I’m dying to know what’s in that stack of boxes.”

What a ridiculous question. Of course it’s going to be presents.

Barnes remembers what Rogers said that day in the foyer, so he notes satisfaction at the sight of Rogers’s smile and the rate of speed at which he approaches the tree. The mission started as protect. Then it expanded to include Rogers’s emotional well-being. To make Rogers happy is desirable. He has had enough unhappiness.

“Oh, Rogers says when they’re sitting on the floor under the soft white lights, “you have to go first. This one might be important later this morning.”

He hands over the large box.

Barnes shakes the thing for the 36th time since its appearance under the tree. As always, the faint clanking sound yields no clue about the box’s contents.

He unwraps.

“Jesus, Bucky, it’s not the Depression anymore. You can tear the damn paper, you don’t have to save it.”

Like that kind of commentary is going to make him unwrap any more quickly.

“Ugh, Bucky, you’re such an asshole.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Barnes still feels slightly giddy every time the mission speaks.

The box contains a coffeemaker. A large, Italian coffeemaker with an espresso component and a milk steamer. And an instruction booklet that is 56 pages long.

“Do you like it?”

It is a device that can be used to make mochas at home, any time of day. And plain coffee for the Olds. And who knows what else is waiting inside that instruction booklet.

And it belongs to him. To go with his 14 items of clothing, 2 pairs of shoes, and bag of weapons. It’s his.

“Bucky?”

“It’s. Great.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He had not anticipated such a strong reaction to receiving gifts. In lieu of saying something embarrassing, he hands Steve a box. Steve rips the paper off, opens it, and says, “what the?”

Barnes hands him another box. Steve opens it and starts to laugh. Barnes hands him another box.
By the bottom of the stack, Steve has to lie back on the floor and laugh while tears leak out of his eyes. Strewn around him on the floor are 8 pairs of pajamas:

- Pale blue with smiling, anthropomorphic milk cartons and toast
- Bright yellow with green tractors
- White with cartoon sushi
- Light brown with bipedal collies dancing in a kick line
- Bright red, printed all over with a moose wearing a smoking jacket and holding a martini
- Light grey with flying pigs and fluffy clouds
- Black with neon elephants
- Pink and green striped, with giraffes wearing crash helmets in the green stripes

Barnes feels almost as calm looking at them at he does at the sheep pants (which Rogers is wearing, well done, Rogers).

They were the silliest ones he could find. Each one means ‘safety.’ It means ‘home.’ It means ‘remember.’

GOOD JOB

Thanks, mission.

“Jesus, Bucky,” Rogers says, “these are hideous. I love ‘em!”

He folds all the pajamas and stacks them, then pats the stack. He looks pleased.

Barnes doesn’t even have to remind himself to smile. It just happens. Doing so unlocks words.

“The sheep pants helped,” he says, “that night with the reprogrammer. Part of me couldn’t believe that anybody wearing those things could be an appropriate target. Helped me to remember. To remain myself.”

“That’s why they’re important?”

“Confirm. They helped me remember. You are home.”

“Bucky.”

It’s okay to hug a little bit. On a holiday, when you’ve found a way to say something that needed to come out.

“You’re home too,” Rogers says in his ear.

CONFIRM

Confirm, confirm.

When he sits back, Rogers is in need of his final present. Barnes hands over the little box.

“Pretty sure it’s your turn, Bucky.”

“You need this one.”

Rogers opens the box to find two US Army-issue handkerchiefs, which he uses, but he’s laughing again, so it’s all good.
Rogers gives him a shirt identical to the one he had given Barnes before contact, that got ruined by the stupid HYDRA assholes. And a sketchbook, filled with scenes from their time together before cold storage.

The briefing loves it so much his head hurts a little. It can’t even manage to get a memory out to him, so the scenes are unfamiliar.

“It’s okay if you don’t remember,” Rogers says. “I’ll tell you about them any time.”

“I need to look at it for a while,” Barnes says.

“In a good way?”

“Yeah.”

“Take all the time you need.”

These new things that are his, that Rogers chose deliberately for him. And Rogers happy. And breakfast ready to go in the oven.

“Christmas is on the good-thing list,” he says.

“Yeah, Bucky. Thanks for reminding me of that.”

Steve’s going to have to wash those two handkerchiefs a lot. Barnes can tell already.

Using the ‘quick start guide’ and the bag of beans Rogers had hiding in his bedside table, it is possible to make a pot of excellent coffee without yet having read the 56-page instruction booklet. It is possible to tune out Rogers’s moaning and read the instruction booklet during the 45 minutes it takes for the French toast to bake.

In Rogers’s defense, it does smell great. Tastes even better – good thing he made 2 pans or there wouldn’t have been any left for the Olds.

Esther gives him a set of baking pans. Ollie gives him a toolbox, filled with the various tools Barnes has bought at the hardware store and left lying around the dumpy building: a whole other set of belongings that Barnes hadn’t even thought to claim. Lidia gives him 3 books: The Cookie Bible, The Baking Bible, and The Soup Bible. Despite their titles, he’s pretty sure they are not religious texts. But they each state that they contain >1000 recipes. He has a lot of work to do.

And maybe it’s good that they’re moving into building JARVIS. If he’s going to have this many belongings, he will need his own closet.

“Oh, Jimmy, no,” Lidia says when she opens his gift.

What.

He was so sure it was appropriate. A signed first edition of Master and Margarita in Russian conflates many of her interests in one.

“This is too much! I can’t take this. I only got you cookbooks!”

He looks at Steve.
“But the cookbooks are great.”

“I think she’s worried about the expense, Buck.”

“I most certainly am!”

Oh. Well. That’s no problem.

“Don’t sweat it,” he says, “all my money was stolen from HYDRA.”

“What?” Rogers says, but Lidia is already laughing.

“All my cash was stolen from a supply depot, and building JARVIS helped me obtain electronic funds from a number of HYDRA accounts.”

“How much money, Bucky?”

Don’t you take that tone with me, Rogers. I refuse to feel guilty about taking money out of the hands of the wicked.

“Plenty.”

“Bucky.”

“Oh, leave him alone, Steven, he’ll put it to much better use than HYDRA ever would.”

She leans over and kisses Barnes on the cheek.

“Thank you, Jimmy. My book is marvelous.”

“If we’re putting in requests,” Ollie says, “I want another sweater just like this one.”

He’s already wearing it, right over top the one he had on when he arrived.

Barnes pulls out his phone and orders another one.

Esther squeaks at the cat tree (“it’s taller than I am!”), and Barnes has to do more last-minute ordering at the discovery that she does not plan to share any of the first installment in her membership in the Cheese of the Month Club. So disappointing, Esther.

But what really makes the Olds go quiet are the envelopes.

They smile and look skeptical when Rogers hands them over, and it’s amusing to watch them read the leases with frowns and expressions of disbelief.

“What is this?” Esther asks.

“Only if you want,” Steve says. “But we thought.”

“We’ve been worried,” Barnes says.

“Worried?” Lidia asks.

“No amount of Bucky and me tacking up plastic is going to make that place warm,” Steve says. “And you guys can tell me all day that that landlord won’t bother you anymore, but I don’t like it.”

“It’s not safe,” Barnes says.
“But where will you live?” Esther asks.

“Avengers Tower.”

Barnes hates that name.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Esther says.

“Son,” Ollie says with an impressive frown, “this rent can’t be correct.”

“Who knew, this building turned out to be rent-controlled too,” Rogers says in a flat tone.

Ollie looks even angrier.

“Did Captain America just lie to me?”

“I don’t see any Captain America around here,” Rogers growls.

This is not going right.

Nobody gets to ruin Christmas, dammit.

“If there’s one thing HYDRA would hate to see its money spent on,” Barnes says, “it’s the increased comfort and safety of ordinary, voting citizens.”

They all turn to stare at him.

“What?” Rogers says.

“What?” Ollie says.

“Jimmy, what?” Esther says.

“You terrible thing,” Lidia says, and laughs.

Finally.

“Come on, Lidia,” Barnes says, “let’s go check out next door”

No one’s going to be left behind at that one. As they file out the door, Barnes signals to Rogers: cat tree.

Barnes opens the door, and morning sun is streaming through the open curtains. The place is a little dusty, but it looks huge in the morning light, and it’s warm.

“Oh my,” Esther says, “this really is big enough for both of us.”

“And my books,” Lidia says.

They wander the apartment, commenting with approval over the size of the closets and the ability to obtain privacy. Barnes feels easier when he sees Esther in the kitchen, running her hand over the granite countertops. He feels almost certain when he sees Lidia with her arms outstretched, stepping across the wall, measuring.

He knows for sure when Rogers drags in the cat tree and sets it up in front of the large, west-facing window, and Esther snorts.
“All right, you two,” Esther says, “you’ve managed us very nicely. We’ll behave and do as we’re told.”

“What?” Ollie says.

“Hush yourself, Ollie Peters,” Esther says. “These boys are being unbelievably generous to us. You’ll move in here so that cough will clear up and your chilblains go away, and you. Will. Like. It.”

For 3 seconds it appears that Ollie might decide to be stubborn about it, but he’s standing in a sunbeam in his giant sweater, and his physical comfort is obvious.

“Oh, fine,” he says. “All right, it’s really wonderful, thank you.”

Which calls for more French toast. And more coffee. And eventually, more movies. By the time Barnes has to get the roast beef in the oven, he has lost his kitchen helpers to measuring tapes next door.

He doesn’t mind.

Chapter End Notes

The working title of this chapter was "sappy, sappy Christmas."

PS: YOU GUYS

You guys are THE MOST AWESOME. I am thrilled times ONE MILLION that the comments are full of shrieking welcome at the return of a disembodied shouting voice, and ridiculous songs about Steve, and recipes for baked French toast.

We are a community. *much love*
Relocation, again

Chapter Notes

THIS IS NOT A FLUFFY CHAPTER.

Those of you who are troubled by dissociation should take care in reading.

It’s easy to tell Potts’s continued irritation about the real estate agent by the series of phone calls Rogers receives on December 26, culminating in movers arriving on December 29.

This is approximately 16 times faster than Barnes would have chosen, if anyone had asked him.

Everything is planned with an efficiency worthy of any battle plan. One small truck and a small army of people. Strangers in Rogers’s apartment. In with the Olds. Measuring, packing items into boxes. Touching all their stuff.

“Bucky. You want to go sit in the bathroom with Eleanor?”

Not helping, Steve.

Barnes has one box of clothing, his duffel of weapons and tactical gear, his laptop bag, and one box containing kitchen supplies and toolbox. It took him 11 minutes to pack, and that’s only because he had to redo the box of kitchen supplies to reach the optimum configuration.

Most of the time is taken by divvying up Rogers’s furniture (Ollie taking the bed; Esther and Lidia the sofa and chairs) and bringing the Olds’ stuff across the street.

There are too many people.

“Find a quiet corner and take five deep breaths for me,” flying Sam texts.

Barnes looks up to find Rogers staring.

He finds a corner. He counts his breaths. It helps a little.

The moving people are kind to the Olds – they tell jokes and smile a lot. They ask to take pictures with Rogers. They give Barnes a wide berth and sidelong frowns.

“Now Jimmy, stop trying to glower everyone to death,” Lidia says. “It’s going to be fine. People travel from Manhattan to Brooklyn every day. You’re not going to the moon.”

At least on the moon there would be fewer people.

“It’s an adventure, kid,” Ollie says.

Then Ollie coughs extensively.

Get over yourself, Barnes. This is why we’re moving.

CONFIRM
Confirm.

Lidia’s bookshelves fit nicely around the long walls of their apartment. Esther and one enthusiastic young man are cheerfully wrangling over how to organize the kitchen cabinets.

Cat Eleanor is sitting in the tub with flat ears. Barnes can relate.

The group of movers has the Olds situated by 1300.

“You ready, Bucky?”

No. But off they go anyway, in a car provided by Stark. Barnes watches out the back window until he can’t see the building anymore.

The apartment on the 32nd floor of building JARVIS has a large fruit basket on the kitchen island with a note from Potts welcoming them. The small army arrives 13 minutes later with all their boxes of stuff.

“Building. Sweep for surveillance.”

“Bucky.”

Didn’t you learn anything from the real estate agent, pal?

“Your belongings are secure, Sergeant. And welcome. I’m glad you and the Captain are here.”

“Thanks.”

It takes him 14.6 minutes to unpack, and then only another 40 to help Rogers with his books and art supplies.

The space is aesthetically pleasing. The view is comprehensive, from windows high enough up to present limited threat from snipers – not to mention the bulletproof glass. He has a bedroom with a door and a lock. The bed is 1.8 times larger than Rogers’s sofa bed, and it doesn’t have a weird dip in the middle of the mattress. The sheets smell faintly of citrus.

There’s no reason for increased pulse.

There’s no reason for it, Barnes.

“Is this a fucking pineapple?” Rogers says over the fruit basket. “What are we even supposed to do with this thing?”

Who knew tropical fruits could be such a useful distraction from discomfort? By the time Barnes has pulled up a video on pineapple preparation, peeled and cored the thing, and they’ve each eaten enough that their mouths are starting to sting, Barnes has had baseline functioning for 26 minutes. And he has learned the layout of the kitchen and location of utensils and plates.

Score yet another one for Potts.

The lady herself shows up at 1545, with Stark in tow.

“Steve,” she says in a warm tone, and hugs him. “We’re so glad to have you here.”
There is a waiting sort of pause. Potts kicks Stark in the ankle.

“Glad to have you, buddy, sorry about the thing with the thing,” Stark mutters, shaking hands with Rogers.

“Thanks, this is so generous. Bucky and I are really grateful. Tony, Pepper, this is Bucky Barnes. Bucky, Tony Stark and Pepper Potts.”

Potts holds out her hand.

“Bruce said you like to go by Barnes?”

He will have to thank Dr. Banner for that later.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Barnes, we’re really happy you’re here. JARVIS is so excited. I can’t wait to know you better,” she says, grasping his hand with a surprisingly strong grip.

Her smile looks genuine. She shows no indicators of fear.

“Thanks,” he says.

“Tony,” Potts says.

“It’s fine, you’re fine, don’t murder anybody,” Stark says, glaring.

“Tony! Barnes, don’t pay any attention to him.”

What is the correct response.

Stark looks as if he wants to make another smart comment, but Potts takes him by the shoulders and steers him toward the elevator.

“We’re both very happy, don’t worry about a thing. I called out for Indian, it’ll be in the common area at seven, by which time Tony will be wearing his big boy pants, I promise.”

By the end of this speech, they’re in the elevator.

“That could’ve gone better,” Barnes says.

Somebody needed to say it.

“You’ll grow on each other. I hope,” Rogers says.

“Potts seems nice.”

“She’s terrific.”

They’re back to awkward silences. Hooray.

“Bucky. Is dinner with everyone going to be okay? You don’t have to go.”

“Gotta eat.”

“Well yeah, but we could go to the Carp or something instead. Or order groceries. I know today’s been a lot.”
Shrug.

Have to meet building JARVIS’s other inhabitants some time. Waiting is not going to make strangers any less strange.

As it turns out, the only actual stranger is Maria Hill. Everyone else he’s met: Stark, Potts, Banner, Romanoff, and the arrow guy, Barton. They all know to call him Barnes. They all know to shake hands and step back.

“You look different from the last time I saw you, in DC,” Hill says.

She has a gaze like a tiger assessing the nutritional value of a small animal and whether said value is worth the effort of moving. Even though she herself is a small portion of human, barely worth a tiger’s effort.

“There’s more going on in there now,” she says. “Good for you.”

She claps him on the arm.

Barnes looks at Rogers, but he is talking to Romanoff.

“When did you see me.”

“Oh, here and there while you were busy cracking Rogers’s brain in half by virtue of not being dead. I’m the one who fired the helicarriers on one another, you know,” she says, leaning in a little, “I was totally ready to give Steve as much as ninety seconds to get off the damn thing, but nope! Whither thou goest, and all that jazz, I guess.”

Barnes rocks back on his heels with Asset-memory. It differs from the briefing’s older offerings. It’s more immediate: he can smell oil, feel wind against his skin. His brain has a metallic screech in the background. So much pain in his head. He remembers: pain in the head was standard. The Asset could use that pain to focus: complete the mission, bear the wipe, and then it could go back into cold storage, where nothing hurt.

On the helicarrier, he had hurt. Pummeled by the target, flesh shoulder dislocated, trapped under debris and unable to get leverage, at the mercy of the man who made him so goddamn angry. Trapped, and the target kept talking to him, kept confusing him.

‘Just end it,’ he remembers thinking.

 Feeling relief, to be done, finally. Surely this guy wouldn’t beat him to death. The target seemed like the type to make it clean, one head shot, and done. At last.

“Bucky.”

That name, the target kept saying. Stupid name. The Asset hated it.

And then the target set him free. Inexplicable. The guy’s mission parameters made no damn sense. Nothing on that rapidly disintegrating vehicle made any fucking sense at all.

“Bucky, come on!”

He’s on the floor.
Why is he on the floor.

You need to move back, Steve.

Steve doesn’t move back. Of course. He is holding Barnes’s arm.

“Bucky!”

“What happened.”

“I think you had a seizure.” Banner.

The floor is strangely comfortable.

“Why’s the floor so warm.”

“In-floor heating.” Stark.

The wonders of the future never cease.

“It’s nice.”

Rogers sits back with a smile and drops his arm.

“Scared the shit out of me, Buck.”

Barnes sits up. The whole room looks poised for action, except for Romanoff, who looks extremely bored. Barnes assumes this is a marker of upset.

“Sorry,” he says, “big memory download.”

Stark tilts his head to the side and frowns in a way that looks like thinking hard.

Everyone’s staring. So awkward. What does he do.

“What’s everybody gawking for?” Barton says. “Ain’t like we haven’t all done our own freaking out on the floor. I’m hungry.”

“I beg your pardon, I do all my freaking out on soft surfaces,” Romanoff says.

“Come sit down over here and have a samosa, Barnes,” Potts says, patting the sofa next to her.

It is kindness.

“Sorry,” he says again as he sits.

“Shut up, Barnes,” Hill says. “I’m the one who’s gonna be sorry around here.”

Then she shows him the sweet-hot orange sauce that goes on the little vegetable fritters. Then she shows him the green sauce that melts his eyeballs.

He likes Hill. And he likes Indian food.

They let him sit in the corner of the sofa and refrain from conversation. But every time Barnes uses his left arm, Stark stares at it. What does he want.

Once the food has been largely demolished and the others look ready to settle in and give their jaws a
workout, Rogers says,

“That was great, Pepper, thank you. But Bucky and I should get back to unpacking.”

Which is a lie.

PROTECT

Oh. Confirm.

“Healing okay?” Rogers asks when they’re behind their new locked door.

Nod.

“You want to tell me what you remembered?”

For once, it’s a story about the past of which Rogers does not approve.

“End it? Bucky, I would never –”

“I know that now, asshole.”

Even if it becomes necessary. That’s a problem.

PROTECT

Sure thing, pal. But what if I’m the thing that needs protecting from?

CONFIRM

In other words: even the mission’s no help for that little tangle.

Reactions to inhabiting Building JARVIS are illogical. Building JARVIS has provided schematics and blueprints. Construction materials maximize toughness and safety. There is no definitive reason to distrust.

But Barnes can’t sleep. The bed is too soft. The air is too warm. The building is too quiet. He has to sneak the door open to observe Rogers’s safety while sleeping.

Barnes walks, almost the whole night long. The first night, he paces the apartment. The second night, he runs the stairs down to the lobby and back up. Then, finding himself still pre-dawn and Rogers sleeping quietly, he begins a systematic exploration of each floor. The second floor contains service areas: cafeteria, coffee bar, hair salon, dry cleaner, tailor. Things to ensure employee satisfaction. The coffee bar is open even at 0308, staffed by a solitary middle-aged woman sitting on a stool behind the counter, writing in a notebook. Barnes makes sure she doesn’t see him.

He walks for hours. The body is tired. But the mind won’t let him sleep.

The third night is New Year’s Eve. Stark is having yet another party. Barnes researches the holiday, and identifies: disapproval.

“Says here you’re supposed to kiss someone at midnight.”

“Oh yeah?”
“Who are you going to kiss.”

Why are you so embarrassed, pal.

Please don’t let it be Romanoff.

“Bucky. I’m not going to kiss anyone, geez.”

Rogers is as red as the Christmas decorations they had on their tree, still up at Ollie’s apartment in Brooklyn. Where everyone is free from kissing.

“Good. Saves me from having to do a cavity search.”

Rogers blinks 4 times, then snorts and grins. Positive development.

“That’s how it’s gonna be? Any girl I want to date has to pass your scrutiny?”

Rogers needs to be examined, as he has apparently undergone a significant decrease in basic intelligence all of a sudden.

“Confirm. Background check, references, body scan, thorough vetting. I guess I might trust Romanoff to perform the actual physical exam. I might scare them off.”

“You’re the last true romantic, Bucky.”

“All’s fair in love, war, and close surveillance.”

Barnes blinks. That was a lot of words. But Rogers is grinning. Barnes has run out of quips. How long does it take to recharge one’s quip supply.

Rogers’s expression softens into something sadder. Dammit. But his eyes are still crinkled.

“You got on a roll there. Sounded like my Bucky for a minute.”

Barnes identifies: dislike in response to the phrase ‘my Bucky.’

He is saved from further pondering about identity by the appearance of Potts on the TV, inquiring about the party.

“No way,” Rogers says. “Sorry, Pepper. But Bucky can’t, and I’m going to keep him company. And you know I’m not the world’s biggest fan of fireworks.”

“I totally understand,” Potts says.

More kindness. They order pizza for dinner, try to watch movies. Barnes feels as if insects are crawling in his skin. The body is so tired. He paces.

“What’s going to help, Buck?”

Unknown. Barnes shrugs.

“Want to try the gym?”

Assessing. Physical activity could exhaust the body until sleep is possible.

Sleep is desired.
“All right.”

They take the elevator down to the basement. The gym is large, clean, and brightly lit.

“What do you think?” Rogers asks, “Want to run? Or maybe to spar?”

Running. Ugh. And lifting weights is stupid when you could practically pick up half the rack with your left arm.

Barnes recalls the videos he has seen of Rogers fighting aliens and HYDRA. He recalls the newly downloaded materials. Rogers is as well-matched to him as anyone.

Might be fun.

“Spar,” he says.

He steps toward the boxing ring, but Rogers stops him. There is equipment. Who needs equipment to beat on somebody?

“Safety gear, Bucky.”

PROTECT

Confirm. Safety is important.

Except.

Rogers holds up a padded head piece. It’s stupid-looking. Barnes doesn’t want it.

“Got to protect our hideous faces,” Rogers says.

So Barnes puts it on. The head piece presses forehead and cheeks.

Pressure on forehead and cheeks is standard procedure. The body tenses up. Pressure on forehead and cheeks means the chair.

He doesn’t want it.

He doesn’t want it.

But the procedure has started. The Barnes can tell, from the way it’s squeezing his face.

“Let’s get these gloves on you,” the handler says.

ALLOW

Confirm.

The handler secures the Barnes’s hands for the procedure, to prevent the Barnes from lashing out.

“Open up,” the handler says.

No.

No, I don’t want that.

“Come on, Buck, you don’t want to bite your tongue.”
PROTECT

This handler diverges from standard procedure. The handler’s voice is soft.

The thing accepts the guard into its mouth.

Where is the chair.

The thing follows the handler. Deviation from procedure. Watch the handler carefully for clues to correct action.

“Ready, Bucky?”

The thing awaits orders. Awaits lightning-pain-fire-ending.

The handler takes a fighting stance.

Mirror.

Hands at defensive position.

Move.

The handler tests the thing’s reflexes. The thing’s reflexes are good. The handler does not land any blows. The handler has its own head piece and bite guard. Will the handler undergo the procedure with the thing. Deviation from procedure.

Requirements unknown.

“Yeah,” the handler says.

The handler punches; the thing blocks. More testing. The thing is in acceptable physical condition. It can pass this test. Passing tests is desired. To fail a test means correction. The thing blocks the handler’s blows.

The handler is very strong.

The thing loses focus briefly, wondering how the handler can be even as strong as the thing, and the handler lands a solid uppercut, throwing the thing’s head back. The inside of the thing’s head is a clean, bright room with nothing in it. Identified: adrenaline. Identified: aggression.

No more testing. No chair.

‘No,’ the thing thinks. ‘Refuse. I don’t want it.’

And he plants his right leg to throw all his weight behind the metal arm. Feels his arm connect, and the handler’s head piece cracks open, spilling fluff. Even through his glove, the Barnes can feel the crunch on the other side, the target’s face breaking.

Barnes watches Steve go down to the mat, with blood on his face. He goes down.

MISSION PROTOCOLS VIOLATED
Mission protocols violated

Chapter Notes

STILL NOT FLUFFY

Please take care if you are bothered by descriptions of self-punishment (mostly emotional/mental), mentions of self-harm, and sleep deprivation

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MISSION PROTOCOLS VIOLATED

Steve is on the floor.

Steve is on the floor bleeding.

Steve is on the floor bleeding, and his blood is on Barnes’s left glove.

MISSION PROTOCOLS VIOLATED

Assess Steve’s condition.

Spit out mouth guard.

Expand left hand. Remove head guard and right glove.

Steve is breathing. Steve moves his head.

Remove Steve’s mouth guard.

Do not touch.

Touch causes harm.

“Building,” he says, then, louder, “building, help.”

“Medical assistance is on the way, Sergeant,” building JARVIS says. “Arrival estimated ninety seconds.”

Set countdown, 60 seconds.

Assess.

Steve’s head guard has burst from impact. Probable facial fracturing. Open facial wound matted with material from the head guard.

“Bucky.”

No.

No, he has damaged the target. He doesn’t deserve that name.
He runs.

The shreds of the left glove get left behind around the tenth floor. Thirty-four flights is a long way to climb, even for an enhanced human. The activity bleeds off some of the panic, leaving behind mission failure.

MISSION FAILURE

Confirm.

He has to protect Steve from himself now. As feared.

Bedroom door: locked. He shoves the dresser in front of it, then upends the bed as well.

“Sergeant.”

No.

Barnes throws his phone at the wall. It makes a dent.

He goes in the closet, slides the door shut.

It is confinement. But it is another barrier between himself and Steve.

He deserves confinement. Deserves to sweat and shiver and suffer.

Mission protocols violated.

Steve injured.

Probability of brain injury: 88%.

Fault: his.

Confinement warranted.

Barnes removes the 2 guns, 6 knives, and garrote wire from his person and throws them into the far corner of the closet.

He will go back to Brooklyn. Building JARVIS and the Avengers will protect Steve. Barnes will live in the dumpy building with bad heating, and maybe the Olds will allow him to watch over them, even though they will withdraw their friendship. Because he hurt Steve.

No more Steve.

No more Olds.

No more flying Sam, or Romanoff. Or Building.

Mission failed. No more assists.

Mission failed.

Forty-six minutes later, the confinement and dark are working as punishment. Barnes’s brain is screeching, and his body shakes. There’s a rattle: someone trying the bedroom doorknob. The sound
of a lockpick attempt. A body shoving at the door.

They have sent someone for him.

If they can’t get the door open, eventually they will send Stark in his suit, or green-thing Hulk.

Not Brooklyn after all, then.

He will go quietly, wherever they take him. Barnes will not resist.

The window crashes inward and shatters on the floor outside the closet, followed by the thump of feet. Here they come.

“Barnes.”

Oh.

Well. Okay.

They have sent Romanoff to put him down.

He slides open the door, ready.

She is wearing a complicated dress, in dark green, with sparkles. Where is her gun.

“Hey, Barnes.”

Her expression is calm, quiet. There will be no hesitation.

“Okay,” he says.

He is ready. He only hopes that he hasn’t ruined Steve’s memory of the Bucky-person. He hopes everyone will keep their Christmas presents. If only he had a minute to prepare, he could ask Building JARVIS to give all his money to the Olds.

He gathers his hair and pulls it up off his neck, turns to give her access to the base of his skull.

“Barnes, what? NO,” Romanoff says, with so much anger in her voice that he drops his hair and turns to look at her.

She is shaking, her face pale as salt.

“I’m not here to execute you, you idiot,” she hisses.

What.

“I can’t believe you would think after all this, that we would – that I would – you stupid, oblivious – “

She clenches her fists and eyes and takes several deep breaths.

“Barnes. What are you doing in the closet? Is this helping, or are you punishing yourself?”

She’s too smart for anyone’s good. Barnes scoots farther back into the back corner of the closet. She will try to make him come out. He’s not allowed out. Steve is damaged.

“I need an answer, Barnes.”
You don’t need shit, lady.

ANSWER

Even the mission agrees that he can no longer be trusted to make good operational decisions.

“Punishment.”

Barnes doesn’t understand her facial expression.

“You don’t have to do that. Not here. Nobody punishes anybody here.”

Well, none of the other inhabitants are former HYDRA assassins, are they?

“Come on, Barnes. Steve’s gonna be okay.”

That requires verification.

“Steve will be okay?”

His voice sounds weird. Too high.

Romanoff sits cross-legged, just outside the closet, out of arm’s reach.

“I’ve just come from the infirmary. He’s awake and fussing at everyone. His orbital socket is crushed, cheekbone fractured, and he has a moderate concussion.”

Oh.

Crushed face and injured brain. Asset-memory comes back again, the moment just before reset. Smoke, pain, rage. The flavor of oil in the air. The target’s head lolling, face swollen, eye red with burst vessels.

Barnes pulls the door shut again, leaving just a 5-cm gap.

“He’ll be fine,” Romanoff says in a soft voice. “He heals up fast. You know that.”

Which does not mitigate what he did.

“You guys were sparring?”

Nod.

“Then Steve’s a moron,” she says.

Response unexpected.

“What do you mean.”

“I mean he’s going to be fine, Barnes. They’ve already reset the bones and scanned his brain. He’s going to be fine, and no one blames you.”

It is a kind comment, though it cannot be true.

“Are you okay, Barnes?”

No.
“Uninjured.”

“Barnes, that’s not what I meant,” she says in a gentle tone.

The room is freezing. Barnes shivers from more than misery.

“Will you come out?” she asks.

Unknown.

“Steve would hate to see you in there.”

That’s playing dirty, Romanoff.

“Come out, Barnes. Let’s go see Steve.”

CONFIRM

Oh, now you have something to say.

EYES ON TARGET

No. You said she’s mission-assist, so we’re going to trust her intel.

He shuts the door all the way.

“Don’t be stupid, Barnes. It’s freezing in here.”

Freezing, dark, confined. It’s what he deserves.

She waits for 8 minutes.

“Okay, Barnes. I’m not going to stand here freezing my ass off. But I’m having JARVIS send people up to fix the window and clean up this glass.”

She opens the door, just a little, and stares down at him, wearing the tundra in her expression.

“If you hurt yourself with this glass, I will bring you back from the dead myself, you hear me? You go out that window, I will hunt you down. You don’t do that to Steve. Understood?”

Nod.

“Good.”

She slams the closet shut.

She curses at him in six different languages as she drags the furniture away from the bedroom door.

Twenty-four minutes later, people come into the room.

“What the hell happened in here?” one voice says.

“You been working here more than six months and still ask questions like that? It was aliens or robots or Thor forgetting what planet he’s on. Who knows? Who cares? Double time holiday pay, man.”
Four voices identified, speaking softly. Barnes hears the sound of sweeping, rattling, and a quiet swear. Clearly no one told these people that the closet contains a scary famous assassin who just beat the shit out of Captain America.

Barnes pulls his peacoat down from its hanger and drapes it over himself. On one hand, the warmth is too much like comfort to be allowed, but on the other hand, it’s more restriction. It makes the air around him feel stale, like the tank before freezing.

Identified: increased heart rate and respiration, body trembling, muscle aches, skin wet, teeth chattering. Adrenalin and panic response. Suitable reaction to confinement and darkness. Confinement and darkness required in response to negative actions.

We were doing so well.

CONFIRM

And now it’s all ruined.

DENY

Shut up, mission. You don’t get to go soft just because we had a good run.

The workers take just over half an hour to replace the window. Identified: conflicting emotional response to being left alone again. Desire noted for company: disallowed. Desire noted to go out the window and find a place far away from people. Also disallowed, thanks a lot Romanoff. Desire noted to see Steve.

Disallowed.

Disallowed.

Disallowed.

Barnes’s internal timekeeping goes offline. Confinement makes static in the mind. He cannot identify allowable alternative forms of punishment. He needs Steve to tell him what to do. From outside arm’s reach. Waiting in the dark, inside close walls that subjectively appear to continually pull in closer, makes time seem so long. Is it a new day yet. How long has he been in here.

Maybe this is the punishment Steve has decided. Maybe Steve will make him stay in here forever.

There is a clatter out in the apartment, and Barnes hears Steve shout his name.

Identified: relief. Now they can get it over with.

The bedroom door bangs open.

“Bucky!”

Barnes pulls the coat off his head as the closet door slides open with a rattle. Steve’s face is heavily bandaged. He looks down at Barnes for two breaths, the set of his mouth appropriately unhappy.

Then Steve drops to his knees and pulls Barnes into a tight hug.
“What are you doing in here, Buck, god! Why’d you run? Are you hurt?”

It is more confinement it is close contact his skin is hot it is danger it’s too much Steve I can’t.

“Sorry. Sorry, Bucky, I’ve been going out of my mind. I didn’t mean to. Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

No.

“Don’t fucking argue with me, Bucky, you cannot sit in the closet.”

He has to follow Steve’s orders until punishment is complete. He climbs out of the closet.

“You gonna tell me what’s going on in there, Buck?”

Shrug.

“Bucky. I’m okay. I swear.”

His face is swollen to twice its usual ridiculous size, purple-red with what is definitely going to be extensive bruising.

“Bucky. Don’t look at me like that. Come on.”

He stares at Barnes.

“Fine. I’m on concussion protocol. Gotta stay awake for a few hours. You going to stay with me?”

What’s another night without sleep.

“What.”

Stay awake, monitor. Acquiesce to movie choices. Sit on the floor well outside arm’s reach.

“Don’t you think you’d be more comfortable up here on the sofa, buddy?”

No.

At 0530 Rogers insists on sleeping.

"You should get some sleep too, Buck. I'll set an alarm, it's okay."

Deny.

Barnes sits within view of the sofa and monitors Rogers’s breathing.

At 0630, Rogers wakes in response to toe-pinching.

"Told you 'm fine."

Rogers continues to breathe regularly, with slight snoring likely owing to nasal swelling.

At 0730, Rogers wakes in response to toe-pinching.

"Uuuuugh, Bucky."
The sun coming through the window shows that Rogers’s facial bruising continues to evolve in a normal progression. Barnes re-tucks the blanket around Rogers’s feet twice.

At 0830, Rogers wakes in response to toe-pinching.

"For fuck's sake, will. You. Let. Me. Sleep."

Ungrateful.

Barnes makes a coffee with his large coffeemaker.

He would go downstairs to get a mocha from the coffee bar, but he has to keep eyes on Rogers.

He would ask building JARVIS about delivery, but he smashed his phone.

He would bake cookies, but they haven't purchased proper groceries yet.

The year is 8.75 hours old, and already it sucks worse than last year. And last year he started out in cold storage. He thinks. He's pretty sure.

At 0956, when Barnes is about to go see about a toe to pinch, Rogers sits up, looking slightly less swollen and a lot more purple around the face. His hair looks as if it had a hot date with an egg beater.

"Please tell me that's a coffee and you have more," he says.

It is and Barnes does. He pours a mug for Rogers, sets it on the kitchen island, and steps back. Rogers, who has been standing with his hand reached out, frowns. He steps toward the island. Barnes moves back.

"Coffee's real good, Bucky, thank you," he says when it's gone.

At 1100, a problem: Rogers is to go to the infirmary floor for assessment. Reaction to anticipated view of medical equipment: negative. Target leaving sight: negative.

"Why don't you stay here and get a little rest," Rogers says.

If he doesn't want Barnes's company, Barnes will respect that. Rogers goes to the infirmary, and Barnes goes to the closet for confinement.

At 1153, Barnes hears the door. He remembers what Romanoff said about Rogers's probable reaction to self-confinement and leaves the closet. Better to get an eyeful of the target, anyhow.

"I was hoping you'd be asleep," Rogers says.

"What did the doc say."

Rogers frowns so hard that he flinches from moving his face too much.

"Bucky. How long has it been since you slept?"

Thirty-five hours.
"What did the doc say."

"That I'm gonna be fine, Bucky. Really. I'm cleared to sleep as much as I want, and I just have to check in once a day. But I think that's mostly so they can track how much faster I heal than a normal person."

Nod.

Rogers steps toward him. Barnes steps back.

"Bucky."

What do you want Steve.

"Can we talk about this?"

"Talk about what."

Talk about how he has ruined it. Talk about mission protocol violated.

PROTECT

Talk about how bad he is at protecting.

DENY

Shut up, you.

"Please let me apologize," Rogers says.

What.

"Bucky, I'm so sorry."

Rogers is sorry.

Rogers is sorry.

Sorry for exactly fucking what, Rogers, with your broken face and your banged-up brain, what exactly the hell do you have to be sorry for.

"Buck."

Barnes opens his eyes, and his left hand has crushed the top railing of a chair back. Because terrific. Because that's real fucking excellent.

Back to confinement.

Rogers stands outside the closet door and says 16 variations on “please come out of the closet.” Barnes presses his face into the corner until it hurts. Like Steve’s face must hurt.

Rogers knocks on the closet door at 1330.

"Hey Bucky? Pepper sent over a new phone for you."
"Leave it."

"You have a bunch of text messages, Buck. From Sam, and Natasha."

"Leave it."

"Okay, Bucky."

Barnes waits for the sound of Rogers's footsteps to recede before he fetches the phone.

Two texts from Romanoff: "Don't be an idiot" and "GET OUT OF THE DAMN CLOSET."

Six texts from flying Sam: "Hey man, how you doing?"; "Barnes: please text me back"; "Dude. Let me know ur ok"; "I am not playing now. Check in."; "For real Barnes this shit will not stand"; "Dude. Txt me or I'm calling Steve."

Barnes texts: "okay."

The new phone pings immediately: "You sure about that?"

No.

He texts back: "okay."

He sets the text alert to the hunting horn and not that stupid ding.

He doesn't get back in the closet. He does lock the bedroom door.

Rogers keeps knocking on the door. He wants Barnes to eat. He wants Barnes to talk. He wants Barnes to come out and "watch TV or something."

At 2240, Rogers stands outside Barnes’s bedroom and says,

"Goodnight, Buck. I – hope to see you tomorrow."

Barnes spends the night prowling around Building JARVIS. It is secure. He makes the note to himself regularly: Building is secure. Several times, he has to get creative with hiding places to avoid speaking to security personnel on patrol. That’s good.

In the elevator back up to his floor at 0450, he asks when the last time was that anyone successfully infiltrated the building.

“Not since the Chitauri attack, Sergeant. And the infiltrator in question was an Asgardian prince, so I hardly think he counts as a typical example. Mr. Stark upgraded my physical security systems when he rebuilt the building’s structure and added the living quarters. I have sent that information to your phone.”

“Thanks, pal."

“My pleasure, Sergeant. Would you allow me to make a suggestion?”

“Sure."

“Your pulse is elevated and your core body temperature low. I note that you have not slept in more
than fifty-five hours. It is likely that you are functioning at suboptimal emotional and cognitive levels.”

Gee, you think.

Even worse than Building being its usual busybody self: Rogers is standing in the middle of the living room. Wearing the tractor pants. Barnes tries to stare at the tractors, to let them do their job as mission reminder. But they appear to be moving. How could printed fleece tractors move.

“What the fuck were you, Bucky.”

Oh. Rogers is furious.

“Gonna need an answer, Buck.”

“Patrolling.”

Rogers steps forward – too close. Barnes steps back, and back, until he’s up against the doorway, and Rogers is still too close.

“The hell you need to patrol for, Bucky? We live in a goddamn fortress! The only place more secure than this is maybe the bunker under NORAD.”

(The briefing butts in: Barnes has been there. It isn’t.)


He’s too close.

He’s too close.

Identified: mental static.

Identified: right hand trembling, plates shifting in left arm.

Back the fuck up Steve.

“Dammit.”

Rogers punches the wall next to Barnes’s head. Barnes’s left hand has a fist full of Rogers’s t-shirt.

Not again.

Rogers is too close. His eyes are wide, and Barnes hurts with the effort of holding back punch-break-destroy.

He feels sick.

He feels sick.

Barnes runs, and he makes it to the bathroom in time. Vomiting is fucking gross. He hates it.

Rogers is behind him. He wets a towel and hands it to Barnes. It feels good to wipe his face clean. Rogers hands him a glass of water, which tastes sweet and takes the terrible flavor out of his mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Rogers says, “I’m doing everything wrong. Bucky, I am so –“
He’s too close again.

“Need you to step back.”

Rogers’s pleading expression drops off to blank anger.

“Fine.”

When his knees feel less wobbly, Barnes goes back to his bedroom. Rogers’s bedroom door is also shut.

He thinks back to Christmas, barely a week past, and how good it all was. How he felt kindness, and belonging. How he felt safe.

Steve is the target. It should not feel like such a goddamn relief to be separated from him by a locked door.

He doesn’t spend the whole day in the closet. Romanoff keeps texting him to get out of it, and she can probably see him through some nefarious future technology that he would definitely like to have. If so, and he stays in the closet too long, she will tell Steve. And Steve will probably remove the closet doors, and then there will be no confinement.

It was easier, when the handlers were in charge of punishment. The brain aches from having to organize everything. Approaching 68 hours without sleep.

At 1800, Rogers knocks on the door.

“How do you feel about calling a truce? Both of us promise to stop acting like stubborn jackasses? We could celebrate détente over pizza.”

Sure. Because it’s so easy. Great idea.

“Fine. Suit yourself,” Rogers says after 93 seconds.

At 2230, Rogers yells “goodnight, asshole” down the hallway.

Barnes waits 30 minutes, then leaves his bedroom, sweeps the perimeter of the apartment. Drinks a glass of water. Crumples the note saying "pizza in the fridge" and throws it away.

He sits on the floor in the hallway outside Rogers's door. Out of reach of causing harm, but between Rogers and any outside harm. It's not so bad. Their apartment also has those nice heated floors.

And then he punches Steve again. He doesn’t mean to. It’s just that Steve’s face is right there, too close, and his expression is so angry when he says, ‘you can’t even control yourself, you’re worse than an animal. I’ll never trust you. We should’ve put you down.’ And Barnes can’t let that stand, he has to hit, but once he starts, he can’t stop.


If only he could stop punching Steve. He can hear his own voice, shouting ‘no stop it no,’ but his fists keep crunching against Steve’s face.

He will beat Steve to death, and then where will he be? All alone. He wants to stop. He can hear himself yelling to stop. Maybe it’s the mission yelling at him, but his arms just keep going.
Someone tries to stop him.

That’s good. Someone strong, but they restrain him, and that’s its own kind of fear. No one can hold him, he’s too strong but they won’t let go, the person holding him, he can’t get away, and they’re shouting ‘Bucky Bucky’ in his ear he can’t get away from them, he can’t –

“Bucky, please!”

Barnes opens his eyes and sees the hallway, the bathroom door. The hallway? Heartbeat dangerously rapid, respiration rapid, disorientation get away from me let go get away.

He twists hard, and Rogers lets go. Barnes rolls into the opposite wall with a thump.

"Jesus, Bucky, you were screaming."


Rogers crouches down, at eye level. His face wears only the healing injuries from New Year’s Eve. His face is not pulped. No new injuries. No new injuries.

He is wearing the sushi pajamas. Good. Those are good to look at. Mission reminder. Also, they make him think of the Carp. Safe place, with mission-assists.

Identified: a desire to weep.

"What's going on, Buck? You didn't. Did you sleep on the floor?"

Didn't mean to sleep, pal.

Why are you glaring like that Steve.

"Your face looks better," Barnes says in a desperation move to evade further scrutiny.

"Yours looks worse," Rogers growls.

Desperation move: failed.

"Get up," Rogers says in an orders-giving sort of voice and wearing an expression like smashing, "and don't you dare go in your room. Kitchen. Now."

CONFIRM

What even.

Barnes goes to the kitchen.

Rogers proceeds to make a pile of rubbery eggs and half-scorched pancakes. There's another mission sub-task Barnes is failing at: taking over the cooking. But he enjoys cooking, and enjoyment is for people who aren't a danger to everyone and everything around them.

The interlude of quiet gives sufficient time for Barnes’s pulse and respiration to return to baseline. He has to blink rapidly, though – every time he closes his eyes he can see the images from his dream of Steve’s head being pounded to mush.

He does not enjoy Steve's terrible food. So he eats it. But he draws the line at orange juice.
"Bucky, you love orange juice."

Deny.

CONFIRM

He lays his hands flat on the table and stares at the wall.

"Goddammit, you don't. Jesus, Bucky, what's going on with you? I don't know."

Rogers sits at the table with a strange posture: shoulders and head low, arms hanging between his knees. Barnes identifies: dislike.

"I don't fucking know what to do, Bucky. I'm so sorry."

Barnes eats another pancake, to make Steve feel better. It does not appear to work.

"Can you at least tell me why you slept on the floor?" Rogers asks after a long pause.

"Surveillance."

"You're safe here, Bucky."

You're not.

"You can't sleep on the damn floor outside my bedroom. It's not right. Is there something wrong with your bed?"

Smells weird, too soft, building's too quiet, everything is wrong Steve.

Shrug.

"Buck. We can't keep doing this. Do we need to go back to Brooklyn?"

Yes.

"Can’t. Ollie’s living in your apartment."

“It was our apartment, Bucky, and that doesn’t. Jesus. You scared the fuck outta me, screaming like that."

Shrug.

“Bucky.”

It’s working up to be a truly obnoxious conversation, but they are saved by Stark: relief from a completely unexpected source.

Stark comes on the TV screen. He is singing.

“And I miss yooooou, like the deserts miss – Rogers. Your face looks like the ass end of a mandrill. That your handiwork, Murder Bot? Good job, nice to see Mister Perfection down off his pedestal. We’re doing brunch. I must be surrounded by my kith, because all my kin are dead. Oops! Did that slip out?"

Too many words.
Barnes feels dizzy.

“Not up for it, Tony, thanks.”

“Not up for copious amounts of free food? What is the matter with you?”

“Not today, Tony.”

Rogers speaks through gritted teeth.

“You got trouble? Is it trouble with the arm? Because I am in for any troubles with the arm. I’ve got ideas. Consider me on standby twenty-four seven for anything arm-related.”

Barnes rises from the chair and steps back against the wall.

“It’s not the arm, Tony. Just – it’s fine, okay? We’re fine. Just. We’re adjusting.”

Stark’s face on the television screen loses its half-smile.

“This like the thing the other day, with the floor?”

More than you know, champ.

“Yeah,” Rogers says.

“I’m sending up bacon. Bacon makes everything better. Hit me up if you need anything.”

It is kindness, unlooked-for.

Rogers glowers at the dark television for 4 minutes, then turns to where Barnes remains backed up against the wall.

“Look, that’s your choice, okay?” he says, pointing at the screen. “No more disappearing half the night, no more sleeping on the goddamn floor like a whipped dog, Bucky. That is not okay.”

Here it is. Here is where Steve will name his punishment. Finally.

“You are not a robot. You can’t keep on not sleeping. It fucking stops now. You want close surveillance? It goes both damn ways, pal. You got two choices. Either you sleep in the bed with me so I know you’re getting some rest, or we’re getting monitors in our rooms. Both of us. On all night. Your choice.”

That’s not a punishment. What even, Rogers.

“Don’t you fucking glare at me like I’m the one who’s half-dead here. Pick one, Bucky. Monitor set up before tonight or you and I are going right now to your room to lie the fuck down.”

PROTECT

Shut up.

It is merely an illusion of choice. Barnes has seen how Rogers sleeps. Barnes could have a bed the size of the entire room and Captain Bed Hog would be too close by 16 orders of magnitude.

“Monitors,” he says.
“Fine,” Rogers growls at him, and gets on his phone to snarl at JARVIS and put in the work order.

“I swear to god, James Buchanan Barnes, you are the most stubborn, ridiculous son of a, do you have any idea how worried I have been about you, this is beyond –“

Barnes accepts the tirade. It would be better if Rogers would just get it over with and hit him, but in the meantime, he’ll take the yelling.

Forty-three extremely awkward minutes later, Stark sends up not only large amounts of bacon but also a wide variety of breakfast foods. And they haven’t even finished their giant fruit basket yet. Rogers gazes at Barnes with a solemn expression and starts handing over food. Barnes finds his body moving without engaging higher functions. Whatever Steve gives him, he eats.

And, surprisingly enough, Stark was correct. Barnes feels less dizzy after the sixth piece of bacon, a cranberry muffin, and a plate of non-rubbery eggs that have small bits of green herb in them. He identifies: curiosity about the herb. Curiosity is possibly a positive development.

Less positive is the creeping sensation that he has been behaving badly.

PROTECT

What’s that supposed to mean, mission.

EAT

He eats.

He looks up on his phone what a mandrill is. Stark told Rogers that his face looks like a monkey’s ass.

Pretty funny.

“Don’t even goddamn think about it,” Rogers says when the breakfast foods have been demolished. “No more locking yourself away, either. You sit your ass on that sofa where I can see you.”

Bossy Rogers is terrible. But Barnes deserves terrible. He sits: safely out of arm’s reach, but closer than Barnes has consented since New Year’s Eve. He can do this. Pretend to be a normal person sitting in front of a normal TV on a normal -

“Hey. Hey, buddy, wake up. It’s dinnertime.”

Barnes finds that he is leaned hard into the corner of the sofa, with a crick in his neck and cold knees. The light through the windows has a distinct red tint.

What time is it.

“Hope you don’t mind that I let you sleep all day,” Rogers says, “seemed like you needed it.”

Rogers is no longer using his angry voice. Now he’s using his smug voice. Barnes does mind, but it’s too late now. He stands, and every joint pops approximately 35 times.

“I also hope you don’t mind that I got dinner delivered from the Carp.”

You buttering me up, Rogers?
Mission’s had a one-track mind recently. Post-sleep, Barnes has the sneaking suspicion that he has been interpreting it incorrectly.

Shut up.

Barnes also suspects that Rogers has somehow dosed his soup, because when it’s done he yawns 5 times in succession, and his subjective body weight is approximately 900 kilos. He doesn’t even feel the need to hide from the technicians who come in to drill holes in the walls and set up the monitors that look like tiny television sets.

He doesn’t even get angry at the technician who keeps staring at the two of them red-faced and giggling every time she mentions 'watching each other's every move.'

Ugh, it’s as bad as the baristas in Vinegar Hill. He stares at Rogers, who merely turns to glare at him.

It’s been a day for glaring, that’s for damn sure.

But at 2400, when Rogers announces that it’s time to sleep, his face is only serious, not angry, when he stands in the doorway to Barnes’s room until the monitor is on and Barnes has climbed into bed. Rogers has even given him the giraffe pajamas to wear, 'just in case.'

Just in case what, Barnes has no idea, but it calms him to put them on, anyhow.

Forty seconds later, the monitor flickers and shows Steve’s room.

“I’m gonna read for a while, Buck,” he says, “but you go to sleep. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

And he is.
Small steps: the monitors. Staying out of the closet, even when Barnes relives the memory of his fist breaking Steve’s face. Unlocking words to speak to Building JARVIS that make possible an apology – not a detailed one, but a start. Allowing himself to make breakfast: concrete actions, defined result. Putting forth effort to contribute to the household and enhance Rogers’s comfort.

For the entire time that Barnes moves back and forth across the kitchen, he doesn’t think once about punishment or violence.

All that comes back when Rogers sits down at the table across from him. Barnes makes a mission note that Rogers’s face is mostly healed, but that doesn’t help.

Rogers, however, has increased his baseline cheerfulness by 200%. He insists on doing the breakfast dishes. That’s only right, given that Barnes cooked, but it creates idleness, which means thinking.

Barnes thinks back fondly on his pre-contact days, when there were bad guys to punch during rough times and plenty to do. If only there were another alien invasion or something.

“What are you hovering for, Buck? Afraid I forgot how to wash dishes?”

“Deny.”

“Then what’s up?”

“Actions unclear.”

Barnes watches Rogers run through several responses: surprise, dislike, settling on confusion. He wipes his hands on a towel. Taking time before speaking.

Reminder: Rogers shares the feeling of wrongdoing.

Did Rogers ever sit in his closet.

Unlikely. The guy has too many shoes.

“What actions?”

“Self.”

“You mean you don’t know what to do?”

“Confirm.”

“What do you want to do, Buck?”
“Unknown.”
Rogers gazes at him sharply.
“You have a million opinions, Bucky.”
Shrug,
More staring.
“I don’t want to tell you what to do. I’m not in charge of you.”
“Or. I guess we need some groceries. You want to help me order some?”
Barnes could fall down with relief.
“Confirm.”
“Why don’t you grab your cookbooks and pick out some things to try.”
Distinct actions to perform. Mental noise reduced. He can choose recipes and food products. He can argue with Rogers over what constitutes decent bread (nothing square and pre-sliced that comes in a plastic bag).
It’s only as Rogers is entering his credit card information that Barnes notices their proximity and breaks out into a sweat. Slides away.
Makes Rogers frown.
How long will he be like this. Has he ruined everything forever.
Steve will tell him no. Steve will say everything is fine.
PROTECT
Right.
Romanoff would call him an idiot, probably.
He needs information.
“How do you feel safe,” he texts to flying Sam.
There is a long pause. Little dots appear on the screen and go away four times.
“You practice. You pick one spot that feels closest to safe and stay there when you need to. Then you make that space bigger.”
Brooklyn was safe. Steve is supposed to be safe. Where is the new place to start.
The closet is confinement. It is not safe. His bedroom might be safe, but if he sits in there too long, Steve will yell at him again.
Barnes chooses his end of the sofa as a preliminary safe spot. He sits, replays the conversations from Christmas morning, telling Steve ‘you are home.’
Is that gone now. Barnes doesn’t know how to ask. Doesn’t want to ask, in case the answer is yes.

Maybe flying Sam has also texted Steve, because over the course of several days, while Barnes practices his safe spot, Rogers doesn’t hassle him. He lets Barnes stand close and then move away. He makes suggestions of activities when Barnes stands adrift in the middle of the living room.

Barnes learns two useful pieces of information from Rogers’s suggestions: (1) biographies of modern presidents are both factually inaccurate (if the briefing is correct) and really boring and Rogers should stop buying them; (2) he should’ve been spending time in the giant tub, because it is amazing and soaking in hot water makes his brain forget how to make trouble for itself.

He remembers the tub back at the condo in DC, and how the hot water eased strong emotion. Stupid not to have used the tub before. Especially given that he can lie flat with just his nose and mouth above water.

The second time, he’s 28 minutes into his soak when he opens his eyes to find Rogers staring down at him.

“Just making sure you’re still alive,” he says when Barnes lifts his head out of the water. “Sure you don’t want a snorkel?”

Maybe.

Later, Barnes is experimenting with the contents of his first Cheese of the Month delivery when Rogers’s phone makes the banjo sound.

The urge to do violence in response to the banjo is acceptable. No punishment needed.

“Hey, Thor’s coming,” Rogers says.

The banjo sound happens twice more. Barnes considers whether Petit Basque cheese would have sound-dampening qualities if placed into ear canals.

“So of course Tony wants to have a party.”

Deny.

CONFIRM

“You up for meeting Thor, Buck? Not at the party, I mean.”

Unknown.

Rogers puts on his thinking face. Barnes braces for disaster.

“You know. I mean. If there’s gonna be a party anyhow. Maybe Sam would like to come up.”

For once, Rogers is using his deviousness for good.

“Okay,” Barnes says.

Barnes spends 3.25 hours in the safe spot before they go to meet Thor. He’s never met a space alien before. It’s a lot to take in.
From a distance, as they enter the common area, Barnes assumes that Thor and the woman are standing far apart, so the differences in their sizes is an optical illusion. But no. He really is enormous, and she really is the size of a legume.

What is with all the tiny ladies around this joint.

As a gigantic space prince, Barnes figures Thor could lay him out. Objectively, this should be a comfort. Subjectively, it makes his left arm go crazy, and he is not getting within arm’s reach of the guy.

Like Rogers, Thor appears to have been misinformed about what constitutes a well-fitting shirt. Maybe they don’t make shirts big enough to fit.

Thor greets Rogers with a booming voice and a hug that makes Rogers’s spine crack.

“Steven, my friend! Truly it has been too long since my eyes last beheld you.”

“Hey, Thor. I don’t know if Tony told you. I want to introduce you. This is Bucky. My friend Bucky Barnes. I’ve known him my whole life. He was – gone, for a long time.”

Thor turns to Barnes with his enormous smile and his ham-sized hand reached out. Then he tilts his head and frowns a bit. Withdraws his hand.

Oh great what now.

He places his fist against his heart and. Bows a little.

“Greetings, Bucky Barnes. I am glad you have returned, and honored to make your acquaintance.”

Am I supposed to do the fist thing.

UNKNOWN

No kidding.

“Thanks,” he says, “call me Barnes.”

Thor continues to look at Barnes as if assessing something. It’s not hostile. That doesn’t stop Barnes from desiring him to stop. He edges toward Rogers.

“Well, I’m not afraid to shake your hand, Barnes,” the woman says, giving over her little doll hand and a ferocious grip. “Jane Foster.”

Barnes doesn’t even have time to say hello before she has turned to Rogers to ask whether he ‘finished the book.’

“I did,” Rogers says, and in the time that he takes to inhale and continue, Foster’s off like a shot.

“It’s great, right? I mean, any way you talk about quantum reality it’s going to sound like a pile of woo, but it’s all true! I really liked the chapter on entanglement and that metaphor about tesseracts like from *A Wrinkle in Time*. Have you read *A Wrinkle in Time*? You should really read it, it’s a classic of science fiction. I read it when I was a kid, and it was the first time I ever heard about a woman scientist, it’s probably the whole reason why I’m here today, isn’t that amazing?”

“It is,” Rogers says, and writes the title in his little notebook.
Barnes figures he hasn’t said that many words in the past month.

“Oh my god,” shouts another female voice from behind him, “remind me never to go to the bathroom before we come here. I want to live in there. It’s like peeing in heaven. You guys are so lucky I didn’t strip down and cover myself in that hand lotion, it smells like joy.”

Thor likes them talky, apparently.

The new woman has a lot of hair and doesn’t walk so much as dance across the room, until she catches sight of Barnes and stops. She stares at him in a way that feels intrusive, though she remains far out of reach.

Barnes bumps into Steve.

The woman walks forward. She stands less than 1 m away, edging closer. Too close.

Too close.

“Well hell-lo tall, dark, and lickable,” she says.

Barnes does not wish to be licked. He steps left, behind Rogers.

“It’s okay, Bucky, this is Jane’s friend Darcy. Darcy, this is Barnes.”

“Do I call you Bucky or Barnes?” she says, stepping behind Rogers.

Getting close again.

Barnes moves forward to keep Rogers between them, in case of licking.

“Or do I just call you my date for tomorrow night?”

Retreat desired.

Distance to egress, 4.2 m.

“Darcy,” Thor says.

Rogers snaps his notebook shut.

Distance to egress, 3.9 m. Number of knives within reach, 6.

“What’s going on here?” the Darcy person says.

“Darcy,” the Thor person says in a soft rumble, “friend Barnes must not be touched. It causes him anguish.”

“I’m not touching him.”

Distance to egress, 2.6 m.

“Oh!” the Jane person says, “oh no. Okay, Darce, let’s go get a coffee.”

“What’d I do?”

Distance to egress, 1.7 m.
“It’s okay, don’t worry about it,” Steve says.

“We will go to the coffee bar,” the Thor person says. “And perhaps we shall see you later, Steven.”

“That sounds good, thanks.”

“Hey man, I’m sorry!” the Darcy person yells.

Distance to egress, 50 cm.

“They’ve gone, Buck,” Rogers says.

Note: lack of additional voices.

“Confirm.”

“It’s cold. Sure you want to go out there?”

Respiration increased. Pulse increased. Surface temperature decreased. Blood pressure elevated.

He places his hand on the glass door to the balcony. Confirm: cold.

“Steve.”

Rogers moves swiftly. But he makes noise. He remains outside arm’s reach. He stands to the side, hands held out. Open palms.

“I’m right here, Buck.”

“Confirm.”

“How about we stand here for a bit and watch the traffic go by?”

“Okay.”

It is kindness, to watch the cars the size of pinheads travel 140 m below. To wait until the plates in his arm stop shifting, then go back to the apartment.

Steve lets Barnes throw both locks on the door, so he can be sure they are in place. Then Barnes goes to his safe spot on the sofa.

Flying Sam appears to have been correct. Sitting in that corner of the sofa, a space familiar to his body, familiar pressure along his back, legs, and left side, decreases pulse and respiration.

At 1635, flying Sam arrives.

Mission assistance.

Unless flying Sam has been waiting to castigate him in person for injuring Steve.

But he hopes mission assistance.

“Let me see your face,” Sam orders Rogers after a hug. “Wow, you did a number on him, Barnes.”

“Confirm.”

Barnes presses back into the corner of the safe spot, which is exhibiting decreased efficacy.
“We’re gonna talk about that,” flying Sam says. “Tomorrow, because I have a hot date in motherfucking Tony Stark’s workshop, and then I am going to party with the Avengers and feel like a superhero. But tomorrow? We are gonna talk. And if anyone around here should feel nervous about that, it’s Steve.”

What.

“Uh, what?” Rogers says.

Flying Sam’s expression when he comes to stand in front of the sofa is kind.

Barnes cannot even process.

“That your safe spot, Barnes?”

Nod.

“Looks like a good one. Is it helping?”

Nod.

“Good. Now. Show me where to put my bag, because I am not waiting another minute. Gotta go see a guy about some wings.”

Wings.

YES

The briefing throws out the image of Rogers giving him a chocolate bar.

Identified: happiness.

“Flying Sam,” Barnes says before he can stop his mouth.

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Sam says.

Of course Barnes is not going to pass up on seeing the new set of wings, no matter how bad he feels.

“Oh great, the whole gang. You even brought Lee Harvey Oswald, what joy,” Stark says on their arrival.

He glares while he says this, but he’s about to give flying Sam new wings, so Barnes will give him a pass.

“Jesus, you did not assassinate John F. Kennedy,” Rogers mutters as flying Sam walks toward the pile of equipment on a table.

The briefing concurs.

“Confirm.”

Rogers’s eyebrows jump up and down.

“Yeah?”

Rogers grimaces.

“I’m not sure that makes me feel better.”

You’d think Steve Rogers would know better than to seek comfort in history.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Stark has 3 sets of potential wings for flying Sam: one bat-like, one smooth like an airplane wing, and one curved and articulated like a bird’s wing made out of razors.

Flying Sam denies the bat-like ones straight out.

“They’re not stiff enough for tight maneuvers, and where’s the backup chute?”

“Don’t need one,” Stark says, “self-healing fabric. These things are their own chute.”

Sweet ice-bound harbor of Arkhangelsk, Stark has an even shakier grasp on what constitutes safety than Rogers does.

“I’m thinking,” flying Sam says, “of a situation when someone might rip off one wing and kick me off something high.”

Ouch, flying Sam. Ouch.

CONFIRM

“Who the hell’s gonna get close enough to do that?” Stark says.

Barnes raises his left hand.

“God, you’re a menace to human survival.”

As programmed, asshole.

“To be fair, I’m probably strong enough to pull them apart too. And your suit, right?” Rogers says.

“Dammit, you have a point,” Stark says. “Come on, show me.”

Rogers pulls the wings away from their harness.

Then he and Barnes together pull the smooth-winged apparatus apart.

“Okay, look,” Stark says, “obviously I let my enthusiasm run away with me. I’m going to start over from scratch, but do you want to fly today or not?”

“I want to fly,” Sam says.

They go down to the gym, which is not a safe space.
Rogers elbows him, his mouth twisted in a way that suggests regret. Plenty of that to go around, pal.

But it’s easy to set aside the memory of injury – even of mission failure – at the sight of flying Sam swooping around near the ceiling of the obstacle course, shouting with clear excitement.

The place isn’t safe, but the activity makes a quiet space in his mind.

The party is not possible. Barnes tries. He sticks to the interior wall of the common area, where a nice plant stands next to a strange piece of furniture, providing cover on one side.

At first, it’s not so bad. Thor’s Darcy brings him a beer, which she hands him from the full length of her arm, saying,

“Dude, I am so sorry. I had no idea. How do I not put together Bucky Barnes and Bucky freaking Barnes? Not to mention that whole jump-off-the-balcony-or-murder look on your face. I feel like a jerk.”

“It’s okay,” Barnes says, because she really does look sorry.

Information gained: beer is all right. Tastes bitter in a good way. And he has learned from his cookbooks that you can make bread with it.

Romanoff hugs flying Sam so enthusiastically that he squeaks.

“What sound did you just make?” Rogers asks.

“Shut up, dude, I just got groped by Black Widow. Nothing you say can bother me.”

“My turn,” Hill says.

“It’s not fair,” Barton says. “How am I just meeting you now? I don’t know you well enough to grope you.”

“I know, it’s rough. I’m highly gropable,” flying Sam says.

And they all laugh at Rogers, who turns red right on cue.

Thankfully for him – and for the mission, for Barnes, and Barnes’s cardiac health – no one tries to grope Rogers.

Stark brings a non-Avenger friend (who knew he had those), Col. Rhodes, who shakes Sam’s hand and says,

“Call me James, please. I can’t tell you how glad I am to have a little backup.”

“Keeping these crazy-ass folks in line isn’t easy,” flying Sam says, “and I only know four of them so far.”

“They only get worse in larger numbers.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

They grin and clink beer bottles when they say it, as if it’s a joke, even though Barnes knows it to be true.
They’re cute, all trying to out-quip one another and fighting over nachos. Rogers, Romanoff, and flying Sam look over at him regularly to check in, even though none of them goes so far as to actually bring him any of those damn nachos. Thor bows at him again, and it’s just as weird the second time.

But it’s too much noise. Even with the wall at his back and the plant by his side, it’s too many people. There are too many points of observation. Too much crowding into his head.

Banner comes over and stands next to him, back against the wall as well.

“Tony’s a true extrovert,” he says, “but I gotta tell you, I hate these things. Half an hour in and it’s like the noise is pushing at me.”

CONFIRM

“Yeah,” Barnes says.

“Looks like Steve’s having fun.”

Rogers is currently playing a version of pool with Thor that involves holding the table off the ground and tilting it to make the balls go in the pockets.

He’s laughing more than Barnes has ever seen in this lifetime. The briefing aches a little.

On one hand, it’s desirable to see Steve happy. On the other, Barnes wants to punch Thor in the neck.

Will we ever be like that, mission?

PROTECT

Oh, that’s super helpful, thanks.

“You’re probably the only person in here who could play that too,” Banner says.

Too much. Too loud, too exposed.

Barnes shakes his head.

“All right,” Banner says.

He drains his bottle and stands away from the wall.

“Well, that’s enough for me. I’m off to find some quiet. See you, Barnes.”

“Bye, loser!” Stark shouts as Banner heads for the elevator.

Otherwise, no one seems bothered that Banner left.

Maybe attendance is not a requirement.

How to obtain this information.

Shouting: suboptimal.
Does Rogers have his phone on him.

Only one way to find out. Barnes sends a text.

Rogers jumps, and several pool balls go flying, so Thor wins the game. He makes a speech about his mightiness.

He actually uses the word “mightiness.” Which is how you know he’s a space alien.

Rogers. Frowns.

Why.

“Why the hell are you texting me, Buck?” he asks when he’s close enough not to shout.

“Had a question.”

“You couldn’t just walk over and ask me?”

Leaving myself open to potential jostling, groping, or whatever they think passes for dancing over in that other corner? No thank you, champ.

“No.”

“You don’t have to stay, Bucky. Too much?”

Nod.

“Want me to come with you?”

That’s a trick question. Yes, but not at the expense of enjoyment.

“No,” Barnes says, demonstrating generosity.

Also, he’s pretty sure he’ll be able to monitor the party from their apartment.

Supposition: correct. It’s like pre-contact surveillance to watch the crowd on the television. Observation without pressure is more calming than even the quiet and absence of people.

Kind of boring, though. Barnes cleans the guns from the duffel. He flips through his cookbooks. He discovers that Petit Basque cheese doesn’t melt so great but otherwise makes a nice grilled cheese. He goes to the online shopping site and stares at the mind-boggling array of books available.

It was much easier when he had Lidia as his own personal librarian. How to choose.

“Building,” he says aloud, “how do I decide what to read.”

“What have you enjoyed reading so far, Sergeant?”

He lists off the books he borrowed from Lidia over previous months. Only the good ones. Not Seduce Me, Rogue. Or the ridiculously inaccurate spy novels. Or the fucking Fountainhead.

“Based on your preferences for classic literature and science fiction, I can compile a list of suggestions for you.”
“Thanks.”

A message arrives on his phone with fifty titles on it. Barnes spends a pleasant 105 minutes looking up all the titles and adding the likely ones to a ‘wish list.’ He orders the first five.

It’s the first evening he has actually enjoyed since they moved in: watching Rogers and flying Sam make asses of themselves while he sits in a quiet room and learns about books.

Maybe eventually he will return to being able to enjoy an evening with Rogers in the same room.
Unwanted stories

Chapter Notes

VERY DIFFICULT STUFF HERE: MENTIONS OF TRAUMA AND TORTURE, BOTH EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL

Please be prepared for terrible things and care for yourself before/while reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barnes wakes at 0520, presumably with a great deal of time on his hands, given that Rogers and flying Sam hadn’t returned from the common area until 0235. Flying Sam had been more than a little drunk, and the two of them had fallen on Barnes’s boredom-dispelling cookies like the starving.

“I hope you appreciate what you’ve got here,” flying Sam had said around a mouthful.

“Every fucking minute,” Rogers said.

Sure.

Nice to hear, if probably the contact high talking.

The clear benefit of having read the instruction manual for the coffee machine is that Barnes had been able to use the ‘quiet morning’ setting to pre-grind the beans for the next morning. Flying Sam is sleeping on the sofa, which, like the one in Brooklyn, has a pull-out mattress.

Of course, this one has a pull-out mattress with a small pump in it that makes it inflate over the top of the support structures, so it doesn’t have any weird dips in the middle and is in fact slightly more comfortable than Barnes’s own mattress.

Will Rogers yell at him if he starts sleeping on the sofa.

Unknown.

Barnes watches Rogers sleeping and looks at cat videos on the internet until 0645, when the coffee maker is set to begin brewing.

Rogers may still be sprawled diagonally across his bed with two pillows on top of his face and his left foot hanging out of the blanket, and flying Sam may be snoring with one arm hanging to the floor, but Barnes is not going without coffee.

He’s a highly skilled assassin. He could sneak back and forth to one measly kitchen for one measly cup of coffee in his fucking sleep.

Because his memory might resemble a wheel of Emmentaler, but he has not forgotten flying Sam’s statement that the three of them are going to ‘talk.’

Likelihood that said conversation will cover upsetting subjects: 900%. Barnes is not doing it without coffee. And preferably breakfast. But definitely coffee.
And if Rogers and flying Sam wanted to get a jump on the caffeine wagon, they shouldn't have have stayed up so late.

Thankfully, the internet has an endless supply of cat videos, because even Rogers doesn’t wake up until 0800. Getting slack in his old age.

It is ridiculous to watch Rogers wake. First he says ‘urgh’ from under his pillows, then flops over onto his stomach, sending the pillows flying, arms spread out at his sides, the sheets tangled around him. After 2.5 minutes, he gives a large sigh and rubs the back of his head. It takes him almost a full minute to sit up, given how tightly the sheets are wound around him. He yawns once, blinks, and then the supersoldier light blinks on, and he’s ready to shift the earth into a different orbit or whatever other ridiculous task sits at the top of his superhero to-do list.

Rogers looks up at the monitor and waves at Barnes. Barnes lifts his mug in salute, and that’s enough to send Rogers out of his room. He knocks at Barnes’s door 2 minutes later.

“Yes.”

“Can I come in?”

That’s new.

“Yes.”

Today it’s the sheep pants.

Mission. Do you think Rogers is as nervous about talking with Sam as we are.

LIKELY

Huh.

“Thanks for making coffee, Buck.”

“Welcome.”

He hovers like a dope. Barnes waves that it’s okay to sit on the bed mostly because he doesn’t want to get a crick in his neck from staring up so far.

“How was your evening?”

“Good. Watched the party. Ordered some books to read.”

“Jeez, you watched the whole thing?”

“Confirm.”

“I thought I was gonna have to carry Sam out of there. Remind me never to be in the same room as Barton and Darcy at the same time ever again.”

“Bet they hope Stark has some crazy hangover cure.”

“He’d have to, right?”

“Confirm.”
“But it was okay? That I didn’t come back here with you?”

“Yeah.”

They sit in awkward silence for almost 2 minutes: subjectively, about 3 months. Barnes is about to suggest some cat videos when they hear flying Sam stir. Saved by houseguests.

Flying Sam then proceeds to exert a slow form of torture by making them wait for the dreaded talk. First there must be coffee: reasonable. Then flying Sam makes a smart remark about Rogers not being able to lap him on a treadmill, resulting in a cascade of testosterone-fueled banter that culminates in the three of them going down to the gym so Rogers can yell out his mileage while he runs. Flying Sam sulks, and Barnes takes out his annoyance on the climbing wall.

The climbing wall is actually not so bad.

Then showers, then breakfast, and it’s past 1100 already. Barnes is starting to get a little mental static.

“So beating the crap out of each other on New Year’s Eve,” flying Sam says when the breakfast dishes have been cleaned up and they’re waiting for the next pot of coffee to brew, “whose genius idea was that?”

Barnes looks at Rogers, who wears an expression of dread. Looks familiar.

“Mine, I guess,” Rogers says. “I mean, we weren’t going to Tony’s party, and Bucky couldn’t seem to settle. I thought a workout might wear him out a little.”

“Workout?” flying Sam says in a tone of deep sarcasm.

Time to step up, Barnes.

PROTECT

That’s right. Can’t let Rogers fall on his sword.

“Other options were given: running, weights. I chose sparring.”

Flying Sam looks up at the ceiling and breathes deeply.

“So you’re both stupid,” he says.

“Sam.”

“Tell me exactly what went down,” he says to Rogers.

“Like I said: he just couldn’t seem to settle down, wouldn’t stop pacing. I thought maybe he needed to bleed off some energy.”

“That true, Barnes?”

Shrug.

“Barnes. You were keyed up?”

“Over-stimulated, confirm,” Barnes says. “Had not slept in over twenty-eight hours.”

“What?” Rogers says.
“Y’all have to be kidding me right now,” flying Sam says. “Steve.”

Rogers flaps his arms.

“Okay, so you were starting from a baseline level of stupid already, then you went down to the gym. Then what,” flying Sam says.

“Bucky went toward the ring. I had to call him back so we could get the protective gear.”

Barnes pours coffee on the counter, owing to his newly shaking hand. He successfully puts the carafe down and steps out from behind the kitchen island, farther away from them.

“What gear did you use?” flying Sam asks.

He mops up the coffee, fills Barnes’s mug, and sets the mug on the corner of the kitchen island, pushes over the sugar and cream, and steps back. The spoon rattles loudly in the cup while Barnes stirs, even though he uses his left hand. The plates are shifting back and forth.

“Just normal gear,” Rogers says. “Head protectors. He didn’t want it at first, but once he had it on, he didn’t argue anymore about it. Let me wrap up his hands and put his gloves on for him.”

“You had to put the gloves on for him?”

Is he allowed to go to the sofa.

“Yeah. He. He balked a little bit at the bite guard.”

The colors in his surroundings are paling out.

“And then?” flying Sam asks.

“He seemed fine. Really calm. Not aggressive at all, mostly just blocking me, until I got in a lucky shot, and he just lashed out.”

“Goddammit, Steve.”

“What?”

“Look at him.”

No, don’t look at me.

“Bucky.”

“Hey, Barnes. Why don’t you go sit where it’s safe.”

CONFIRM

Confirm. Will comply.

“Better?” flying Sam asks.

Barnes looks up: he’s sitting on the coffee table. Rogers is standing back near the television. Flying Sam has a serious expression, but Rogers looks distressed.

“I don’t understand,” Rogers says.

“It wasn’t calm, was it, Barnes? When you had the gear on?” flying Sam asks.

Barnes shakes his head.

“Can you say what it was?”

Identified: trembling, sweat, lump in throat.

“It’s okay if you can’t,” flying Sam says, “but it would help to say it.”

TRY

Nod.

“Compliance,” he says.

Feels like choking to say it.

“What do you mean compliance,” Rogers says in a hoarse whisper.

Obey the handler. Disobedience means punishment.

Why do they recoil like that.

“Hey,” flying Sam says, “okay. Compliance. What caused that? The gear?”

Nod.

“All of it, or any piece in particular?”

Identified: protected back, protected sides. Familiar pressure of soft cushions. Ideal arm-rest height for comfort.

“It’s okay, Barnes. None of that stuff is here.”

“Head piece,” he says, “bite guard.”

“God, Bucky,” Rogers says.

“Can you take five good breaths for me, Barnes?” flying Sam says.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.
GOOD JOB

Thanks, mission.

“You had stuff like that back at HYDRA?”

Nod.

“Barnes,” flying Sam says in a gentle voice.

Barnes looks up. Not at Steve. Steve is melting down. He can’t. Can’t protect right now.

Just. Give me a minute, Steve.

“Three more breaths.”

One.

Two.

Three.

“I know you don’t want to say it. But I swear to you, it helps. If you can.”

Barnes shakes his head.

How does one even find the words for it. The throat closes up.

“One word at a time,” flying Sam says.

One.

Two.

Three.


“Jesus,” Rogers says. “Bucky. Bucky, I am so —“

He is moving, walking forward, hands out. Large. Fast.

Identified: fear.

“Steve,” flying Sam says in a tone so sharp that Barnes jumps as well. “Don’t touch him right now, okay?”

“Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“We never saw that,” flying Sam says. “Steve’s got a file on you, you know? It described some pretty bad things, but it never said exactly how they wiped you.”

“File’s out of date,” Barnes says.

Not on purpose. Apparently some things are easy to say.
“You saw it?” Rogers asks.

“Confirm.”

“They left stuff out, Barnes?” flying Sam asks.

Incongruously, Barnes wishes to laugh.

Left stuff out.

You assholes don’t know one eighth of it, thank you very much.

PROTECT

Protect who, mission? Are we protecting Steve now? Or me? Because you know what would protect me right now? A fucking wipe to take these fucking memories away.

“Hey,” flying Sam says, and reaches out his hand.


The body wants to move. He stands.

There’s no goddamn safe space if the danger is in his own fucking head. And they won’t stop looking at him.

He could run. Take the stairs down, four at a time, thirty-two floors, disappear into Manhattan’s crowds.

But for what? Rogers would turn the world inside out to find him, with building JARVIS and Romanoff to help.

Exhausting.

Barnes takes the less-tiring option. He goes to the door and stands in the corner behind the hinges, where he can press his forehead against the wall and pretend they aren’t staring at him.

“I’m sorry, Barnes. That was stupid of me,” flying Sam says.

Shrug.

“Can you tell us about that?”

Can he. Unknown.

“Sam, that’s enough. You can’t make him —”

Identified: anger.

Barnes raises his hands and places them on the wall to either side of his head. He makes a fist with his left hand and knocks it against the wall twice. But gently, to avoid needing repairs later.

Can’t make me, pal. Sure you can. Just keep it up with the pleases and the Buckys and the come ons and you can make me. That’s why we’re in this shit show now, isn’t it?

“Bucky.”
Barnes speaks quickly, before he can change his mind.

“Negative response to touching. Identified: panic response. Learned instinctive reaction based on experience. The body remembers what the mind resists recalling. Inventory categories: testing, reprogramming, punishment.”

no you can’t tell him this, stop.

“First category: testing. Long-term medical monitoring of serum and freezing effects. Multiple efforts to implant tracking and remote de-accessioning devices. Device migration owing to serum effects. Device removal. Extensive testing of pain tolerance. Extensive testing of serum healing factor.”

They never used any anesthesia Steve. They cut me open over and over and wrote down notes about how much it took for me to finally pass out. I’ve seen my own liver Steve. They made bets on how long I could scream before my voice gave out. I remember what it smells like when I’m on fire.

stop. he can’t know this. it will only hurt him. stop.


They told me you were dead Steve. I waited for you. I waited for you to come get me but you never came. I always remembered your name no matter what they did to me Steve but you never came, and then they told me you were dead. They showed me the newspapers. You were dead. No one would save me because you were dead Steve.

don’t say it Steve will hear you.

So I let them have me.

“Experimentation with programming techniques. Identified: water boarding, drug regimens, direct cortical stimulation. Death and revival via drowning, suffocation, artificially introduced arrhythmia.”

He sits on the floor. The body is so tired, and the knees tremble. The wall feels cold and solid against his forehead. The wall will not go to pieces.

stop now.

No. No I might as well finish it now.


Bored guards rated punishment. Tuesday rated punishment.

“Inventory: confinement, beating, sleep deprivation, confinement, sexual abuse, drug regimens, confinement.”

They hurt me every way they could think of Steve. Sometimes they made up new ways just for fun.

There is evidence.

don’t let him see no Steve don’t look.
Barnes takes off his shirt.

“I saw those when your shoulder was hurt, Buck,” Steve says. “Where’d you get them?”

Three straight lines down his back, two on the left side and one on the right.

“Whipping. With chains.”

“Don’t you. Heal like I do?”

“Healing efficiency lower than original serum permits scar formation given sufficient wound severity. Cryofreezing required for full scar resolution. No cryo subsequent to receiving these.”

One.

Two.

Three.

“Somebody gave you those in DC?” flying Sam asks.

Vocal tenor indicates extreme anger.

“Wounds date to three weeks before present consciousness. Five lacerations requiring suture, including three requiring dermal suture to close tissue over bone. Handler: Rumlow, Brock, chastised for excessive force mid-mission.”

Barnes is able to remember the chains set into the floor at the bank. The chains Rumlow whipped him with, laughing the whole time while the lab coats mewled in the corner like their usual useless selves. Barnes doesn’t remember a lot of handlers, but he remembers enough of Rumlow to hope that he has suffered a particularly slow, painful, gruesome fate.

“Why would he.”

“Because he was an asshole, Steve.”

Whereas Barnes took those chains and pulled them out of the floor. He pulled them from the floor himself and used them to destroy the tank.

He did that.

He pulled the chains from the floor. Destroyed the tank. Destroyed the chair.

PROTECT

Yes.

The briefing lets go of him, and Barnes sags forward. He pulls his shirt over his back. He’s cold, but his arms ache too much to put the shirt on. His throat hurts. His brain hurts. His chest aches.

What the hell, briefing.

He shivers.

“Can I get you a blanket, Barnes?” flying Sam asks.

Nod.
Rogers walks over but stays 2 m away.

“Can I sit down with you? Over here.”

Nod.

Flying Sam comes back into the room, shuffling his feet as he walks to make noise.

“Blanket incoming,” he says.

Barnes flinches from it — there’s a minute of no-don’t confine me-heavy-too much. Then Barnes pulls it around his chest, and the warmth is good.

“I don’t like ice in my drink,” Rogers says.

What.

“Can’t stand the stuff, ever since I defrosted.”

His voice sounds nasal and hoarse.

PROTECT

Yes.

“That must be a real hardship, pal.”

“It really is.”

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

“Did they put you in a chair too,” Barnes says.

“What?”

“To make you. Did they put you in a chair.”

“Good question, Barnes,” flying Sam says.

Barnes looks at Rogers, who wears an expression of profound sorrow.

“No, Buck. It was a tube kind of thing. But I climbed into it on my own power.”

“Did it hurt.”

“Hurt like hell. But after I came out of it, that was the first time in my life that nothing hurt at all.”

Barnes assesses current pain levels. Must be nice to have pain levels be zero.
He rests his head against the wall again. Neck’s too tired to hold his head up.

“You can move ten centimeters closer,” he says.

Rogers gives a miserable-sounding laugh and moves.

“We did this once before,” he says.

“Did what.”

“Sat like this. Me just out of reach, you facing the wall. Right after Azzano. The first time Zola had you. You never did talk to me then. Just sat, until you shook it off and decided to pretend you were fine.”

The briefing turns over inside, but even it is too tired to dredge up something that old.

“I don’t want to remember that right now.”

“You don’t ever have to, Bucky. I’ll remember it for both of us.”

That is kindness. Barnes remembers: Rogers also has a mission imperative to protect. He beckons, and Rogers moves exactly 10 cm closer.

Flying Sam seems to have been correct. Having spoken, Barnes no longer reacts with fear to Steve’s presence.

“How’d you do this, Barnes?” flying Sam says from behind them. “How’d you make it to here?”

“Got a new mission,” he says, and reaches over to poke Rogers in the shoulder. Just one fingertip. Not so bad.

“You always were the strong one,” Rogers says.

Whatever.

“I’m sorry I was so stupid, Bucky. It won’t happen again.”

Likelihood of that happening: 0.3%. Barnes cranes around to look at flying Sam, who grins.

“I am so proud of y’all,” he says, “and I’ll be even prouder if next time you talk to each other first without waiting for me.”

That would be more efficient.

CONFIRM

“I feel like a wrung-out dishrag,” Rogers says.

If Barnes looks half as puffy and tear-stained as Rogers (likelihood: 400%), they are both out of contention for any last-minute beauty contests.

Barnes stands up, and only has to lean on the wall for 2 seconds to regain his balance.

“If you’ll take one more piece of advice from the seasoned professional in the room,” flying Sam says, “we’re gonna wash our faces, order a bunch of pizzas, drink a bunch of beer and watch the dumbest movie we can find on TV. And tomorrow will be better.”
It’s always wise to trust an expert.

“Confirm,” he says.

“Confirm,” Steve says. And laughs.

Chapter End Notes

This is the conversation Steve remembers in A Chance to Try Bravery (https://archiveofourown.org/works/5076952)
Flying Sam is a good handler. His post-outburst recovery plan is highly successful. He even provides an opportunity for Rogers to enjoy an argument, when he orders one pizza with ham and pineapple.

Rogers has strong opinions about the inappropriateness of fruit on pizza. Rogers is wrong: it is delicious.

Even better, at the end of the speech, flying Sam says,

“Tomatoes are fruit.”

Nice.

The movie is exceptionally stupid – even flying Sam spends most of it texting. It is about dogs playing basketball, and Barnes is certain that watching it has lowered his basic level of intelligence.

But by the end of the evening, Barnes feels more at ease than he has since they moved to Manhattan. He looks over at Rogers and flying Sam, currently picking all the black olives off the remaining pieces of pizza, thereby obliterating any illusion that they are kind or good-hearted men.

He told them terrible things, and they did not make him leave.

“You okay over there, Bucky?”

Surprisingly, yes. Tired enough to sleep for a month, but okay.

Barnes wakes at 0217 and sees on the monitor that Rogers is awake, sitting up with his elbows on his knees, staring at his own monitor with a solemn expression. Barnes waves.

Rogers waves back, and his shoulders hitch.

“Don’t let me keep you up, Bucky. Go back to sleep.”

They have flying Sam for half the day before he goes to Harlem to visit his mother. Prior to flying Sam’s arrival, Rogers had been full of ideas about amusing activities for them. Post-meltdown, they sit at the kitchen table yawning, drinking coffee, and picking at breakfast until 0930.

Barnes feels raw around the edges. He wants to ask questions:

- Did Rogers understand before
- Was speaking okay
- What is the next action

But questions require talking. Also, what if the answers are negative.

“I swear, the two of you,” flying Sam says.

Before either of them can request clarification, three firm knocks sound at the door.

“Hey, Natasha,” Rogers says when he opens it.
Barnes, still sitting at the table, sees the way flying Sam purses his lips before he takes a drink of coffee.

Flying Sam has called in backup.

Who’s getting the beat-down, champ.

Romanoff kisses flying Sam on the cheek and says,

“Let’s see you, Barnes.”

She studies his face briefly, standing exactly 0.8 m away, just at the point past his fingertips if he reached out.

“Sam told me about yesterday. I hope that’s okay.”

Assessing. If her supposition is correct that they were trained by some of the same people, did she undergo similar programming.

Identified: sadness at the thought that Romanoff could have endured similar suffering.

Even if she is terrible.

“It’s okay,” he says.

“Nice to see you took my advice about not leaving us in body or spirit,” she says, “I hate necromancy.”

For an example of her awfulness. Thanks a lot, lady.

“What,” Rogers growls.

“Oh, Steve! I forgot you were standing there!” she chirps.


“The hell you mean leaving.”

It is super soldier as grizzly.

“Great idea, let’s head out,” Romanoff says.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

The smile drops off her face. It was a fake smile to begin with, but the expression following it is spooky. Barnes is definitely getting the better part of this bargain.

“Oh, you are, Rogers. You’re coming with me and we are going to have a nice long talk about symptoms of dissociation and your extremely poor powers of observation.”

Rogers exchanges anger for confusion.

“We’re what?”

“It’ll be fun. For me, anyhow. I don’t know how you’ll take the extensive listing of all the ways in which you’ve been a dumbass.”
Barnes looks at flying Sam, who sips his coffee with a serene expression, as if no conversation is going on to his right.

“Don’t wait up,” Romanoff says, and pulls Rogers out the door.

Don’t wait up. It is 0950. How much are they going to talk.

YIKES

Confirm, mission. I feel kind of bad for Steve.

CONFIRM

Flying Sam sets his coffee mug down on the table.

“What do you call them,” he asks, “your three parts?”

Oh. It’s separate and interrogate. That old game.

“Mission head, mission imperative, mission briefing.”

“How’s the briefing doing?”

Identified: surprise.

Barnes assesses.

“Tired. Worked hard yesterday.”

“Yeah, I bet. Those memories bothering you before?”

“Negative. Locked away.”

Flying Sam frowns.

“Okay. How’s the mission imperative?”

FINE

It answers quickly, as if it’s excited to be asked.

“Says it’s fine,” Barnes reports.

“Fine’s not too specific.”

There is a shivery feeling in his chest.

It’s okay, mission. Flying Sam is mission-assist.

WORRIED

MISSION: PROTECT

PROTECT TARGET
PROTECT MISSION HEAD

CONTRADICTION

DOWNLOAD PROTECTS MISSION HEAD

POTENTIALLY INJURES TARGET

Confirm, mission.

Barnes repeats this to flying Sam, who looks surprised.

“Okay. And how are you?”

“Same. Tired from strong emotion. Concerned that negative intel will injure Steve. Injury could result in rejection, especially given recent injury and behavior.”

“Barnes. You really think Steve would reject you?”

Barnes looks at the contents of his mug. All the parts of him wish to hide from this question. There is too much potential for hurt. He is not recovered from yesterday, or the week preceding it. Also, the mug is only 1/8 full.

However, How many times has Rogers said ‘sorry’ since the incident in the gym. The monitors where his idea. He let Barnes use the giraffe pants.

“Maybe not.”

“I’m gonna tell you definitely not, Barnes. He’s in this for thick or thin. Like you, right?”

CONFIRM

“Confirm.”

“What are you gonna do to make sure this kind of mess doesn’t happen again?”

Stay out of the gym.

Shrug.


Nod.

“What else?”

Assessing.

“Baths.”

“Good. What else?”

Defined tasks.

“Baking.”

“That’s really good. Anything else?”
Barnes stares. That’s already a lot. Flying Sam does not know about the cookbooks, with 1000 recipes each.

“Talk to your friends, maybe?”

“The Olds are in Brooklyn.”

“Barnes. Brooklyn isn’t Mars. Hail a damn cab. Call them on the phone!”

Call them on the phone. That requires talking.

“I don’t have their numbers,” he says.

His phone vibrates. The Contacts page comes up. It now contains six names: Rogers, Romanoff, flying Sam. Plus Esther Berman, Lidia Stepanich, and Oliver Peters.

“Building,” he says.

“Ms. Stepanich’s iPad is capable of video calls,” the text screen reads.

“You see, Barnes? Your backup’s still around. Hey. It’s okay, man. You’re all right.”

Barnes uses his handkerchief.

“You want to call them now?” flying Sam asks.

“Yes.”

Like his list of good things, Barnes is compiling a list of safety-enhancing things: the sofa, five breaths, the tub, and now calling the Olds on the television.

The television shows cat Eleanor sitting on the floor in front of a bookcase while Lidia’s voice says,

“—do it right? Hello? Who is this please?”

“It’s Sam Wilson, Lidia. Sam and Barnes.”

“Jimmy,” Barnes says, and cat Eleanor’s ears flick.

“Jimmy?” Lidia’s voice says, “hello! Do you have a cold? I think I’m supposed to see you, but it remains Farm Heroes, and I have lost my level because there weren’t enough onions.”

“Who are you shouting at?” Esther’s voice says.

“Jimmy is on the iPad with that handsome Sam Wilson, but I can’t see them.”

“Jimmy? Are you on the iPad really?”

“You have to turn the camera around,” flying Sam says mid-laugh.

Lidia and Esther wrangle over the iPad: the picture jumps around. Too bad. He loses sight of cat Eleanor. But flying Sam is able finally to direct Lidia to the correct button. The picture collapses, then expands, and he can see half each of Esther’s and Lidia’s faces.

“Hi,” he says.

Identified: strong emotion, the desire to hide his face.
“Jimmy, you look terrible, are you ill?” Esther says.

She sounds distressed.

“Not ill,” he says, “I’m okay.”

“Kind of a rough transition to Manhattan,” flying Sam says.

Esther opens her mouth, but Lidia cuts in.

“Don’t you tell me about rough transitions. Do you realize that beast of Esther’s runs laps every night at two a.m.?”

“She does not,” Esther says.

“She does! You don’t hear it because you’re too busy snoring.”

“Lidia, you stop it right now, I do not!”

“I’m sure Jimmy knows all about it,” Lidia says.

They are ridiculous. Lidia is grinning, and Esther wears a scowl so fierce that her glasses have ridden up her nose.

Words are locked up tight in his throat again. Why would the sight of their faces do that. Their expressions falter.

“Barnes and Steve had a big talk yesterday,” flying Sam says. “I think he used up his weekly allotment of words.”

Flying Sam is pulling out all the stops.

Esther looks at Lidia, who nods once.

“Well that’s all right,” Esther says. “It’s just nice to see your face.”

Barnes presses back into the corner of the sofa.

“How are you settling into the apartment?” flying Sam asks.

“Oh, wonderfully,” Lidia says. “Don’t mind me and my silliness. Esther’s a wonderful roommate. At this rate I’ll outgrow all my clothes from all the cooking. But that cat! Jimmy, can I persuade you to take her?”

“Don’t you listen to her Jimmy, she loves Eleanor. She just loves complaining more.”

“Speaking of complaining! We’re never going to hear the end of this from Ollie!”

“Where is Ollie?”

It’s probably a good sign that he could make himself speak. It makes Esther and Lidia smile, anyway.

“Off at the VFW,” Esther says, “probably getting his butt kicked at checkers.”

“Drinking terrible coffee and pretending that it’s better than spending time with us, which it most
certainly is not,” Lidia says.

They talk for 25 minutes. Lidia asks about the cookbooks, which makes Esther ask about the kitchen, and Barnes is able to answer questions, at least. Esther fetches cat Eleanor, who looks around her and makes a small sound when Barnes tells her hello.

“You should call us again soon, Jimmy,” Lidia says when the conversation has wound down.

“I will.”

“It’s good to see your face, dear heart,” Esther says.

“Better?” flying Sam asks when the television goes dark.

Nod.

“That’s how it goes, Barnes. You figure out the things that help, and you do them.”

The good list, and the safe list.

“This is difficult,” Barnes says.

Oops. Didn’t mean for that to come out.

“Dude. You went through seventy years of terrible shit. It was always going to be difficult, coming back from that.”

He has a question. It takes effort to make the words.

“It was easier before. Why now.”

“A million reasons,” flying Sam says, “recovery’s not a straight line. Sometimes you have to build up your strength before you can let yourself be weak. Sometimes things just hit you wrong.”

Barnes commits this to memory.

“There’s gonna be stuff that sets you off.”

“Like punching Steve.”

“Yeah. Like punching Steve. Maybe hold off on doing that again. But it’s normal, okay?”

It’s not okay. It’s fucking bullshit is what it is.

CONFIRM

Goddamn HYDRA.

CONFIRM

“You want to talk about it more?” flying Sam asks.

“No.”

Flying Sam smiles at his vehemence.
“Fair enough, man. You want me to get out of your hair? Let you have a little alone time?”

Assessing.

“No.”

Which is how Mrs. Wilson comes to be the recipient – instead of the provider – of baked goods.

Rogers returns 90 minutes after flying Sam’s departure, looking pretty rough about the face. He stands in front of Barnes, opening and closing his mouth. Like words are also caught inside his throat, unable to emerge.

Barnes hands over the plate of cookies. Plain chocolate chip, nothing fancy, but Rogers almost smiles when he takes 3 of them.

“Sam get off okay?”

“Confirm. Said to tell you goodbye.”

Rogers looks tired.

PROTECT

Confirm.

“I gotta apologize, Bucky.”

Or, you know, the other way around, apparently.

“For what.”

“All of it, I guess? Natasha said –“

He frowns.

“What did she say.”

“She said I make it worse. By expecting you to be the same Bucky. That I don’t. Look at you. See how you actually are.”

That’s true, but nobody has to like it. Barnes identifies: sadness.

Indirect surveillance was so much easier.

The briefing pipes up.

Right. Except for Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and the days in between them.

PROTECT

I’m trying, mission. Figure he is too.

CONFIRM

Barnes holds out the plate of cookies again.
“Guess we both have shit to work on, pal.”

“Yeah, Buck.”
Because they're never allowed to catch a damn break, Thor knocks on the door at 0900 the next morning to inquire whether Rogers would like to spar.

Barnes imagines Rogers saying,

"I've spent the whole month so far in a you-sized pile of trouble caused by sparring," or,

"Sorry, Romanoff has me under strict orders to keep my paws to myself until I get my brain in order."

Unfortunately, what he says is, "that sounds great, actually."

Because Rogers is the greatest living pain in the ass. And sadly only about as smart as he looks.

Barnes wonders who would be more likely to nail Rogers to the wall for this decision: Romanoff or flying Sam.

Barnes would, but it's not mission-compatible.

CONFIRM

It's too bad.

"Okay, Buck? I assume you want to stay here?"

1. Not okay, Rogers.

"Coming with," he says.

"Excellent!" Thor yells (yelling apparently being his baseline), "your presence will be most welcome, friend Barnes."

Rogers scowls. But he says nothing.

Thor stares at Barnes in the elevator.

"Something has happened," he says, "your energies are calmer. Whatever it was, I am glad of it."

Energies. What does that even mean.

"Thanks," Barnes says.

The gym remains dire: a place of clammy skin and increased mental noise. Barnes replays the memory of flying Sam testing Stark's wings and is able to keep his respiration normal.

Barnes uses the climbing wall while Thor and Rogers jump around the obstacle course throwing their fancy weapons at each other. He climbs until his muscles burn, then scales the wall all the way to the top to sit on the little platform with his arms clasped around his knees.
The sound of their laughter, and the enthusiasm in Rogers's voice, have created two contradictory responses.

It is mission-compliant that Rogers is enjoying himself.

But.

There is nothing wrong with Thor. Thor has demonstrated friendliness and consideration. There is no logical reason why his sparring with Steve should make Barnes so angry.

It does.

Barnes watches them fling the shield and hammer at each other, gradually learning how to make the two work together. Like choreography.

"It's like baseball!" Rogers laughs at one point.

Or like fucking baseball. Ugh.

They are evenly matched and fight well together. Like he and Rogers would, if Barnes weren't such a damn mess.

For 68 minutes, it looks fun. Rogers and Thor grin at each other. Rogers looks over regularly to the top of the climbing wall, checking in.

Then, in one moment, in the motion of Rogers's arm swinging from back to front, the smile drops off his face. His shoulders tighten.

The shield strikes the hammer and rings like a bell. The sound makes Barnes's left arm vibrate. Makes his teeth ache.

Rogers swings back and hits at Thor again, body rigid. Thor's smile is gone too, but his expression suggests concern, not anger. Rogers hits, and hits, and once he makes a hoarse cry.

PROTECT

Yeah, I see it, mission.

Barnes swings down off the climbing wall and jogs over to stand just outside the fighting radius.

He doesn't want to fight. Identified: stress response. He can feel the turmoil of the previous week still hovering. Violence will bring it forward.

Steve is being very stupid.

But Barnes can stand close by, as Steve did by the door in the common area when Darcy Lewis spooked him. Barnes can stand guard. Be ready to help. Be a reminder.

Rogers hits, over and over, rolling his eyes toward Barnes, teeth clenched. Thor stands calm, blocking the blows, occasionally stepping to the side so neither of them gets hurt.

Then Rogers drops the shield and stands with his head and hands hanging, sweat dripping off him.

"It is all right, Steven," Thor says.

Rogers shakes his head.
"It is," Barnes says.

Or anyhow, maybe it will be at some point. Assuming that 'it' is … everything.

Roger's head snaps left, and he stares at Barnes. His eyebrows come together briefly.

Barnes has come down to the gym with no handkerchiefs, and this seems like the beginning of a handkerchief moment.

Except that Steve pushes it all down. Barnes watches it happen – Steve bottles up all that strong emotion and stuffs it deep inside. Leaving himself looking stiff and uncomfortable.

Barnes identifies: dislike.

"I thank you for an enjoyable workout, my friend," Thor says after looking back and forth between Rogers and Barnes. "It is seldom that I find myself so challenged while on Earth."

Rogers takes so long to answer that Barnes gives consideration to kicking him so he'll remember his manners.

"Sure thing," Rogers says finally.

"Perhaps someday you will be able to join us, Barnes."

Nod.

"Well. I must away. I have been informed by Jane that I may not live another day without consuming something called a pastrami on rye. I wish you both a fruitful day."

He probably thinks he's doing Rogers a favor by bowing out. Unfortunately, it leaves Barnes doing cleanup.

This is not really the kind of cleanup he's good at.

Rogers continues to stare at the floor, doing a creditable impression of a statue. Barnes waits until the elevator has had time to carry Thor out of hearing.

"Rogers," he says.

Steve's shoulders shake.

"Hey, pal."

Steve looks over at him again.

"Let's go home."

For 3 heartbeats, it looks like Rogers is going to crumple. But he stuffs it down again.

"Yeah, okay."

Barnes sits in the safe spot while Rogers showers.

Probably the spot wouldn't feel safe to Rogers. Different parameters.
It's a puzzle that Barnes mulls over through his own shower: Rogers's safety protocols. Maybe he
doesn't have any. Barnes has never seen evidence that Rogers has a list of good things.

As he dresses, he sees the sketchbook on his bedside table. The one Rogers gave him for Christmas.

Worth a shot.

Rogers is sitting on the sofa in full-on Stay the Hell Away Mode, knees spread wide, arms out at his
sides, face scowling.

Barnes sits on his own end of the sofa and hands over the sketchbook.

"Tell me a memory," he says.

Rogers's scowl deepens.

Unexpected response.

But then Rogers's expression clears, and he just looks sad.

"Okay, Buck."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it's okay," then, "what are you wearing?"

The sleep pants with dancing collies, obviously. The giraffe ones were dirty.

"I need them."

Rogers makes an unhappy-sounding laugh.

"I wish a pair of sleep pants could make me feel better."

"Why don't they."

They are soft, warm, and ridiculous. They ought to make anyone feel better, even when mission
support isn't needed.

Rogers looks surprised.

"Be right back," he says.

When he returns, he's wearing the black ones with elephants. Nice.

"Okay." Rogers pages through the sketchbook, "something happy, right?"

"Confirm."

Like he had to ask.

Rogers flips back and forth through the sketchbook several times. It’s full of drawings that give
Barnes vertigo: scenes that look like they should be familiar but aren’t, or things that are only half
familiar, like the Howling Commandos standing on a beach with a dark-haired woman and a pile of
spooky-looking weapons.

Rogers finally stops on a drawing that takes up both sides of the page: a street view, crappy-looking
buildings and shop fronts, a bus and a horse-drawn cart, indistinct, dark-clad figures on the streets.

The picture means nothing to Barnes. But he’s glad Rogers didn’t pick one of the ones with people in it. Or the baseball one. Barnes does not have the emotional fortitude for an evangelical speech about baseball.

“This was our street, in Brooklyn Heights,” Rogers says in a scratchy voice. “Where we grew up.”

Going far back. Good choice, Rogers. Probably safer.

“This is the view from my building. I spent a lot of time out on the front stoop, drawing this view when I had pencils, looking at it when I didn’t. All those times when I was well enough to be out of bed but too sick to play. Even now, I can draw this in my sleep.”

“Did he live there too?”

This is apparently the wrong question, given the way Rogers’s head snaps up to stare at him with fierce eyes.

“You, Bucky. Not he.”

Oh.

That’s the trick, isn’t it. Barnes has the same body, and the briefing. The mission to protect. But he’s not the same. Is it even possible to be so.

If it’s not possible, will Steve make him go away.

How long will he wait.

“I’m sorry,” Rogers says, “that was the wrong thing to say. Jesus, Nat just told me this yesterday. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t remember,” Barnes says.

“I know, Buck. I know, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

Rogers looks like he wants to put his foot even further into his mouth, but then he shrugs.

“Everything smelled different back then,” he says, “people smelled different. Less perfumy, like living things. Everything’s so clean now. Well-lit. Which is - good, I guess? You’d go to the butcher and buy twenty-five cents worth of beef liver wrapped in paper. It’s all in plastic now.”

He points to one storefront.

“That’s the butcher, Korzchak and sons. The grandsons were two and three grades ahead of us in school. God, they were awful. You broke the younger one’s nose once.”

“Why.”

“Uh, if memory serves because he called me puny Irish trash.”

“Seems reasonable.”
For once, Barnes has performed the correct action. Rogers laughs.

“Jesus, Bucky, you’re still doing it too, aren’t you? That whole warehouse in Queens, my god!”

It's true. Ain’t that a thing.

“They don’t get to call you that, Stevie, not anyone, not ever,” the briefing gives him – the high, indignant voice of a prepubescent male.

It’s a long damn protection detail. No wonder HYDRA couldn’t burn it out of him.

The moment has unlocked Rogers’s words for him. He talks for a long time after that, stories from when he and the Bucky-person were small children.

Tiny Bucky-person beat up a shit ton of small assholes on Steve Rogers’s behalf.

Good job, tiny Bucky-person.

CONFIRM

The briefing gives him the image of a mini-Steve making the sunrise smile.

Really good to see in memory, if 400% less positive than seeing it in person.

The tense set of Rogers’s shoulders is gone by end of day, but Barnes wakes at 0035 to an unfamiliar sound. On the monitor, Rogers is thrashing in his bed, making a sound like “nnguh.”

 Defined task.

Barnes goes into Rogers’s room. The sound of the door opening is insufficient to wake him.

Toe-pinching is an effective waking method, but that seems rude to do to someone having a nightmare.

He lays his hand on Rogers’s shoulder. Rogers convulses and wakes suddenly, eyes wide with distress and respiration increased.

Barnes clenches his jaw and maintains position, hand on Rogers’s shoulder, grasping firmly.

“Bucky,” Rogers says.

“Right here, pal.”

Rogers shivers for a minute and puts his hands over his face. When he removes them, Barnes stands up.

“Sorry I woke you.”

“It’s okay,” Barnes says.

Rogers looks at the wall, awake but obviously still caught up in whatever he was dreaming.

“What was it.”

Rogers blinks up at him.

“Oh, the usual,” he says, “everybody around me dying while I can’t do a damn thing about it.”
Sounds terrific. Just about on par with killing everyone around him and not being able to stop it.

“T’m not gonna sleep any more tonight,” Rogers says. “Can we – go somewhere? I want to walk.”

“City that never sleeps, right? That’s what they say on the television.”

They don’t get very far. Despite the comfort of many layers of clothing and his hat, when they exit the elevator banks on the ground floor, the expanse of the lobby – that sense of huge space – makes the body seize up and refuse to move forward.

What a terrific development. Can’t take small spaces, can’t take big ones. How fun.

“You okay, Bucky?”

Barnes shakes his head.

“What is it?”

It takes several minutes to speak.

“Too much space.”

Doesn’t make any sense. The gym is huge. But the gym doesn’t have any windows.

‘Want to walk,’ Rogers said.

Dammit.

“You should go,” Barnes says.

He’s wearing the bugged jacket. It’ll be all right. Barnes can stay right here and listen. Rogers can walk until he feels better.

“No, it’s okay,” Rogers says.

“You said you wanted to walk.”

“I’d rather be where you are.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Coffee bar’s open,” Barnes says.

“It always comes down to coffee for you, doesn’t it?”

Nod.

“We’ll take the stairs up, okay Buck?”

“Confirm.”

Chapter End Notes
This references chp. 24 of This, You Protect
(http://archiveofourown.org/works/1752638/chapters/5906783)
Effective treatments for nightmares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They trade off nightmares for several nights. That first night, the woman at the coffee bar, Katie, smiles at them and makes decaf mochas.

Rogers stares into the cup and talks about working with Rumlow. Who, as it turns out, was a lying fuck on top of being an abusive handler. Gosh, who could’ve guessed.

The second night, it’s Barnes’s turn to dream of terrible things: the sex stuff mostly, so that he levitates 1 m off the bed at the touch of Steve’s hand on his shoulder. Which is terrific.

Katie at the coffee bar makes sympathetic noises and serves them hot chocolate with whipped cream.

Barnes elects not to recount his stupid awful dreams and asks about the alien attack instead. It’s not an uplifting story – and they find out that Katie’s boyfriend had been smashed flat by a building during it, which does wonders for Rogers’s attitude – but it passes the damn time.

The third night it’s Rogers’s turn again, yelling ‘Bucky Bucky no.’ Katie frowns at them and serves a pale yellow-green tea that tastes of grass clippings. “I don’t work the night shift tomorrow,” she says,” so you two might want to think about actually sleeping.”

Barnes tells Rogers about calling Esther and Lidia on the television, and some of the tightness goes out of Rogers’s eyes.

The fourth night, Barnes dreams of confinement and suffocation, so that after Rogers has awakened him, the walls of the apartment feel too close, and they actually make it all the way outside.

It was easy to forget, during the intervening weeks spent indoors, how goddamn cold it is. A wet-smelling wind blows in from the northeast.

“Where’s your damn hat,” he says.

“Don’t need one,” Rogers says.

Incorrect.

CONFIRM

The Carp is not open at 0135, of course, but they find a grungy diner that is, and Barnes learns that a hand-high pile of pancakes will drive bad dreams away pretty well.
Useful mission intel.

While they eat, it starts to snow: heavy clumps that fly in almost sideways and quickly cover the sidewalks and paper boxes.

“That’s really pretty,” Rogers says.

They order another round of breakfast foods and watch the snow fall. It is aesthetically appealing. The briefing has many disjointed images of snow – plenty from the bad old days, tinged with red and the memory of aching joints, but some from the Bucky-person too. Mini-Steve looking pale but for a bright red spot on each cheek, grinning. Multiple children yelling with excitement.

“You want to walk a little?” Rogers asks after they’ve paid for their intensive carbohydrate treatment.

An easy question to answer, for once.

“Yes.”

Even though it is really damn cold, the wind in his face invigorates, and the snow swirling through the streetlights creates mental quiet. He looks over at Rogers, who walks with his chin held high, watching the snow fall.

GOOD

Yes. It’s good.

“They say you take your life into your own hands to go into Central Park at night,” Rogers says in a voice suggestive of challenge.

“Gee whiz, sounds scary,” Barnes says.

Also good: making Rogers laugh. Mission-compliant.

CONFIRM

They walk up and down the gentle hills under bare branches and cold white lights, snow piling up around them as their feet crunch through it.

“We’re gonna be okay, Buck, I know it,” Rogers says after a time.

Barnes stops in the middle of the path. Strong emotion slides through him like a tide coming in.

“Bucky?”

Rogers has one hand held out but does not touch: lesson learned.

But.

Barnes reaches out and grasps Rogers’s wrist. Rogers inhales sharply. Barnes shakes once, then lets go.

Respiration normal. Pulse normal. Success.

“I never wanted to tell you those things,” he says.

“It’s okay, Bucky.”
“I know. Flying Sam was right. Still hard, though.”

“I know.”

“Long way to go to get to okay.”

“Doesn’t matter, Buck.”

Barnes would like to break out into a cascade of gloomy thoughts about that. But they’ve been standing still long enough, and it’s snowing hard enough that Rogers has a small pile of snow accumulating on top of his head.

Kind of difficult to maintain pessimism under that circumstance.

“Guess we’re gonna be okay, then. Since you said so.”

Rogers grins wide.

“That mean I’m the boss around here?”

Don’t get ahead of yourself, champ.

There’s really only one suitable response. Barnes bends, gathers up a handful of the wet snow, compresses it, and whips it at Rogers’s face.

It’s conceivable that Rogers could’ve moved out of the way. Maybe. But Barnes does have enhanced reflexes, after all. The snowball catches Rogers dead center and explodes.

“You. You asshole!” Rogers yells.

Barnes runs.

What is it that makes this non-threatening. Could be the non-lethality of the missiles, the lack of proximity, or the loopiness of the middle of the night. Could be the after-effect of that many pancakes. Regardless, Barnes skids to safety behind a tree, and he and Rogers spend 30 minutes lobbing snowballs and child-inappropriate language at each other until they’re both soaked, Rogers is shouting with laughter, and even Barnes has made a moderate-sized smile.

“Truce!” Rogers yells finally, “truce, goddammit!”

He flops down on the ground and swishes his limbs around.

“What are you doing.”

“I’m making a snow angel. It’s my sad excuse for catching my damn breath.”

“You look like a dope.”

“Nice to see you recognize your own kind.”

Barnes kicks snow on him.

Rogers calls him a shithead and pulls him by his ankle onto the ground, where Barnes does not swish his limbs around, because he is not a dope, no matter what Captain Stupidface says. But he does lie on the ground and watch the snow flying around in the streetlights.
Flying Sam said there would be bad moments that catch him off guard.

Apparently there are also unexpected good moments. He can add this to his inventory of calm-enhancing memories: lying on the cold fucking ground, breathing hard, watching the snow come down and not feeling any fear for the first time in many days.

Chapter End Notes

Mission-assist Guinevak made a personality poll based on sleep pants!

http://guinevak.tumblr.com/post/1413769452/yes-i-spent-the-entire-morning-on-this-dont

(Your Friendly Author is breakfast/carpfrands)
Spatial expansion

While he’s not going to go in for any physical contact any time in the foreseeable future, all the talking establishes even in Barnes’s body that Rogers is a safe space. That there is no need to fear him, if perhaps indications that one might fear for him, and not just because he has a marked tendency to run full tilt into danger. Barnes can see the stuffing-down of strong emotion that happened in the gym occurring at regular intervals, if with less drama.

Gonna have to break some time, Steve. Why wait?

But Barnes, having had his big breakdown, now finds a concrete action, as defined by flying Sam: expand the safe space. There’s the corner of the sofa for bad moments, but with Rogers identified as On the Safe List, the safe space expands to include the whole apartment. From there, he makes forays into other parts of Building JARVIS.

The coffee bar: good, as long as it’s not too busy. Bonus if Katie is there, with her notebook and her sharp eyes.

Next location to tackle: the common area.

Barnes and Rogers go to a couple of group dinners, where Barnes takes his plate to sit under the large potted tree and observe. Once Barton sits high up on the weird structure, not speaking, and Romanoff has to set his plate on a platform and back away before Barton will touch it.

Interesting.

Rogers is good about cycling past regularly to check in, and Hill throws him containers of hot sauce. Barnes only sweats a little – and then partially from the hot sauce – and retreats to the apartment when the noise becomes difficult. No one challenges him.

It’s enough to warrant reciprocity. The next morning, he pulls out his bowls when Rogers leaves for the gym.

“What did I do right?” Rogers asks on his return, grinning at the plates on the counter, “I want to make sure I do it again.”

“Paws off, Rogers. These are for everyone.”

Barnes lets Rogers lick the bowl of dough, even though it’s disgusting.

When they get to the common area with the five dozen peanut butter-chocolate chip cookies, only Barton is there. It’s impressive how one human of average height can take up that much space on a sofa. He is watching a show in which people with bows and arrows are singing.

The guy has a schtick.

“Hey, all right,” Barton says, taking two handfuls of cookies at once, “where’d you get these?”

“Bucky made them.”

“No shit? Excellent!”
They’re nothing fancy, but it’s gratifying nonetheless. Rogers and Barton laugh at the stupid movie. The potted tree has a thickly padded chair next to it now. Nice. Barnes installs himself. It is pleasant to listen in.

“Where is everybody?”

“Mad scientist in Newark,” Barton says.

Of course there are mad scientists in Jersey.

“An actual mad scientist?”

Why sound so surprised, Steve. You live in a building with two of them.

“Yeah,” Barton says, “with some kind of mind control helmet, and I am not down for that.”

He twists around to look at Barnes.

“You know,” he says.

Barnes needs a second before he can nod.

“Yeah,” Barton says, “no damn way. Anyway, awesome baked goods, dude.”

Rogers smiles at the room. The guys on the television break into song. Barton laughs.

Mission note: grab cookies next time, if he plans on moving out of arm’s reach of the plate.

CONFIRM

“Why didn’t anybody tell me about the mad scientist?” Rogers asks.

Are you even kidding me here.

“Man, are you kidding? With the whole face thing, and the interventions, and the general air of misery and crisis?”

Barton: tentatively approved.

CONFIRM

“I’m field-ready,” Rogers says.

“Steve,” Barton says, “nobody saw you guys for two straight weeks, and pardon me, but you both still look like shit. I’d like to get through five whole dinners without Barnes falling down on the goddamn floor like that first time. Nobody’s gonna pull you out for an op unless it’s the literal, actual end of the world.”

“Oh. Right. Okay,” Rogers says.

On one hand, thanks so much for the reminder of Barnes’s ability to cause general trouble and decreased functionality. On the other hand, nice to have backup for Operation Make Rogers Sit Down and Shut Up.

Overall, a good afternoon. The movie ends, and Barton and Rogers play a variety of training modules on the television. Their training simulator is called Xbox and has more realistic simulations
than Barnes has used in the past. They invite Barnes to train, but he declines. A little skills
degradation is attractive. Might be nice not to be able to kill people quite to easily, even if they’re
made of electrical signals.

Instead, he checks Building’s security feeds for a while. Status normal. Building is optimized for
safety and comfort.

He sits for 18 minutes feeling bored.

Too bad his book is 4 floors down.

Mission note #2: carry a book.

The briefing gives him an auditory file:

“Jesus Christ, Steve, we’re not attached at the hip. I think I can live through five goddamn minutes
on my own without going to pieces.”

CONFIRM

What.

Real subtle, you two.

Now he’s ganging up on himself. Awesome.

Despite being mission head, Barnes graciously consents to heed the advice of his team members.

“Be back in a sec,” he says.

“Dare I hope that you’re going for more cookies? Dammit!” Barton yells, having sabotaged his
training by talking.

“You ate ‘em all, champ,” Barnes says.

Rogers goes off the side of the electronic road because he’s too busy grinning at Barnes, and Barton
wins the race.

Barnes slips out before Rogers’s smile disappears.

He fetches his book and makes the tactical decision that hard-working bakers who did not get a fair
share of their own labors deserve a mocha. Good decision: Katie is working.

“Hey!” she says, “let me look at you in the cold light of day.”

Purpose unknown, but she has been kind to him and Rogers, so he stands still to let her stare.

“You look better,” she says.

“Thanks.”

The mocha she makes for him is excellent.

Barton and Rogers are still working on their ridiculous training module when he returns. Barnes sits
back down by the potted tree and gets in 4 chapters (if Barnes had a Pantalaimon, he would be nicer
to it) before he hears the chatter of the rest of the team.
“Oh em gee, Grandpa emerged from his doily-covered living room,” Stark yells, starting things off on a low note.

“How was it fighting your own kind, Tony? I’d ask if it broke your heart, but I’m not sure you have one.”

Good job, Rogers.

CONFIRM

“My kind. Please. That guy could barely win a junior high science fair.”

Stark launches into a description of the op in terms highly unflattering to the mad scientist in question. Sounds like a cake walk. But still less desirable than an afternoon with a book, a mocha, and baked goods.

“You’re missing something,” Stark says at the end of his story. “Where’s your villainous appendage?”

“Sitting against the wall behind you, Mr. Oblivious,” Romanoff says while Rogers glowers.

Barnes waves at Stark.

“My sofa’s not good enough for you?”

“I like it here,” Barnes says.

Protected back, wide field of observation, plant. Optimal placement.

“I bet you do, given how much Pepper probably spent on that damn chair,” Stark says, but he turns away to give unsolicited advice about the training module, so maybe he doesn’t mean anything by it.

It’s not so bad. After pizza arrives, Romanoff brings him 3 pieces of the one with sausage and peppers. They all laugh loudly about the hapless mad scientist and the training module.

After 96 minutes, Romanoff crouches next to him and hands him a beer bottle.

“Still sitting in the closet, Barnes?”

“No.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” she says.

But mostly, they let him be. Stark stares some, and Banner looks over and jiggles a couple of times as if he’s thinking of coming over to chat, but he never does.

Rogers looks over frequently, checking in. It works. Barnes is satisfied to sit at the periphery and observe. It’s like the days of covert surveillance, except that he gets pizza and beer.

“We really could’ve used you today,” Banner says to Rogers at one point. “The guy had so many civilians running around with his mind-control thing. The best we could figure out to avoid any of us getting brainwashed was for the big guy to corral them, which I think was terrifying for everybody.”

“Including the big guy,” Romanoff says.

“Maybe next time,” Rogers says.
Barnes identifies: remorse that his troubles have prevented Rogers from performing his duties with the Avengers and protecting civilians from asswipes with mind-control helmets. Even people from Jersey deserve better than that.

But no one mentions it again.

Barnes learns that ‘Xbox’ is not, after all, a training module but entertainment. Unfortunately, he learns this through a module that requires all of them to sing.

Horrifying.
Barnes has previously identified that inactivity is injurious to emotional health. It’s unfortunate that Rogers cannot take a hint from Barnes and occupy himself with nice, safe activities such as reading and conducting controlled experiments with cheese and bread.

It means they spend part of each day in the gym, which is losing its power to disturb through greater contact. The climbing wall is reliable. It allows him to maintain physical condition without having to run every day or making holes in Rogers’s face.

But Rogers is too stuck on ‘saving’ things. He is stuck on the idea that he has let the Avengers down by not helping with the mad scientist and therefore he should go back to work.

Barnes knows himself to be no expert on healthy human functioning, but Rogers’s inclination to fight his way through life seems suboptimal.

“Somebody’s gotta stand up to the bullies, Buck,” the briefing supplies.

The voice is that of child Steve.

This suggests the disheartening idea that Rogers’s obstreperousness is congenital.

Contributing to Bad Idea Theatre is Rogers’s costar, Tony goddamn Stark.

One comment Rogers makes about going back into the field, and Rogers’s laptop is inundated with files detailing locations and movements of suspected HYDRA threats in the greater New York City metropolitan area.

Barnes remembers the little real estate agent with increased retrospective dislike. According to the files on Rogers’s laptop, there are 47 HYDRA operations centers - ranging from administrative offices to shipping centers to training facilities – within a 150 km radius of the city.

And Rogers thinks it’s going to help him take them out. He thinks it’s going to help Barnes for him to take them out. Preferably within the next week, it seems.

“Less HYDRA’s good for the world, Buck,” he says.

Okay. That is correct. HYDRA is a demonstrable, palpable source of evil. But for fuck’s sake, Steve. It does not have to all be this very minute. Not if it means that the two of them continue to scream themselves awake at night, and stand knees locked and sweating at the entrance to the lobby half the time, and glare off into the distance while beating their own emotional responses into a paste (that’s just Steve).

“I gotta do something,” Rogers says.
Barnes can appreciate the sentiment. Lack of action creates brooding. But there are all kinds of action. Maybe volunteer at a soup kitchen, champ. Buy a damn cribbage board, like Ollie has.

It creates a conundrum.

It is non—mission-compliant to tie Rogers to a chair. Rogers is a grown-ass adult with autonomy. Protection covers physical and emotional safety, but self-determination must be maintained.

CONFIRM

It sucks.

CONFIRM

By contrast, it is also non—mission-compliant to allow Rogers to injure himself by returning to active duty while still emotionally compromised. It’s gonna be just like sparring with Thor: the thing Rogers has in his brain that he won’t let go of will build until it overwhmels. And the Avengers have enough of the overwhelmed thing going on with green-thing Hulk.

Not that Rogers will listen to him about it. Or Stark.

Romanoff might. Or Hill.

CONFIRM

Right.

Barnes shadows the women for a couple of days, to acquire intel.

This has surprising consequences.

First, it has the effect of sending Barnes all over Building JARVIS, looking for them. He has no idea what to actually say to either of them that might keep Rogers from hiding behind operations. But unclear mission parameters can be resolved by gathering information. So he gathers. This is a useful activity, for two reasons:

1. Unlike sleep-deprived wanderings in the middle of the night, daytime observation under circumstances of increased rest and breakfasts of increasing excellence (good job gaining cooking skills, Barnes [CONFIRM]) creates a sense of familiarity and comfort in the body. Members of security become familiar faces. Exits and routes of retreat are known. He has objectively known that Building JARVIS is safe. Now he feels it.

2. It makes a conversation with Rogers about the two of them with their new tasks: Barnes sweeping, Rogers making plans with Stark (ugh). But they agree not to leave Building without notifying one another. They make a signal. Disappearance is danger. To have a signal is comfort.

Hill spends a good deal of time on the security floor. Although they approach levels of acceptable attentiveness while on duty, the security staff are not nearly on their game on their home turf. Once Barnes borrows a jumpsuit and cleaning cart from janitorial services and traverses the entire length of the security floor without detection.

He is confident that they would not harm a resident without immediate provocation. But the risk makes his chest feel stopped up tight, and Hector is not going to be thrilled that his uniform
‘mistakenly’ gets put back through the laundry.

It’s also mission-compliant to demonstrate to himself that his sneaking-around skills remain intact.

He isn’t stupid. He does this at the end of a standard work day, even though he has to hustle to return to the apartment before Rogers gets back from more yapping at Stark about bad guys. But Barnes has been rewarded by the sight of Hill in her office, her feet up on her desk with her shoes off, shooting rubber bands with acceptable accuracy at a tiny target painted on her office ceiling.

“What did you do all afternoon, Bucky?” Rogers asks, 25 seconds after walking through the door, 73 seconds after Barnes skidded in.

Just in case his voice is still rough from breathing heavy because of the run up all those stairs, Barnes shrugs.

There’s a heavy blue rubber band around the stalks of broccoli for dinner. After he’s put the vegetable in to roast, Barnes shoots the rubber band experimentally at the oven clock. It takes 3 tries to get the angle right, and another 2 to stretch it out enough to get adequate distance.

It’s not as impressive as Hill. His target is a lot bigger.

“What the fuck was that for, jerkwad?” Rogers shouts, rubbing the back of his head.

Some days Hill spends time in Potts’s office. That’s the sum total of his knowledge about it, because that’s the sum total of what Building JARVIS will tell him. There’s no hiding on Potts’s floor: the whole damn layout is open, and security’s on their best behavior in front of the boss lady. Even the fire doors to the stairwell are exposed.

However, Hill, Romanoff, and Potts do 0930 coffee twice per week. Rogers, who fails to comprehend that none of the mocha syrups available for residential purchase taste right, complains about the continuing need to spend time at the coffee bar, but the sight of the three of them, sitting close together at one of the small, round tables, laughing together, makes an immediate quiet space in Barnes’s mind.

He hasn’t determined what he wants to say to them. ‘Make Steve stay home’? That’s insufficient, but he doesn’t know how to put it yet.

Anyway, it’s good to watch the women. They are easier together than in mixed company. Their eyes are less watchful, their bodies more relaxed.

Looks appealing.

CONFIRM

Reminds him of stuff from the briefing: Rogers and the Bucky-person sitting on top of one another all the time. In each other’s pockets. When touching was the comfort, not distance.

The women make that look like something worth trying to get back to.

Barnes practices that idea in his head all day. Tries to imagine standing close without the inside of his head screeching.

He can manage it for 16 seconds.
It was longer in Brooklyn, before all the troubles. Maybe that comes back, with time.

Barnes arranges an intense desire for mochas regularly at 0930 on Wednesday and Friday, whether Rogers is around or not. All that staring has the unexpected consequence that Barnes finds himself sitting in Stark and Potts’ living room while the women make his hair smooth with heated metal plates. Potts gives him a glass of fizzy water with cucumber in it. They turn on a show about a small, loud lady who repairs old houses and settle in, as if they expect him to stay.

The whole situation is confusing. Not upsetting, but strange. When Romanoff sits behind him and brushes his hair, instead of tensing at the threat, the muscles in his shoulders release a little. Potts orders salads for their lunch. Barnes’s comes with pieces of pepper tuna on top, as if it had come from the Carp.

They let him sit to one side and listen while they comment on the show and talk about hair products. His hair smells like herbs. Once Potts leans over to pat his left knee twice and smile at him.

It makes a safe space. A weird space, but a safe one.

So safe that he finds himself waking from sleep, with a stiff neck and his left foot numb, having slept sitting upright on the floor, leaning against the arm of the sofa.

“Good morning, merry sunshine,” Potts says.

Morning. How can it be morning. Steve will be alarmed.

Barnes looks at the window, but the sun indicates midafternoon. Potts laughs.

“Sorry. That’s just a thing my grandmother used to say. You were only out for about thirty minutes. You missed the bathroom reno.”

“It was hideous,” Hill says, “I’m sorry, but subway tile is not the answer to every question.”

“You are wrong,” Romanoff says.

Barnes pats his head, which feels considerably rougher than before his trip to Snoozeville.

“Messed up my hair,” he says.

Will they be angry. They spent a lot of time making it shiny, and he fucked it up.

“You’re fine, Barnes,” Hill says and hands him a hairbrush.

This is a lot of kindness. He has learned a great deal about hair maintenance. Potts has let him into her living space.

“What are you over there frowning about?” Romanoff asks.

Frowning was unintended.

He could ask Romanoff about it. But Potts and Hill are too new. Preliminary assessment: positive, but he cannot anticipate their reactions. Romanoff has seen enough of him that he knows she won’t be offended by his questions. He would not wish to distress Potts and Hill.

He shakes his head.

“Okay,” she says, and smiles.
So does Hill. So does Potts. As if he were a normal person, just visiting for an afternoon of enjoyment.

“Why aren’t you afraid,” he says to Potts.

It’s maybe the easiest of all the questions he’d like to ask. They have put their hands in his hair, and in response he did not pull away or draw a weapon. He fell asleep. So curious.

Even more curious, Potts turns the color of a stoplight, and Hill rolls her eyes.

“I’m, uh. Not afraid of a lot anymore,” Potts says.

She holds up her hands, and they glow orange, so hot that the air shimmers around them. Then Potts breathes deep, and the glow fades.

Identified: surprise.

“I was captured, last Christmas,” she says, then shakes her head a little.

It’s a clear deflection. She is telling him a thing she doesn’t like to speak of. Another kindness.

“Nothing like you,” she continues, “just for a little while. By someone I thought I liked a little. But he turned out to be one of the bad guys. He injected me with this stuff. Extremis. Tony figured out how to tame it some, but there’s still – not a lot that can harm me these days.”

Even Potts has been through the wringer, in this place. There isn’t anybody here who hasn’t been fractured. Not even Katie and her dead boyfriend. Romanoff and her spooky training. Potts and her fiery hands. Whatever happened to Hill to make her more dangerous than anybody.

“Are you okay now,” he says.

“Yes! Yes, I’m fine. I mean, mostly. Getting there. But largely okay.”

Nod.

It is unexpected intel. It explains their kindness. It provides an example of how to go on. Flying Sam will approve of this, when he hears.

“You okay, Barnes?” Hill asks.

Nod.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” he says to Potts.

She smiles.

“I’m glad you came over today.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Romanoff takes the elevator down with him downstairs. He has a little paper bag filled with things to put in his hair to increase its health and appearance, and a variety of objects that he can use to hold it out of his face.
And he learned how to braid.

“You look pleased, Barnes,” she says, “good day?”

“Confirm.”

“I’m glad.”

It’s been good. He feels improved, but he has a mission, even if that ruins it.

The elevator stops at his and Steve’s floor.

“Building, please hold it,” he says.

“Of course, Sergeant.”

Barnes figures that Romanoff would rather chew off someone’s ear than show surprise. She gazes at him as if standing in a small box suspended 32 floors up with no immediate plans for egress were perfectly normal.

“Rogers wants to go back into the field,” he says.

The day’s kindness isn’t ruined, if Romanoff’s eye roll is anything to judge by.

“Oh god, it’s the mad scientist, right? He’s laying some huge guilt trip on himself about it, isn’t he?”

Nod.

Romanoff groans.

CONFIRM

“What do you think about it, Barnes?”

Thanks, lady. You can’t use your creepy mind-reading powers? You’re gonna make me actually talk about it?

She stares at him with a weird little smile on her face.

“He wants to hit things instead of talking about them,” he says finally.

Romanoff crinkles her eyes up.

“And?”

Ugh, why are you so awful.

“And he won’t acknowledge that all my shit is just as hard for him as it is for me.”

“A plus, Barnes, well done. I’m going to tell Sam you said that.”

GOOD

Don’t you go taking her side, mission.

CONFIRM
“He told you this? Steve?”

“He’s been talking to Stark about it. Making plans.”

Romanoff pats his arm.

“Stark is an amazing combination of single-minded and easily distracted,” she says. “I’ll keep things from going sideways, all right? Maria will help.”

“Thanks,” he says.

“Hair Club’s got to stick together,” she says, and laughs while she punches the button to open the door and pushes him through.

Rogers displays inadequate appreciation for the impressiveness of Barnes’s hair.

Typical.

His talk at dinner is all about HYDRA and strategy.

“Do you think,” he says, “I mean. Do you want? To come with? They were worse to you than anyone, Buck.”

Barnes has been practicing. He remembers everything flying Sam told him. He has been working hard to identify concrete actions. To perform activities that enhance calm.

He marinated these chicken legs all day in brown sugar and barbecue powder. He roasted them in a slow oven for 2 hours. He spooned some of the juice from the pan over the rice when he served it. Objectively, this meal is goddamn delicious, Steve.

And now he doesn’t want to eat it.

“No,” he says.

Some day, probably, he’ll want to go back in the field. Right some of the wrongs. Find the people who turned him into a living nightmare and rip their bones out of their flesh.

But right now? He’s in goddamn pieces, and more bloodshed is not the fucking answer.

“Sorry, Bucky. I’m sorry.”

Barnes pushes his plate away and goes to his room. He doesn’t want safe space. He wants to be alone.

It’s not like the time after New Year’s. He’s more together than that. He stays out of the closet, for one thing. And at 2200, he walks into the living room and stands in front of Rogers, who’s sitting on the sofa looking miserable.

“I’m going to sleep now,” he says.

“Are we – okay, Bucky?” Rogers says.

Rogers is a dumbass on so many levels.
“Yes,” he says.

Sleep is elusive. Barnes lies in the dark for 52 minutes, then watches through slitted eyes as Rogers climbs into bed, stares with an expression of distress at the monitor for a while, and goes to sleep.

So stupid.

At 0030, Barnes is annoyed by lying awake. He gets up and re-dresses.

‘Building,’ he texts, ‘will you tell me if Rogers has a nightmare.’

‘Of course, Sergeant.’

He goes to the coffee bar. Katie looks up from her ubiquitous notebook and frowns at him.

“Again?” she says.

Shrug.

“They have a whole medical floor here, you know. Ever think about a sleeping pill?”

Barnes shakes his head, and Katie sniffs at him.

“Sit,” she says, and points at the stools set to the left of the cash register.

It’s good to have an order to follow. For the moment. He sits.

The cup she uses to make his hot chocolate is large. And she adds a truly impressive amount of whipped cream.

“You want a cookie, too?” she asks, “you look like you might want a cookie.”

Nod.

She slides one across the counter to him. It’s not a variety he has had before.

“What is this?”

“Snickerdoodle. Is it okay? I gave you my favorite.”

Cinnamon, vanilla.

“It’s good.”

“I’m glad.”

The hot chocolate is very sweet. The hit of fat and sugar, and the heat of it, together serve to reduce physical stress responses.

“Got something on your mind, Barnes?”

Too many things for his amount of words to handle.
Shrug.

“Anything I can do?”

Hot drink and a new flavor of cookie seems like plenty, even given the hour of night. Katie has told them that she got the job at the tower because Stark felt bad for people who suffered losses from the alien attack. That most of the people were bitter, and turned down the jobs. She works nights three weeks out of every month, mornings for one, always with her notebook close by her left hand. She rests her hand on it while she speaks.

“What do you write,” he asks.

Katie’s eyebrows lift in surprise.

“It’s a journal,” she says. “I guess. I always kept one when I was younger, but I got out of the habit. After Rodney died, my therapist said it might help to write things down.”

Mission note: ask flying Sam about that.

“So it’s sad stuff,” he says.

“Oh, no,” she says. “I mean, it was, at first. But now, it’s all kinds of things. Sometimes I just write about the weather. Or the customers. The people I see on the train. Quotes I like from books. Whatever I feel like writing.”

“Does it help.”

“Sure,” she says. “One of lots of things that help. Barnes, are you okay? Are you sure I can’t call Steve for you?”

He shakes his head.

“Another cookie, then?”

That he’ll accept.

Katie leaves him alone for a while. She cleans the espresso machine and the counter. She writes for a while. It looks so quiet, her pen moving across the page.

It is logical that recording thoughts is helpful for resolving internal problems. But this is not only about him.

It’s worry.

It’s worry. Not just disapproval, or the desire to keep the target in a state of perfect safety. Flying Sam said that recovery is not a straight line – but returning to the field precipitously could move Steve’s emotional state backwards.

Deny.

CONFIRM

“You’re about to have company,” Katie says after 24 minutes, when Barnes has eaten the cookie and has only one-third of the drink remaining.

He looks up, and Rogers is striding quickly across the lobby in sleep pants (flying pigs) and, thank
Marx, a shirt.

“Can I get you anything?” Katie asks, as if Avengers in pajamas are normal things at the coffee bar at 0152.

“Just picking up my lost belongings,” Rogers says.

“Nobody’s lost around here,” Katie says in a tone worthy of Esther.

Rogers looks as surprised as Barnes feels at that.

“Gave me a startle, Buck,” Rogers says after a minute.

“Sorry.”

Rogers looks rumpled. The briefing knows this is a sign of upset.

It's too bad they can't just go back into deep freeze for a while and wake up fixed.

DENY

Ugh, fine.

Barnes stands up. Rogers will sit down here with him all night, if need be. But it isn't needed. This is low-level trouble for the moment. No sense in making it worse by preventing yet more sleep.

“You want a top-off for the road, honey?” Katie asks.

Barnes shakes his head.

"Thank you," he says.

Katie grins at him.

"Go to bed, you two, it's the middle of the damn night!"

Katie is mission-assist.

CONFIRM

Chapter End Notes

So, I don't know whether y'all are interested in my non-fic writings, but just in case, here are a couple of recent-ish online publications:


You all remain, as ever, amazing, and your comments are Most Best.
“I guess I owe you an apology, Bucky,” Rogers says to the elevator floor, “again.”

Sigh.

Mission, think we’ll ever have a day when Rogers doesn’t try to take everything on his shoulders? NO

That’s what I figured.

Ugh. Talking.

CONFIRM

“I remember, from surveillance,” he says. “You said ‘I’m not going to take choices away from him.’”

Rogers’s face registers surprise.

“I don’t remember that, but yeah. I won’t do that.”

“Me neither.”

“What? Bucky. What choice could you take away from me?”

Oh pal. Do you even pay attention to yourself.

“Say if I told you your going out in the field makes me feel unsafe.”

Rogers goes red in the face, frowns.

Would’ve been easy. Ashholish, but effective. Rogers obviously knows it.

“Does it,” Rogers asks. “Make you feel unsafe.”

“The air in the damn lobby makes me feel unsafe half the time. My bar for safety is pretty fucking high.”

That produces a smile, at least.

“You’re talkative in the middle of the night, Bucky.”

Shrug.

They arrive back at their apartment. This high up, the city’s lights look dim and far-away. They spend way too much time looking at this view in the middle of the night.

“You don’t think I should do it,” Rogers says.

Barnes wishes flying Sam or Romanoff were here, so he had someone to roll his eyes at.
Rogers stares out the window for long enough that Barnes gives up on the idea of getting back into bed any time soon. Luckily, the kitchen has a very nice onion-dill bread and a hunk of Havarti just waiting to be combined in a hot pan.

Rogers leaves off brooding at the skyline after 3.5 minutes and sits at the kitchen island, chin on his fist, and waits for his sandwich.

“At some point I hope I figure out what all this food means,” he says when Barnes slides the plate in front of him.

Not like it’s a secret, pal.

CONFIRM

“The mission is protect,” Barnes says.

Rogers pauses his chewing and frowns.

“My mission. Is to protect. You.”

Seems outside mission parameters to make Rogers so choked up that he can’t swallow. Looks awkward.

“Your mission too.”

The sandwich has a mild flavor, sharpened by the herby tang of the dill in the bread. A very pleasant combination for eating at 0227 while Rogers attempts to use his brain for something other than bad decisions.

“You always gotta be the one to fix everything,” the briefing gives him, along with the flavor of cigarettes and low-quality hooch. Cold air, the scent of mildewed tent canvas.

Smart one, briefing.

“Who do you protect, Steve.”

“I. What do you mean?” Rogers says.

The words were pretty basic, pal.

“Bucky. What do you mean, who do I protect? I’m a goddamn superhero. I have to – I protect whoever needs protecting.”

DAMMIT

No kidding, mission.

“Why’s that the wrong answer, Buck?”

Barnes shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, I – what do you want me to say? You want me to say I’ll stay home? Can’t stay home forever. I’ll go crazy. And. And there’s evil in the world, Bucky. You know that better than anybody. I can’t just let it go and do nothing.”

It is objectively correct. Rogers is a member of the Avengers. His duty is to protect the world. He
found his way into his perfect profession.

But that is so not the point.

“You want me to say my job’s to protect you? You know it is, Bucky. That’s what I’m talking about. To wipe HYDRA off the planet. Make sure they can’t ever hurt you again.”

Lenin’s pickled scrotum, is this guy mentally incapable of giving one second’s thought to his own damn self.

“You look like you want to sock me in the face,” Rogers says.

“Tried that, didn’t help.”

What.

Did we just joke about mission failure.

GOOD JOB

Oh yeah?

CONFIRM

Emotional responses are so weird.

As an additional example, Rogers is staring at his empty plate as if he wants to laugh at the joke but feels bad about it.

He looks tired. Barton said, ‘you both look like shit.’ It’s true: pale skin, dark circles under the eyes. Keep this shit up and they’ll be back to closet-sitting and the walls closing in.

“Go to bed, Rogers,” he says, and then, to indicate comfort, “maybe you’ll wake up less stupid in the morning.”

It works: Rogers groused with a smile on his face but goes to his room and flops around on his bed. Barnes pulls out his laptop and his phone.

He texts building Jarvis: ‘I need flying Sam’s email address and an email I can use.’

The Contacts screen pops up with flying Sam’s information and ‘skylord78@mailbox.com’ in the email field.

‘Skylord.’ What a nerd.

“What are you doing, Bucky?” Rogers asks over the monitor.

“Sending an email.”

“You should sleep too.”

“Confirm. After I send this email.”

“Who the hell are you emailing?”
“Go to sleep Steve.”

“What are the odds I’m gonna be really annoyed later about this email?”

“Go. The fuck. To sleep, Rogers.”

“Hundred percent, then. Thanks, Buck.”

But he rolls over and clutches a pillow close.

Barnes’s phone has a text message from building JARVIS explaining that Stark has pre-emptively set up a number of email addresses for him:

- sovietdeatharm@stark.net
- creepymurdereyes@stark.net
- wintersboner@stark.net
- poopsicle@stark.net
- hairclubformen@stark.net

Stark is objectively horrible.

And Romanoff used the phrase ‘hair club,’ which he had thought was a positive comment, but now he has no idea. Is she in on Stark’s jokes.

‘I have also taken the liberty of setting up barnes14@stark.net for you,’ building JARVIS texts.

Barnes identifies: suspicion that building JARVIS felt it necessary to subject him to Stark’s ideas when there was a perfectly reasonable option already available.

Regardless, it is useful to have email capability for contacting flying Sam outside acceptable texting hours.

To: skylord78@mailbox.com

From: barnes14@stark.net

Subject: hello this is about steve

Flying Sam good morning

Figured it would be impolite to text at 0315 because you are sleeping. Rogers is sleeping. I will sleep as soon as email is complete.

Sam. There was a mad scientist in Newark. Rogers feels guilt that the Avengers did not invite him to fight the mad scientist.

Recognized: field operations would be injurious to current emotional health owing to recent difficulties. Supposition: same for Steve.

Please advise.

Rogers reports eagerness for activity, refuses reading and cooking.

Sleep patterns erratic but improved from before. Communication patterns improved. Safety perimeter improved. Practicing safety is helpful. Thank you.
Please advise about Rogers.

Barnes

P.S. Potts taught me how to braid my hair.

Barnes reads over the email. No typos. Message clearly conveyed. Acceptable. He sends it and keeps his promise to get some sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The recipe for the chicken mentioned in chapter 16 is here:

http://www.wegmans.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/ProductDisplay?langId=-1&storeId=10052&catalogId=10002&productId=567047

In my house, this recipe is known as "The Good Chicken."
I STILL HAVE NOT SEEN THE THING OMG

It serves no purpose to expect a specific type of response when requesting additional mission intel. One has to accept the information provided and react accordingly.

Knowing this does not make flying Sam’s return email any less of a disappointment.

To: barnes14@stark.net

From: skylord78@mailbox.com

Subject: Re: hello this is about steve

Hey Barnes –

I sincerely thank you for not texting me in the middle of the night.

Glad to hear things are going better. Sounds like you’re getting out of the apartment, too, if you’re spending time with Pepper. She seems like good people. Keep that up. Let people give you good examples. Thumbs up on your hair-braiding, man. I could never do that.

I know you’re not gonna l9ike this, but I’m not telling you what to do about Steve. I understand your concern about where his head is at, but he hasn’t asked me for advice.

You’re the one who has to talk to him, Barnes. You’re the one with the question. And you need to be prepared to go along with whatever he decides, even if you hate it. Y’all have had enough years of not be able to talk to each other. Better get started to change that now.

If that makes you mad, you can write back or call me any time. We already bonded over you kicking me off an airplane – I can take a little swearing over the phone.

My mama asked me to thank you for the cookies. She said they were really good. I guess you do Esther proud.

Don’t stay annoyed at me forever, Barnes. Keep me posted.

Sam

Ugh.

And on top of it, Rogers did not in fact get smarter in his sleep. Over breakfast, he makes an earnest speech about duty, which makes Barnes’s temples hurt from glaring. Rogers then changes tactics to blather about all the damage done to Barnes by HYDRA and the need to prevent them from doing
further harm, repay them for their actions, blah blah.

“I don’t understand, Bucky. I don’t understand why it makes you so unhappy,” he says.

Barnes tries to speak, but no words come out. What are the correct words to say.

Further damage to be avoided. Rogers projects an aura of healthfulness, but Barnes can see the tight muscles around his eyes. He has seen, over and over, the way Rogers will not allow himself to feel strong emotion.

If he feels strong emotion during a fight. That could result in divided attention. In an opening for injury or worse. For a guy who already fails to prioritize his own safety.

And the mission can yell ‘PROTECT’ all day long, but return to active duty is undesired. Projected outcome: contraction of safe spaces, language degradation, mental noise.

Counterpoint: successful dispatching of the Olds’ former landlord and hired thug, including close contact and casual, non-lethal violence. Successful action on the HYDRA warehouse in Queens, without fragmentation or distress.

What is the difference.

Unknown.

Identified: increased respiration.

“Bucky. Hey. I’m sorry. I didn’t know it would make you this upset. I’ll wait, okay? I won’t go anywhere until you can talk about it. Okay?”

This concession is kindness.

“Okay,” he says, and picks the pieces of his breakfast plate off the floor.

So that’s fucking great. But it’s better than Steve out in the field.

"You want to go to Brooklyn, maybe?” Rogers says at 1020.

Another concession. Also: a good idea.

Barnes bundles into his weather-appropriate clothing, while Rogers pretends that he is too noble and virtuous to be touched by something as mundane as the cold. The day is bright, and the remaining snow is mostly grey and filthy. The crowds are thin – faceless figures bundled in so many layers that they look cylindrical, with clouds of breath around their heads. Except for three women in short puffy coats, slim trousers, high heels, and large sunglasses. Who are possibly robots.

It is good to walk. For the cold to bludgeon him breathless and remind him that he has a body, and not just an unhappy mind. The static recedes, and his shoulders unclench. Barnes looks over at Rogers, who’s walking with his chin tucked into the collar of his jacket.

“What do you want your scarf back.”

Rogers stops dead, causing two people behind them on the street to curse in muffled voices, and stares at Barnes with raised eyebrows.
“No, Bucky, it’s fine. I mean. It’s fucking cold, but I don’t mind. That’s your scarf.”

Good. Scarf’s too damn nice to give up. And the green is flattering to his coloring.

The entrance to the subway station is a shadow up ahead. Barnes stares at it, but this only makes the darkness of it, and its small size, seem worse. He looks away from it, but it pulses in the corner of his eye.

It is unavoidable. They are walking toward it.

The shadow at the center of the subway entrance grows with proximity, until Barnes plants his boots on the sidewalk. The body refuses to move forward. The inside of his head replays the metallic echo of all sounds underground, the flicker of fluorescent lights, the press of other humans around him. The jostle and clatter of the train, blank, dark windows.

“Bucky?”

Barnes shakes his head.

“Tight spaces again?”

Nod.

“Want to try a cab?”

Barnes pictures the inside of a car: low roof, close walls, the smell of numerous strange humans, and sitting in traffic half the day.

He shakes his head.

It sucks.

CONFIRM

He turns away from the subway entrance and walks.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

His breath fogs the air, but the cold is good. The cold reminds him that he’s outside. Not closed in. Not trapped.

Rogers follows him. Of course Rogers follows him. As if an invisible rope binds them together.

CONFIRM

Shut up, you.

“It wasn’t like this in Brooklyn,” Rogers says after 3 blocks.
Because it’s fucking terrific to stab a guy who’s already bleeding.

But then, after another block, in a voice low enough that only enhanced ears would hear it,

“I’m sorry. I fucked it all up. I never should’ve insisted, Bucky. We’ll go back. Even if we can’t be
in the same building, we’ll go back to Vinegar Hill. It’ll get better, I swear.”

Identified: the desire to sleep for a year. Or possibly a decade.

Barnes changes direction.

Rogers follows.

The briefing is a mess, trying to give him too many things at once: times when Steve followed the
Bucky-person, to dance halls and empty lots, baseball diamonds and movie theaters. Times when the
Bucky-person followed Steve, usually into mortal peril.

Barnes feels his face almost make a smile.

Rogers is so miserable that he looks surprised to discover that they have arrived at the Carp.

For an example of why he has no business going into the field until he finds emotional equilibrium.
Pay attention to your surroundings, pal.

The Carp has been redecorated. Banners of pink and red foil hearts are strung all around. Larger
hearts – some ruffled, ugh – are pinned to the walls with messages like “LOVE” and “Happy
Valentine’s Day!”

Looks terrible.

If that weren’t bad enough, there are people sitting at the sushi bar. But as he and Rogers sit at one of
the small tables along the wall, the noodle-making daughter, Kazue, brings them menus.

“My father will never take a day off now!” she says. Her expression looks grumpy as always, but her
voice sounds cheerful. “He tells everyone that Captain America is a friend of the restaurant.”

She gestures toward the sushi bar, where the picture of the family with Rogers is pinned up
prominently.

“Good for business,” she says. “People have started stopping in regularly for dinner, hoping to see
you. But we always leave out the part that you only come in for lunch.”

She and Rogers grin at each other.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he says, and she swats him with a menu.

“Don’t you ma’am me, you’re old enough to be my grandfather.”

Rogers looks embarrassed and pleased. The Carp saves the day again.

Then Kazue swats Barnes with the menu.

“And you! How come all this time you’ve been coming in here and none of us know your name?”

WHAT
Confirm, mission.

They have been friends to him since before contact. The Hayashis made a safe space for him without even knowing they did so. And he has not even introduced himself.

How rude.

CONFIRM

Barnes stands and holds out his right hand to shake, which makes Kazue smile at him. The skin of her hand is rough from hard work, and her grip is firm. It’s a good hand.

“Barnes,” he says, then feels awkward at the unaccustomed need for a forename. He glances at Rogers, who looks misty-eyed, and says, “uh, James Barnes.”

Kazue releases his hand, and his knees are glad to fold him back into the chair. His hand is glad to crumple the napkin lying on the table in front of him.

“Wait,” Kazue says.

She looks at Rogers, who nods in a watery sort of way.

“Did you get frozen too?” she asks Barnes.

Nod.

Kazue frowns.

“Who got you, the Nazis?”

“Russians.”

Kazue scoffs.

“Russians. Always trying to take what isn’t theirs. Japan, for instance.”

She peers at Barnes with a sharp look in her dark eyes.

“They did bad stuff to you, huh?”

HOW DOES SHE KNOW

Nod.

“I thought so. My father said it the first time you came in – that you have the look of some of the POWs he knew growing up back home. The ones who kept half the village up on hard nights, or who had to walk into the forest every once in a while to find themselves again.”

Walking in a forest sounds appealing.

CONFIRM

“Your father is kind,” he says.

Kazue laughs.

“Maybe to you, but he’s going to curse my ears off when I tell him about this! I’ll get your noodles
going. You both look like you need it.”

She swats them each on the arm again with the menus, but it’s a gentle, friendly sort of swat.

“Doing better, Buck?” Rogers asks after fiddling with his chopstick wrapper.

“Confirm. You?”

Rogers looks surprised at that.

Do I look like an idiot.

“Rogers.”

“Okay! Yeah, Bucky. I feel better.”

A young man brings them a tray of rolls and nigiri to keep them afloat while the soup cooks. Barnes kindly allows Rogers to eat several pieces before saying,

“You did not insist that we move to Manhattan.”

It substantially reduces the effectiveness of Rogers’s glare when his right cheek is distended from a large piece of rainbow roll.

“What?”

“You suggested, I agreed. Logical decision based on concern for the Olds’ safety and health. You did not coerce me.”

Rogers frowns at the table.

“Thanks, Bucky.”

“Not everything’s your fault, pal.”

Barnes can see it. For 0.5 seconds, the guy actually thinks about protesting that.

Asshole.

Then he shoves more sushi into his face instead.

Good choice, Steve.

CONFIRM

“Still,” Rogers says after a minute, “I wish I’d been smart enough to figure out that it’d be hard for you.”

“Me too.”

By the time they’re halfway through their bowls of nabeyaki udon, the sting of their combined stupidities has faded, and while Barnes does not wish to test it further today, the throbbing darkness of the subway entrance has receded from his mind.

Leaving more mental space to contemplate the Carp’s new décor.

“The fuck are all these hearts,” he says.
Rogers laughs.

“Valentine’s Day,” he says, “worst holiday on the calendar. You don’t remember it?”

The briefing gives Barnes nothing. He shakes his head.

“Too bad, you used to love it. Every year at school, your desk would be elbow deep in hearts and homemade cookies. Not just from our class, either. Half the school. Hell, one year you had a little gang of kindergartners following you around because you helped one of them fix her hair ribbon after some kid pulled it out before school one day. Those little girls talked their mothers into baking you a goddamn cake for Valentine’s Day. I thought you were gonna explode from embarrassment. Good cake, though.”

This story is confounding.

“Helped a little girl with her hair?”

“Sure. You were always doing your sisters’ hair. The little girl was sobbing her eyes out, and you just stopped, handed me your books, and tied her hair back like it was no big deal. Then you had an escort of adoring six-year-olds for the rest of the school year. Which you loved, I might add. Barely a day went by when you didn’t carry one of them home on your back.”

Kindness to small children. Hypothesis: the Bucky-person was an admirable character.

CONFIRM

The briefing plays an audio file.

“Geez, Stevie, it’s nothing. Anybody would do the same.”

Which is demonstrably not true in this terrible world, but it’s a nice thought.

“Pretty good story,” he says.

“I got a million of ‘em, Bucky,” Rogers says, “say the word and I’ll tell you every single one.”

Now, see. That’s a much more positive activity than running off to do violence to evildoers. No matter how much said evildoers deserve it.

Still doesn’t answer the basic question.

“But what’s the point.”

“Of the holiday?”

Nod.

“Oh, love, romance. That kind of thing. It’s cheesy.”

The guy is the same color as all the damn foil hearts.

“It’s a kissing holiday,” Barnes says.

“Yeah.”

Gross.
CONFIRM

Change of topic greatly desired.

CONFIRM

“Let’s go home,” he says, “we can call the Olds on the TV.”

It’s good to see Rogers look happy.

“Here’s how much I like you,” Lidia says when her face comes on the screen, “I was watching Magic Mike XXL and still answered your call.”

“Sorry,” Rogers says, “I don’t know what that is?”

“It’s a movie about male strippers!” Esther shouts in the background, “and I am definitely too young to watch it!”

Given the expression on her face, Lidia is happy that they have both recoiled in horror.

Barnes finds that he is not surprised.

Esther fetches Ollie, and they spend 7 minutes shifting themselves and the iPad into the optimum configuration to allow all of them to show on the screen at once. This is stymied when cat Eleanor walks over and sits directly in front of the screen.

“That beast!” Ollie yells.

“Oh, Eleanor,” Esther says.

There are several meows and blurry movements on the screen, and cat Eleanor is exiled to the floor. Shame.

But the scene makes Rogers laugh. After a long walk and noodles, it solidifies the sensation in Barnes’s chest that the latest round of troubles has passed and they’ve found another patch of equilibrium.

Rogers wasn’t in on the first television conversation with the Olds, so he has many questions about the apartment, the management company, and the roommate arrangements. Barnes can see that Ollie looks healthier: his cheeks are less hollow and his skin less pale. He doesn’t cough once during the whole conversation.

“They look good, Bucky,” Rogers says after they sign off.

“Yes.”

“Does that help? That they look so comfortable?”

Nod.

“Yeah. Me too.”

Like flying Sam said. Paying attention to the things that increase comfort.
And, unfortunately, like flying Sam also said, speaking of difficulties. Even though that is not comfortable.

“What you said earlier. About going back into the field.”

“Yeah, Buck?”

“Makes me feel unsafe.”

“For me to go, or you?”

“Both. You.”

“I’ll be fine, Bucky, it’s okay, I’m not –“

Barnes holds up his hand, and Rogers rightly recognizes it as a sign to shut his damn mouth.

“Just asking for a little while.”

Rogers looks unhappy again. But relaxed and unhappy, which is a mild improvement.

“Okay, Bucky.”

“Not like HYDRA’s going anywhere.”

Rogers rolls his eyes.

“Well, that’s for damn sure, Buck.”
The mission is clear. The mission doesn't change. Protect. But the targets (the sub-targets: the primary target is only ever Steve) are expanding in scope. Barnes has already demonstrated his willingness to protect the Olds. He would jump into lava for them. For the Hayashis. For building JARVIS, if it weren't a gigantic edifice. Possibly for a few of the yahoos around the tower. Katie, for example. Potts. Flying Sam.

Definitely not Romanoff.

(Okay. Probably Romanoff.)

The added responsibility does not increase stress. To the contrary, it makes quiet. Barnes can surmise that this will not remain true in the event of true danger. But day to day, it is comfort.

He observes Rogers (he always observes Rogers) for signs of the same. The briefing helps: it gives him pictures and phrases to help delineate between affection and duty.

Barnes can see that Rogers's incredible capacity for self-abnegation falters around the following individuals: Romanoff (gross), the Olds, and flying Sam.

Barnes identifies: disappointment since Christmas, he hasn't been part of that group.

Objectively, less than 2 months. Subjectively, a fucking decade.

Set task: regain functioning sufficient that Rogers stops worrying so damn much.

Tall order.

'I'm making a project,' he texts to flying Sam.

'Good, keep me posted,' Sam responds.

Turns out to be several projects.

First: assist Rogers with the whole emotional squashing thing. Strategy unclear. Watchfulness required. That part’s easy, at least.

Second: demonstrate their status to the sub-targets, preferably without resorting to the use of anything that has a red foil heart on it (in case they misinterpret and think he wants to kiss them [which he does not]). Possible strategy: identify problems with which he could assist.

GOOD

Confirm, mission. This achieves three goals: 1. It occupies the mind, leaving less space for brooding. 2. It will demonstrate to Rogers that he remains committed to good-guy, non-lethal, thereby assisting with the first project. 3. It will begin to redress the balance of all the harm caused by the Asset.

Third: continue advancements in personal grooming. It is surprising how little effort is required to
make his hair look really fucking good.

Surprisingly, the third project also assists with the first. To begin with, this is annoying, in that Rogers decides that Barnes is spending too much time in the bathroom.

“You okay in there, Bucky?”

“Yes.”

After the third repeat, Barnes is sick of the question and opens the door. The only reason he shut it in the first place was to use the mirror behind the door to make sure he hasn’t missed flattening any of the hair in the back.

“Oh,” Rogers says, and his face goes pink, “you shaved.”

That’s a stupid comment. Barnes has consistently shaved once per week since reset. The only difference is that this time he was careful about it.

“Admiring my pretty face, Rogers?”

The rosy shade of Rogers’s face deepens.

“Shut up, Bucky.”

But he smiles when he says it.

Rogers stands in the bathroom doorway, watching while Barnes puts the paste in his hair that separates the layers.

“I used to do this a lot,” Rogers says. “Watch you mess with your hair, getting ready for dates.”

Couldn’t have taken that long. The Bucky-person had a lot less hair.

“What about you,” he asks.

“What about me?”

“Did we also stand like this while you got ready for your dates.”

It’s curious, the way Rogers cringes from the question.

“No, Buck. I never went on any dates on my own, before the war. It was always double dates with you and whatever friend your girl could sucker into it.”

“That sounds shitty,” Barnes says.

“It mostly was. But I was ninety-eight pounds soaking wet with a bad heart, bum ears, and a talent for putting my foot in my mouth. Frankly, I never understood why you even tried to set me up.”

This description is ridiculous. The mission throws out

DENY

at the same time the briefing gives him, “don’t be an idiot, Steve.”

Confirm, you two.
He’s already punched the crap out of Rogers and it did no one any good. Instead Barnes moved to stand close – close enough that Rogers’s eyebrows arch. With something to say, the proximity makes no trouble for him.

“There has never been any damn thing wrong with your heart,” Barnes says.

Correct action. Rogers goes all mushy.

“Bucky,” he says in the kind of voice that suggests an incoming hug.

To forestall it, Barnes adds,

“Sounds like all the girls in Brooklyn must’ve been assholes.”

Barnes is unconvinced that the 26-minute tirade following this statement, describing the positive attributes of every girl they knew from ages 5 to 22 (e.g., “Oh my god, she had a face like a two-month-old pumpkin, but she was the kindest person you ever met. Next to my mother. Which is saying something.”), is actually an improvement over a single hug.

Maybe that’s progress.

A few days later, it snows again: a storm that blows in from the east and spends 18 hours dumping on the city until it has no edges left. At 10:35, Barnes and Rogers go up to the common area because it has the biggest windows, and they find Banner and Hill already there, staring at the scene.

By early afternoon, Potts is the only one off still pretending to be a grownup. Barnes sits under his potted tree and reads while the Xbox is put through its paces. Barnes and Rogers carry armloads of ingredients up from their floor and assemble grilled cheeses like a factory line (Stark makes a smart comment about poison, but he eats his. And he fucking enjoys it.) Hill makes hot chocolate from scratch that has alcohol in it and almost gives white mocha a run for its money.

By the time Barnes has a pile of cookies (dark chocolate and dried cherry) tall enough to last more than 5 minutes with this crowd, electronic cars and guns have been set aside in favor of a movie – or, rather, arguing forever about what movie to watch.

“Hey, Pinocchio,” Stark yells, but looking at Barnes, so it’s presumably an insult, “what do you think?”

He rattles off a string of words that have no meaning in context.

“Don’t know,” Barnes says.

“What do you mean you don’t know? You’ve got your classic scifi, your classic samurai, and your classic comedy. Which one?”

“Twenty-One Jump Street is not old enough to be a classic,” Banner says.

The question is unclear. Insufficient information.

“He hasn’t seen any of those, Tony,” Rogers says.

“Are you kidding me? None? You haven’t seen any movies since you came out of the ice cube tray?”

“Now that’s a classic,” Banner says.

“White Christmas?” Stark says, “what are you, an old person?”

Technically, yes.

“Tony,” Rogers says.

“Shut up, Stark, everyone with actual human feelings loves that film,” Romanoff says.

“Which is why you hate it,” Hill says.

“Which is why I hate it so much that I watch it every year,” Romanoff says, and throws a pillow at Hill.

“I have human feelings,” Stark says, “but I also demand a higher class of cinematic entertainment. One that doesn’t involve tap dancing.”

“Tony, are you telling them about your dance recital from when you were eight?” Potts calls out from the doorway, where she’s taking off her shoes. “It’s risky. They might ask you to demonstrate.”

Stark’s outrage actually shuts him up briefly.

Barnes likes Potts so much.

“Oh, well,” Potts says when presented with the list of proposed movies, “if he hasn’t seen it, I don’t think Barnes should go another minute without seeing Star Wars.”

“I actually haven’t seen that one either,” Rogers says.

“What is wrong with you?” Barton asks around a mouthful of cookie.

“I was saving it for a rainy day.”

“Snowy’ll have to do,” Potts says.

“You’ll love it,” Stark says to Barnes, “the villain is a black-clad cyborg.”

Barnes moves the plate of cookies away from Stark.

“Don’t listen to him, Barnes,” Barton says. “It’s a trilogy. You gotta hang in until the end.”

“Excuse me, it’s two trilogies,” Stark says.

“You lie,” Barton says at the same time Hill says,

“The hell you say,” at the same time Banner says,

“We don’t like to think about that,” at the same time Romanoff says,

“Why do you have to ruin everything,” at the same time Potts says,
“You shut your heretical mouth,” and shoves a cookie into Stark’s maw.

Accompanied by Rogers laughing aloud.

A topic on which almost all of them agree. It’s a goddamn miracle.

Snow storms: positive event, resulting in enjoyable activities.

The movie is also enjoyable. It’s silly, but also easy to get caught up in the aliens and robots, in the dumbass people trying their best to do what’s right despite the terrible odds. There is a doofy blond one who turns out to be the hero and wears a facial expression like Steve sometimes, when he’s filled with Noble Purpose.

Barnes would like to inquire whether the Asset was as frightening as the Darth Vader.

Is it a sign of intrinsic villainy that he hopes so.

Also: swords made out of laser might be a deeply inefficient weapon, but they look fun.

By the time the movie is over, the snow is blowing full sideways up at their elevation, sliding across the window glass with a sleepy sort of sound. The late-afternoon light – what little there is of it – is dampened by the clouds and precipitation, so it looks almost like night. Barnes hasn’t touched his book since the film’s opening shot, and he finds that he has moved his chair to within 2 m of the sofas where everyone else is piled on top of one another. Even Steve, who is serving as a back rest for Romanoff as she sits sideways with her knees draped on Barton and her feet in Hill’s lap.

Looks nice, if you don’t mind touching.

“Want to watch the next one?” Barton asks him.

Yes.

The sequel is difficult: full of hard betrayals and old secrets.

“This is the best one,” Hill says.

It is emotionally effective. The heroes make bad decisions out of good intentions. The goofy blond one gets semi-frozen, which creates a hollow feeling in Barnes’s chest. There’s a small talking lizard that needs dental work. The characters can’t get out of the traps their own lack of observation got them into.

By the time the Steve-hero is rushing off in what is clearly a terrible idea to save his friends, Barnes identifies: sadness. It is not entirely negative, but it makes the right side of Barnes’s body feel cold.

He rises from his chair and sits on the floor in front of Steve. Not quite close enough to lean his shoulder against Steve’s knee, but close enough that he can, if he wants to.

“Okay, Buck?”

Nod.

When they learn that the Steve-hero is the Darth Vader’s son, Barnes does lean against Steve’s knee. At the end, everyone’s sad, one of them has a missing hand, and one of them is frozen, and it is a lot to process.

One doesn’t expect personal life parallels in a movie about spaceships.
“Hang in there for the third one, Barnes,” Romanoff says, and squeezes his right shoulder.

Acceptable touching.

Barnes remains in his spot to ponder while everyone else squabbles about the ethics of calling for takeout despite the danger presented to delivery personnel from the storm.

“I employ excellent chefs, let’s just order from downstairs,” Stark says.

“I employ excellent chefs, and I sent them home along with everyone else at noon,” Potts says.

“Look at it outside!”

“I’m on it,” Hill says. “Barnes, Banner, you’re with me.”

What.

“What?” Stark says.

“Hop to it,” Hill says.

Barnes looks at Banner, who shrugs. He looks up at Rogers, who says,

“Up to you, Buck.”

Seems like a good policy not to argue with Hill. Unless one is tired of existence.

They take the elevator down to the second floor, and Hill leads them to the back of the cafeteria. She lays her hand against a steel door, which unlocks.

“Assistant director of security,” she says, “I can unlock anything in the building except for the private living spaces.”

“Which reminds me to ask where you live,” Banner says.

Hill blinks at him and smiles slowly.

“That information is divulged on a need-to-know basis,” she says.

“Does anyone need to know?” Banner asks.

“Nope.”

Given how often Barnes sees her around the tower, he surmises that she has a secret bolthole somewhere within Building.

It would be interesting to find it. Except that he likes having all his limbs attached.

They step into a large kitchen, full of metal countertops and appliances. Even given permission to leave early, the employees have left everything clean and organized.

“Okay,” Hill says, “we’re clearly the three best cooks still in the building. Let’s figure out what to feed people.”

WHAT
Confirm, what.

“You think I’m a good cook,” Barnes says.

Banner laughs softly and claps his arm.

“Barnes. You know I could never figure out what to say to Steve.”

“He hates talking,” Hill says, “which is why Stark loves him so much. Less competition.”

Banner grins again.

“Right. All of a sudden, every time I see him he wants to tell me about fancy cheese sandwiches, and suddenly we’re bonding.”

Hill has her head inside a refrigerator, so her voice is muffled when she says,

“It’s all grilled-cheese sandwiches and breakfast with Steve these days. Makes a nice change from all the silent brooding.”

“And Barton was insufferable about the cookies,” Banner says.

“Isn’t Barton always insufferable.”

Banner laughs.

“Yeah. So let’s just say you have a reputation.”

Identified: pleasure.

It is additionally pleasant to poke through the cabinets and refrigerators, examining all the ingredients used by professional chefs. Gives him several ideas.

“Nothing too time-consuming,” Banner says.

“Nothing too healthy,” Hills counters, “every time I look out the window I start shivering.”

Barnes and Banner, who are standing in front of the same cabinet, simultaneously reach for a box of lasagna noodles. Barnes feels his face make a smile to answer Banner’s. This is a positive step in project #2: take assistive action.

“Always pick your team carefully for maximum effectiveness,” Hill says.

They find boxes and pack them with supplies. Hill declares Barnes in charge of dessert. Easy enough. He has a running list of recipes he wants to try bookmarked on his phone. Hill writes a note for the chefs, telling them what’s been taken.

They are greeted with cheers on their return. Pretty nice. Not so bad to cook with others, either – especially others who don’t crowd him, who themselves dislike being crowded. Interesting, how both Banner and Hill are okay with a brief touch on the shoulder, or feet in their lap, but they twist smoothly away, like he does, when anyone stands too close for more than a breath.

And by the end of the third movie, Barnes can see what Barton and Romanoff meant about seeing it through. Barnes has a sketchy moment when the frozen man gets thawed. Turns out to be a good time to go stick the pans of pound cake in the oven.
All the “there is good in him” stuff about the Darth Vader sends Barnes back to his spot on the floor next to Rogers, who obviously follows the same line of thought as Barnes, given the way he keeps squeezing Barnes’s shoulder. It is – moving. To see that someone terrible can sacrifice and act toward redemption.

Also: there are fluffy things with pointy teeth. Like cat Eleanor. Barnes approves.

The timer for the cakes goes off before the movie is over.

“I got it, you stay put,” Hill says.

So when it’s over, and Barnes feels as if half his skin is missing but his brain is quiet, there are slices of pound cake on small plates all over the kitchen island, next to a bowl of whipped cream. Hill is standing behind the island, shoving surprisingly large bites of cake into her little mouth.

“Dammit,” she says, “why didn’t I take a bite before I plated them? I could’ve said it sucked and had the whole thing to myself.”

Nice.

“So’d you like it?” Barton asks him.

“Yes.”

Barton elbows Romanoff.

“See? An actual answer, not just a nod!”

“Damn, Bucky, they have your number,” Rogers says with a smirk on his face that makes the briefing practically purr.

“I never thought I’d see Frosty the Snowman look so pleased without death involved,” Stark says.

“Be nice or I’ll take your cake away, Tony,” Potts says, and Stark hunches protectively over his plate.

Outside, the snow has slowed. On the broad platform just beyond the large windows, there are more than 11 cm of snow. Barnes remembers the previous snowstorm, when he and Rogers found a good moment. This has also been an enjoyable day. He decides to like snow.

“What are you thinking about, Bucky?” Rogers asks.

“The last time it snowed.”

“Ah. When you ambushed me?”

Barnes can tell: the smile on Rogers’s face is a challenge.

“You mean when I kicked your ass using frozen precipitation.”

Romanoff snickers.

“Kicked my ass? Only because you fight dirty.”

“No point in fighting unless you win.”
“Sounds like a rematch is necessary,” Romanoff says.

“Otherwise, how are we supposed to know who’s toughest?” Hill asks.

“Snowball fight?” Barton says in a tone of excitement.

“Snowball fight,” Romanoff says.

Confirm.

Banner and Potts sit out the snowball fight, and there is loud, vulgar derision at Rogers’s refusal to wear weather-appropriate clothing. Romanoff makes this point eloquently toward the end of the battle, when Rogers face-plants (gee, how did that happen, surely he didn’t trip over a well-placed former assassin) and Barnes holds him down while Romanoff rubs snow in his hair.

“You’re awful!” Rogers yells.

“Aw, too bad,” she shouts, “if only you had a hat on!”

That section of Central Park might never be the same. For certain, the placid, smooth expanse of snow has come to resemble a tornado’s path. The teams fall out as Rogers, Barton, and Stark against Barnes, Hill, and Romanoff, with the expected outcome: Hair Club demolishes the dudes.

“This is what we get for letting all the sneaky folk on one team,” Barton says.

He has so much snow stuck to him that he looks like he spent the whole time lying in a snow bank.

Stark, meanwhile, is too busy holding his sides and shrieking with laughter to even be a sore loser. He really enjoyed the whole thing with Rogers’s hair.

They arrive back at the common area, steaming and damp, to find that Banner has demonstrated excellence by making another pot of hot chocolate. Stark makes Potts squeal by sitting on her in his wet, snow-covered coat and putting his cold face on her neck. Barnes feels tired in a way that is pleasant and suggestive of good sleep.

“This was an awesome day,” Barton says.

Confirm.

CONFIRM

To: skylord78@mailbox.com

From: barnes14@stark.net

Subject: this is a progress report

Dear flying Sam:

weatherunderground.com reports that there has been no snowfall in Washington DC. Suggest that you come visit. New York has had 2 recent snowfalls. I have decided that I like snow. Aesthetically pleasing. Also, highly enjoyable for use as a projectile.
I have kicked Rogers's ass twice at snowball fights.

It is possible that he was not exerting maximum effort.

I am doing as you suggested and attempting to speak with Steve. It is difficult. Words are not always available. Also, Steve is stubborn. I will persist.

Care for yourself flying Sam,

Barnes

Chapter End Notes

I HAVE SEEN THE THING. That is ... a lot to process.

In the meantime, I'm on a tear. So have an update early.
Barnes dreams about spaceships: reasonable. He dreams about cryo: also reasonable, if less pleasant. His bodily reactions to said dreams are not enough to wake Rogers, but they drive Barnes out of bed at 0530.

The snow has stopped, so the only sound as he drinks coffee and reads more about the Star Wars is the plink of his metal fingers on the keyboard. The films are excessively popular. There are even books to read that happen after the films, and piles of associated merchandise.

What was the Asset doing in 1977. Doubtful that the Asset watched a space film.

The briefing concurs. He could poke at it and find out what his body was doing back then, but it was probably something terrible.

Supposition: better to avoid dredging up terrible memories before breakfast.

**CONFIRM**

Confirm.

The toys create curiosity, so Barnes searches and finds a similar availability of Avengers toys. This is highly amusing. One can purchase hard plastic versions of the Avengers with poseable joints, including ones of Black Widow that in reality would not provide sufficient room for vital internal organs. One can have fluffy, cartoonish versions “suitable for snuggling,” which would be the only way possible to snuggle green-thing Hulk. One can have a pillow cover with a life-size photo of Rogers’s face, which is fucking creepy, and he might have to buy one for Steve’s bed. One can have a bear version of the Bucky-person.

One can have a bear version of the Bucky-person. It has a blue jacket and a little felt rifle.

Barnes sets the laptop aside and walks in a circle around the living room 6 times, counting his breaths.

Identified: weird, to be famous and not remember any of it. Did the Bucky-person know about his fame.

Barnes pulls the comic Rogers gave him out of the drawer in his bedside table, from the days before contact. The date on *HOWLING COMMANDOS: The Day Bucky Saved Cap!* is 1947. That’s after the long fall. Maybe the Bucky-person didn’t know.

He takes the comic back to the sofa to read it again, because the story is amusing. The artist gave comics-Bucky a ridiculous curl in the middle of his forehead that would be annoying. Comics-Bucky would want one of the chewing hair clips the women gave him.

Inside the last page of the comic, he finds the letter Rogers included with the package of other stuff. Rogers had been worried for him, not knowing that Barnes conducted surveillance from a place of safety, with the Olds. The package had food in it, cash, warm clothing, and objects to stimulate memory, like the comic. Barnes forgot that he put the letter inside the comic. He hasn’t read it since November. He read it then, realized that contact was necessary, and right away everything got complicated.

The letter is full of crossings-out, which is obviously Rogers holding back strong emotion even back
then, though it leaks out in a few places, such as “Everything fell down around me, in DC. When I found out that SHIELD was evil. When I found out you’re alive.”

Barnes remembers the moment yesterday when the Darth Vader announced being the Steve-hero’s father. Surprise and dismay had made his body shudder.

Was it like that for Steve.

Information desired.

Rogers emerges from the back at 0735, in his tractor pants. Barnes notes: his hair looks at least 7 orders of magnitude better before Rogers makes it flat and smooth like a dork.

“Uh-orning,” Rogers says around a yawn.

“What’cha got there?” he asks when he thunks down on the sofa, mug in hand.

Barnes holds out the letter. Rogers takes it with a frown, handling it as if it might burn him.

He reads, expression exhibiting mild distress, then laughs a little.

“Could’ve stood to make a clean copy, I guess.”

DENY

Confirm.

“Deny. The crossings-out are indicators of emotional state and assisted with understanding.”

Rogers frown at him.

“What? What’s that?”

Barnes takes the letter back and replaces it in its envelope to keep it safe.

“Thought distant surveillance was safer,” he says. “Which is correct, given recent evidence. But safer doesn’t mean better.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Rogers says in a gravelly voice. Then, “you gave me my plant after I gave you that.”

Barnes shakes his head.

“Didn’t read the letter until several days later.”

“Why not?”

Shrug.

“Scared of it.”

“Scared? Bucky, what could I possibly write down that would scare you?”

Do you lack all imagination Steve.

“Passcodes, recrimination, refusal.”
“Refusal? Bucky! You know –“

Barnes holds up his hand.

“Rogers. Listen.”

Rogers shuts his flappy mouth. Good job, Rogers.

CONFIRM

“Mission kept trying to tell me. But I didn’t really understand that you share the protect order until you stood in front of my gun in your sheep pants, willing to die to make a point.”

Rogers puts his mug down. His hands are visibly shaking.

“Oh,” he says.

He’s already doing that thing where he breathes hard through his nose, trying to not feel.

DENY

Confirm.

“Steve.”

Note: strong response to use of forename.

“Steve. I’ve been thinking. We met before the vehicle, yes? You were not surprised to see me.”

Rogers blinks hard.

“Yeah, Buck. We. You don’t remember?”

“Must’ve been wiped.”

Rogers shudders.

“I’d have to dig for it. The letter said ‘everything fell down.’ Please explain.”

There is a tremor in Steve’s voice when he speaks.

“We thought Nick Fury was dead. You shot him in – in my apartment. I chased you on the roof. Threw the shield and you actually caught it, I couldn’t believe it.”

Barnes almost remembers that one, mostly as an echo of sensation in his left shoulder and deep irritation.

“Then in the hospital, Natasha told me about you. About the Winter Soldier, how she’d tangled with you before.”

WHAT

Confirm, what.

“You didn’t know that? You should ask her about it. But all I knew was that this Winter Soldier scared her, and I’d never seen her scared of anything but the Hulk before. Then we found out about SHIELD. About HYDRA. We were driving, in Sam’s car, on a bridge, and it was like you came out
of nowhere. Just. Relentless. They had you in a mask.”

That is another body-memory: humid heat around the lower half of his face, pressure. Barnes identifies: nausea, and puts his mug down.

“You were chasing Natasha. There was a bus crash. And just. Bullets, everywhere. You had so many weapons. Every time I knocked one away, you had another. I couldn’t believe how strong you were, it was like fighting Thor.”

Now there’s no need for flattery Steve.

“And then your mask came off, and –“

He stops speaking. Rogers is staring at the floor, his hands balled into fists on his knees. Barnes shifts 10 cm closer. Rogers glances at him and takes a shaky breath.

“The whole world stopped. It was like – everything went silent.”

Another unsteady breath, and when he continues, Rogers's voice is higher. He speaks all in a rush.

“You were dead, Bucky. I watched you fall. I was close enough to feel the heat of your hand before the bar broke and you fell. And you were only even there in the first place because you’d been covering me. With my own shield. God, Bucky, you looked me in the eye the whole way down.”

Steve makes a sound like choking. Barnes lays his arm on Steve’s shoulder. Unfortunate that it’s the metal arm, but one hopes better than nothing.

“You were dead. I knew you were dead, you fell so far. It was why I couldn’t – why I had – but there you were. Standing right in front of me, looking like you hadn’t aged a day. Like me. I said your name, and you said ‘who the hell is Bucky’.”

It’s Barnes’s turn to shudder; the briefing downloads before he can refuse it: the bank, the chair, the main handler (apparently the former US Secretary of Defense, how terrific) backhanding his face, and fucking Rumlow.

The sound that comes out of him is like the sad laugh Rogers gives sometimes.

“What is it, Buck?”

“Download. Got in trouble about that with my handlers. With Pierce.”

He looks up at Steve.

“May not have remembered my name, but I argued with him because I remembered you.”

Rogers shudders under his hand, and his eyes are pressed shut so hard that it looks painful.

Barnes squeezes Steve’s shoulder a little.

“I remembered you. That's why they wiped me mid-op.”

Steve is overcome. He shakes, and breathes as if there’s no oxygen, and fights with himself to prevent the tears leaking out of his eyes.

Barnes has had a successful day, several nights of good sleep, positive interactions with others, and a cup and a half of coffee. He has reserves. He can exert effort and bear some discomfort for the
mission.

He slides closer and puts both arms around Steve’s shoulders. Steve breathes sharply, then his arms are around Barnes’s shoulders, his hands clutching Barnes’s sleep shirt. His shoulders shake and shake, and Barnes can feel that his own neck is wet.

“Shoulda stopped it,” Rogers says to Barnes’s clavicle. “Shoulda seen something was wrong after Azzano. Never shoulda let it go, I knew. Why couldn’t. Shoulda done fucking anything, Buck, so they couldn’t hurt you. Bucky. The way they hurt you. I wanna fucking burn them to the goddamn ground. Bucky. For what they did. You never shoulda had to go through any of it. The things they did to you. Bucky I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry Bucky why didn’t I jump after you. Why didn’t I save –”

Here is a positive development: Barnes finds that his desire to ease Steve’s suffering is greater than the discomfort caused by proximity. It’s difficult, and he sweats a little, his teeth chatter a little, but mostly it is okay to allow Steve hold onto him and let some shit go. His whole right shoulder is a mess of facial effluvia anyhow, so what’s a little sweat mixed in there.

After 6 minutes, Steve’s shudders stop, presenting Barnes with a good excuse to get himself some personal space. He leans back and digs in his pocket for his handkerchief. Rogers, doing the same, comes up with his own handkerchief at the same time.

It’s good to have a little laugh. And to clean his face.

Rogers looks like he got run over by a tank, but some of the tension he habitually carries has gone out of him. He breathes more calmly, still staring at the floor.

“Hey,” Barnes says, “want to go jump around on the obstacle course and then maybe shoot some guns.”

Rogers is able to make an actual smile at that one. Good job Barnes.

CONFIRM

“Yes,” Rogers says, “yes I do. And then go to the diner and eat about a hundred pancakes.”

“Confirm,” Barnes says.

The obstacle course is good. They’re not sparring – it doesn’t count as violence. They just naturally try to dump each other to the ground and trip each other at every opportunity. Rogers unfortunately makes it first across the finish line, but Barnes, wrapped around Roger’s right leg, gets dragged across shortly thereafter.

Barnes makes up for this defeat at the shooting range. It’s been a while since he fired a weapon, so an advantage is desired.

“Steve,” he says as they’re readying their ear protection, “ninety-two percent probability that if you had jumped after me, the Soviets would’ve had two brainwashed super assassins.”

Oh dear, that decreases Rogers’s firing accuracy. How unfortunate.

“You’re an asshole,” Rogers says in the elevator up to their apartment.

“Confirm,” Barnes says. “Learning my cues for human behavior from a terrible example.”
“You shouldn’t talk about Esther that way.”

Rogers. That is beyond the pale.

Still. Joking indicates improved emotional functioning. Barnes demonstrates approval by punching Rogers in the arm.

Hygiene is required before pancakes, if they ever hope to visit the diner in the future. Barnes watches Rogers smoothing his hair flat post-shower and decides to take care of that problem too. He scoops some of the hair paste into his hand, walks over, and scrubs his hand back and forth across the top of Roger’s head.

“What are you doing?” Rogers asks in a voice much higher pitched than his usual.

“Looks better.”

Rogers looks in the mirror.

“I look like I got caught in a hurricane.”

“Looks better, Rogers.”

Rogers flaps his arms, and his face goes pink, but he leaves his fucking hair alone.

They don’t quite eat a full hundred pancakes. They get pretty close, though.
The Anti--Valentine's No-Touch Club

To: barnes14@stark.net

From: skylord78@mailbox.com

Subject: Re: this is a progress report

Barnes –

While I appreciate the invitation, I’m going to have to disagree with you about snow. Snow is horrible. Winter is clearly the worst season by a long shot, which is why I live in DC now and not closer to my mama’s cooking.

Good job trying to talk. Believe me, I know how hard it is to get Steve to open up. Better prepare yourself for the long haul.

I’ll take care of myself if you will.

Sam

It's good to have projects. There have been no more outbursts from Rogers, but the set of his shoulders is easier. He and Barnes have entire nights when neither of them wakes the other with unpleasant dreams. Improvement.

For the kissing holiday, Katie makes him a 'red velvet latte,' which is a violent crime against coffee.

"Oh my god, I am so sorry," Katie says, laughing so hard at whatever his face is doing that she has to compose herself before she can make a non-horrible drink.

Barnes and Rogers each get a text from Hill at 1226 reading 'common area. 1800. bring dessert and fancy beer.'

"I think," Rogers says, "that it's in the best interest of our health to accept this invitation."

Gee you think.

It's a tall order, dessert and fancy beer. Barnes has insufficient information to make a foolproof dessert choice.

"I believe Ms. Hill is fond of chocolate," building JARVIS says.

Which is so helpful.

He and Rogers walk to a beer store through tiny balls of ice falling from the sky. They alight on one's face and melt. Cold and damp: suboptimal.

"This is awful," he says.

"I'm maybe starting to see your point about winter gear," Rogers says.

For an example of just how gross the weather is.
At the beer store, there is a rack of single bottles that covers an entire wall. The beers have ridiculous names and colorful labels indicating exactly nothing about the contents: skulls, cartoon dogs, farm houses, sheaves of wheat. They gawp at the display for several minutes. Rogers glances at the pink-haired girl behind the register in a vain hope of assistance, but she does not acknowledge the existence of a world outside her phone.

"Any idea?" Rogers asks.

"The one with the dog flying an airplane is funny."

Rogers grins and pulls down the bottle.

"I wonder if people still draw these by hand," he says. "I would've loved that job."

Barnes can see Rogers imagine it: a life without serum, without going to war. A peaceful life sitting at a high desk, drawing quietly each day. The Bucky-person dead from Zola and pneumonia in Italy. Himself buried in Brooklyn at a tragically young age, leaving behind only advertisements.

Actually, that's probably not what Rogers is thinking, given that he doesn't look miserable.

"Fuck it," Rogers says, "let's just get some with nice labels."

They stop themselves at 24 bottles. The pink-haired girl rolls her eyes and sighs heavily at their daring to interrupt her phone time by actually making a purchase.

The little pellets of ice come down even harder on the walk home. The cold worms its way down his collar and up through the bottom of his coat, until his knees ache and he can feel the interfaces between metal and flesh on his left side throbbing. Terrible weather. Hill had better appreciate their efforts.

But the thought of her narrowing her eyes and pressing her lips together in disappointment over dessert is undesired.

Insufficient information.

Additionally: insufficient body heat. Upkeep required to decrease pain response. Otherwise he might try to bite Hill's head off, and then Stark and Banner would have to figure out a way to revive him, and maybe he would forget Esther and cat Eleanor while he was dead.

DENY

Confirm.

Barnes takes The Baking Bible with him.

"Are you taking that book with you into the tub?" Rogers asks.

How else is he supposed to simultaneously get warm and do the needed research.

"Multi-tasking," he says.

"Bucky. You're gonna turn that book into a boat."

It has 1000 recipes. Submarine is much more likely.

"Give it here. Tell me what section and I'll read it to you."
Maybe it’s weird, that Barnes lies flat in the tub with only his nose above water, listening while Rogers sits on the counter next to the sink to read out the titles of all the recipes with chocolate in them. But it’s quiet, and it’s comfortable.

And it’s efficient.

The warmth of the water drips into his bones and eases the hurt in his shoulders. In the tub, his back and sides are protected. He can see Rogers hunched over the book, refracted by the water. Rogers’s voice sounds as if it comes from very far away.

“Hey, this one has beer in it,” Rogers says, and reads out a recipe for a cake. With beer.

Barnes lifts his head out of the water.

“Does that sound good.”

“Maybe,” Rogers says, “and anyway, it keeps with the theme.”

Good enough.

The cake has more steps than he has been used to. Seems appropriate to make something complicated, given the mysterious nature of the invitation and the unknowable nature of what Hill has planned. Barnes notes: it decreases tension to occupy the mind with a complex task.

The recipe calls for yogurt, which they do not have. Rogers is the one to suggest asking building JARVIS, who relays the request through unknown channels, culminating in Potts showing up at their door with a plastic container.

She has her hair in curlers and is wearing yoga pants and a brown and light blue cardigan worthy of Rogers. The skin of her face is extremely shiny.

“Please don’t look at me,” she says. “Tony’s taking me out and won’t tell me where, so I have to go maximum fancy.”

“You will look great,” Barnes says.

Her face turns pink.

“I always feel like such a schlub at this point in the process.”

Barnes feels a wave of smartness wash over him.

“Nah,” he says, “casual has its own charm.”

“Oh you,” she says, and pokes him in the arm.

Rogers is laughing, bent over the kitchen island.

“How is it,” he says, “that you are the world’s deadliest assassin, so terrifying that you could scare Black Widow, but still flirt like that?”

What.

Stark will eviscerate him.

Well. Stark would try to eviscerate him. Chance of success <50%.
“I wasn’t flirting.”

“Okay, Bucky. Whatever you say.”

Just for that, Barnes fills the bowl of batter with water in the sink before Rogers has a chance to lick it.

They use a bottle of chocolate stout in the cake, and top it with a ganache that has coffee in it.

Identified: eagerness.

He and Rogers put on nicer shirts (Rogers puts on a nicer shirt: all 4 of Barnes’s shirts are equivalently flattering) and carry the cake and the beers up to the 34th floor. In the elevator they find Banner, shifting from foot to foot with a bottle in one hand and a platter of small foods.

“I was told to bring Scotch and canapes,” he says.

It’s a plot.

Hill is already in the common area, unpacking bags of food containers. She stands and grins at them.

“You all follow directions so well!” she says. “That never happened with Steve before, must be Barnes’s good influence.”

“You’re a nonstop source of hilarity,” Rogers says.

“It me,” Hill says.

Banner’s canapes are mushrooms stuffed with seasoned breadcrumbs and dates wrapped in prosciutto. Barnes doesn’t know what either dates or prosciutto are, but he eats one anyway. It is sweet, and salty, rich and a little grainy. If it were up to him, he’d eat the rest of the ones on the plate by himself.

Hill declares herself satisfied with all their offerings.

“Good job. I got Indian food. First because it’s my favorite and second because I can’t wait to watch Barnes eat vindaloo. Welcome to the Anti—Valentine’s Day No-Touch Club.”

Barnes blinks. Does that mean he is in two clubs now. Seems like a lot of clubs.

Banner laughs.

“I’m not sure what I think about this,” Rogers says.

“You feel damn lucky, Rogers,” Hill says.

Rogers nods.

Hill has also lined up movies for them.

“Ordinarily I would watch things with maximum explosions and stabbing,” she says, “but since I’m with twitchy, twitchier, and nuclear twitchy, we have an evening of classic animation planned.”

“You mean cartoons? For kids?” Rogers says.

Barnes pokes him in one shoulder, and Banner pokes him in the other.
“Sounds terrific,” Rogers says.

They line up the beers on the table and choose by label, just like in the store, passing them around when one is insufficient or particularly good. Barnes likes the paler ones, the ones that taste better cold. They taste appropriate with a wider range of foods.

Added to inventory of acceptable nutriment: stuffed mushrooms, prosciutto-wrapped dates, saag paneer, lamb vindaloo. Even if the vindaloo makes his nose run and his eyeballs hurt; that’s what handkerchiefs are for.

And while the movies might be intended for children, and have child protagonists, they are emotionally effective. The first one is about a little girl who gets stuck doing drudge work for a magical bathhouse, and whose good nature overcomes all the traps set for her, uncovering secrets and finding her way home. It makes mental quiet – and the art is so weird that Rogers spends most of the film leaned forward, staring at the screen with an expression of concentration.

When the movie’s over, Barnes rummages through the drawers in the common area’s kitchen island and comes up with a blue pen and a small spiral-bound notepad.

“Thanks, Buck,” Rogers says, and immediately starts drawing.

“So,” Banner says while he pours out the scotch and Barnes cuts the cake into slices, “I get why I’m part of the no-touch club, but I kind of thought I was the only member.”

Barnes looks at him.

Banner scrunches up his face, then shakes his head.

“Sorry, Barnes. Yeah, of course, you too.”

“My aggressive heterosexuality is largely visual,” Hill says.

“The way you groped me at the Christmas party contradicts that,” Rogers says.

Hill waves.

“Oh please. As I said at the time, I wasn’t serious about it.”

“It was still seriously uncomfortable,” Rogers says.

“Which is why you’re in the no-touch club,” Hill says.

It’s a valid point.

“But why you,” Barnes asks Banner.

Banner looks as if he’d like to escape somewhere – a Somali desert, maybe, or a Saudi prison. New Jersey.

“It’s, uh, not just anger that brings out the big guy,” he says. “Pretty much any strong emotion can do it.”

Oh.

Oh.
“That sucks,” Barnes says.

“Yeah.”

Kind of dampens Barnes’s desire to meet green-thing Hulk, too, if it’s going to cause Banner distress.

“My god, Barnes,” Hill says after her first bite of cake, “You could’ve won the Cold War with baked goods alone.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

The other two movies are similarly affecting: one about an alien who finds a lonely child and one about a robot that chooses to be kind instead of being a weapon and to save that world. It’s possible that the latter inspires Barnes and Rogers to sit closer together than is usual.

“Another Valentine’s Day successfully avoided,” Hill says while they clean up and divide the cake for transport to their respective abodes.

“I’ll admit this was much better than flipping channels and a kale salad,” Banner says.

CONFIRM

For shit’s sake, confirm.

“I like prosciutto-wrapped dates,” Barnes says.

Barnes is certain that his level of atonement does not even approach deserving a room full of people smiling at him. It’s pretty nice, though.

There’s a loud knock on their door the next morning at 0712. It is Stark, accompanied by a fierce frown.

“You have my yogurt,” he says.

Oops.

“Sorry,” Barnes says, “I only used one cup.”

“What did you even need it for?”

“Made a cake,” Barnes says.

He hates to say it, but it does seem appropriate, under the circumstances.

“You can have a piece.”

Stark stares at him.

“Don’t distract me with cake. I just want my yogurt back.”

Barnes hands over the container. Stark glares at him.
“What,” Barnes says.

Stark shakes the yogurt container at him.

Perplexing.
Project #1, assist Rogers with strong emotion, goes well only in that they settle into peaceful days. They work out far more than Barnes would desire, and walk a lot, spending whole days wandering the city, poking their way around tiny shops and eating whatever looks good. They go to museums, where Rogers sketches and Barnes reads. Rogers continues to talk to Stark about future operations on HYDRA, but he starts no awkward conversations over dinner. They buy a cribbage board, to keep their skills up in anticipation of Barnes being able to bear non-foot transportation again some day and thus visit Brooklyn.

Rogers cheats. Of course.

Project #2, assist others with identifiable problems, is easier. All it takes is observation and action. He helps Katie lift two heavy sacks of coffee, and after her pen runs out of ink one morning at 0520 and she’s unable to locate a new one at the coffee bar, he takes to carrying two extra pens around wherever he goes. They fit nicely next to a knife, with a few sheets of paper folded carefully behind them, in case Rogers needs to draw. He talks Ollie through replacing the washer in his kitchen faucet via Lidia’s iPad. He takes Barton to the Carp on a bad day. These are positive occurrences, expanding Barnes’s interior sense of quiet.

Project #3 is a foregone conclusion.

Unfortunately, Barnes discovers that Stark also has a project. Its origin is unknown, but the indications are unmistakable.

It starts at the coffee bar. Barnes goes for his usual and finds Stark lounging sideways in a chair, flipping a piece of cardboard in his hands.

“Hey, Princess Elsa! Been worried about you, buddy, ever since Pepper told me about your little Valentine’s party with Hill. Made you this.”

He holds out the cardboard, which says NO HUGGING in black letters. There’s a string attached to it, presumably to hang around the neck.

Stark apparently thinks he’s stupid. This is an attempt to make him feel awkward.

Sorry to disappoint, pal. Gotta give a shit to feel awkward.

He takes the sign and puts it on.
“Thanks,” he says.

Stark looks briefly surprised, then scowls and stomps away.

Aw.

“The hell are you wearing, Buck,” Rogers says on his return.

“Stark made it for me.”

“I think Stark’s trying to make you look stupid.”

Barnes looks at him.

“Ah. Okay,” Rogers says.

For the following 4 days, Barnes wears the NO HUGGING sign every time he leaves the apartment. Result: highly entertaining. Stark grows more and more annoyed that Barnes wears the sign without perturbation. Concurrently, Potts grows more and more annoyed with Stark, until she holds out her hand for the sign, then rips it in half.

“That’s enough, you two,” she says.

Only it isn’t. Stark’s next ploy is to arrange more pots of trees for the common area and the coffee bar, as if he thinks Barnes will suffer a brain glitch from having an actual choice of plant to sit under.

Seems a waste, though, all those trees in the common area, unused. They’re nice plants, tall enough not to smack one in the face with leaves.

Technically the trees are for him.

Can he have them.

“I don’t see why not, Sergeant,” building JARVIS says in response to his inquiry.

“Uh, hello?” Rogers says when he returns from talking to Stark one afternoon.

“Hi,” Barnes says from inside the cluster of trees, where he has set up a comfortable chair and a good lamp.

Excellent reading spot. Cozy.

“Where’d you get all these?” Rogers asks.

“From Stark.”

Rogers looks so happy at that idea.

“It isn’t even any use, is it,” Stark grumbles the next time they’re all in the common area. “You’re bulletproof.”

Poor Stark.

Barnes passes him the plate of brownies.
“Just my left arm,” he says.

Next, Rogers gets a project in his head. Maybe he thinks he’s being all suave and subtle. He is incorrect.

It starts first thing in the morning; Barnes wakes to a monitor showing Rogers’s bed empty, and likewise the living room.

“Building, where is Steve.”

“He is on his way up from the coffee bar, Sergeant.”

Adhering to protocols by not leaving building JARVIS – that’s good. Bringing a white-chocolate mocha – that’s better.

“Hey, you’re up!” Rogers says.

His face is pink. Suspicious. But he hands over the cup, and it tastes normal.

“Thanks,” Barnes says.

“I brought breakfast, too.”

Sandwiches, with egg, ham, cheese, and vegetables. All his favorite breakfast sandwiches put together into one breakfast sandwich. Where did they come from.

“Good, right? Katie helped me put them together.”

“Rogers.”

“I’m glad you like them, Buck.”

“How do you feel about a walk?” Rogers asks when they’re done.

It’s a ridiculous question. They go for a walk most days. The weather has even improved markedly in the past week. On one hand, that’s pleasurable. On the other hand, he’s going to have to purchase a lighter jacket.

“Sure.”

Instead of their usual ramble around the immediate vicinity, Rogers walks with a purpose. First, they stop at a store proclaiming itself “thrift.”

“I thought you might find a jacket here, without having to pay a mint for it,” Rogers says.

Rogers has noticed his conundrum.

Nice.

Rogers apparently also conducts surveillance.

CONFIRM

Good job, Rogers.
CONFIRM

A great deal of delicate experimentation is required to find sleeves large enough to contain the metal arm. But time yields success. Jackets acquired: 2, one black leather, similar in shape to Roger’s brown one but with a great many small zippered pockets (aka knife storage), and one lightweight black wool, slim and waist-length with a high collar that, with his jeans, makes him look even taller.

NICE

Confirm, mission.

But he wears the leather one out. The day is a bit windy.

“Thanks, pal,” he says.

Rogers rubs the back of his neck.

Something is definitely going on.

They walk many blocks to a new museum, which is filled not with paintings but with approximately 1 million examples of cool junk.

Barnes researches a lot as he reads – he instinctively knows plenty about weapons, living under the radar, mathematics for precision shooting, and methods to cause human injury and death, but his brain retains little about history or nature.

For example: it's one thing to have looked up the word "elephant," and to have seen a picture of one. It's another thing entirely to stand next the body of one, posed from life. Big fuckers.

And the bones. They spend two hours looking at all those giant bones, along with valuable rocks, primitive weapons, and tons of dead animals set up in educational poses. There are fake whales hanging from the ceiling. He fills pages in the notes function on his phone to remind himself to look stuff up later: about the ocean, about dinosaurs, about the two Roosevelts, and about stars.

They go into a movie theater and watch a show about guys walking on the moon. On the actual moon. With their feet.

“You liked it?” Rogers asks.

“Confirm,” Barnes says.

There is a lot to learn about the world.

“You were always dragging me to lectures and exhibitions,” Rogers says. “Stuff I never would have thought about for two seconds, but you were always telling me that we had to learn about stuff. To know the past so we could live in the future. That the future would be amazing.”

How much of Roger’s flattering descriptions of the Bucky-person is correct, and how much is affection.

Unanswerable.

“Did you hate it,” he asks.

“No! God no,” Rogers says, “it was fun. I mean, when it was just the two of us and I wasn’t busy getting the snub from some unhappy girl. We actually used to come over to Manhattan sometimes,
when we had bus fare. We’d argue over whether to go to the Met or the natural history museum.”

“Who won.”

Rogers laughs.

“Me, mostly. I’d talk until I started coughing, and then you’d always give in. I’d sit and draw at the Met while you slouched around and flirted with the coat check girls, but every once in a while I’d feel bad about it and we’d go look at your dinosaur bones. Not like I couldn’t draw those too. Great way to stay warm on a cold winter day.”

The briefing shows it to him: long, cold walks; terrible coffee and sandwiches at the automat; flirting with the coat check girl for approximately 93 seconds, before he wandered back to the gallery where Steve sat hunched over a cheap notebook. Keeping watch, as always.

“You hungry?”

They’ve walked for miles, inside and out. Stupid question.

“Tell me if this isn’t okay,” Rogers says, coming to a stop in front of a dark restaurant with the word ‘Rodina’ above the door.

Russian food.

What the hell is Rogers doing.

Whatever it is, it is excellent.

CONFIRM

Rogers exhibits terrible taste by turning up his nose at pickled herring, but they eat shashlik and kasha and two bowls of borscht each. It makes a small stirring in the back of his brain – a strange sensation, as if it were the Asset, if the Asset were content.

Contentment was not something the Asset had much experience of.

That person did many terrible things. But he did them with confusion, under duress. Frequently in both mental and physical pain. Wanting only to finish the mission and go back to storage, where nothing hurt. Barnes could examine those memories and try to find peaceful moments. Surely there must have been some. At least a couple. Right?

Barnes identifies: sorrow. For the first time, he feels sympathy for the person he once was, however villainous.

“Bucky. You okay?”

Okay is a sliding scale. Like flying Sam says: recovery is not a straight line. Apparently it is possible to be sad but still okay.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s good.”

“Yes? You look kinda sad.”

Barnes doesn’t know what intent lies behind Rogers carting him around to past and present self-appropriate activities. But it would be crappy to ruin that.
“Yeah,” he says. “Looking sad is an expression of enjoyment in a Russian restaurant.”

Rogers laughs.

*And* he insists on paying for lunch. Weird.

It gets even weirder after lunch, because Rogers takes him to a bakery, a cheese store, and a bookstore.

Mission. Rogers is buttering us up.

CONFIRM

Whatever question Rogers is going to ask, it’s sure to be terrible.

Difficult to maintain pessimism, though, in the face of such activities.

The bakery smells even better than their apartment did on Thanksgiving. They let him taste bits of many types of breads: a loaf with olives in it, one wholemeal with seeds, a plain one with a brittle crust and chewy insides, a dark loaf like he has eaten at Lydia’s home, and one with oregano and Parmesan baked into it.

He gets a half-loaf of each, already cataloging his plans for combining them with cheese and condiments.

He does not miss that the baker places a small box into the second bag, nor that Rogers insists on carrying that one. But he doesn’t ask.

The cheese shop is equally amazing, with not only samples of a dozen cheeses but also various pastes and preserves to go with them. A whole rack of olives and tiny pickles.

He tries each of the available samples and discovers that there are no cheeses of which he disapproves, even counting the Spanish cheese that’s aged in a cave for half a year and smells like something that’s been dead approximately that long.

“How am I supposed to choose,” he says.

“Not like we can’t come back,” Rogers says.

So he picks an assortment, relatively small amounts each of half a dozen, plus a jar of fancy preserved peppers that the shop assistant suggests would be good either in eggs or on a sandwich and a block of quince paste, just because it’s fucking delicious.

The bookstore is the equivalent of the Army surplus store: stuffed into a basement space, dusty and dim, with piles of books leaning at precarious angles all over the place.

Where does one even start.

“How am I supposed to choose,” he says. “I’ll be at the table in the front. Take your time.”

Barnes spends a very pleasant 73 minutes wandering the store, pulling books out of stacks based on the title, or the color, or even the text font. Many of them have stupid covers that remind the briefing of past eras. But it’s interesting to read descriptions on the back covers, compare those with the first few pages of text, and choose for himself. The smell of old books is like dust mixed with mildew and vanilla, and Barnes identifies: enjoyment at the action of sniffing at the old volumes.
He gets eleven books for a total cost of $29.33. Very reasonable.

“I assume you want to go home now to read and eat cheese,” Rogers says with a grin.

Barnes feels his face make a smile.

“Yes.”

Barnes sits amid his trees for the rest of the afternoon, reading *Dracula*, which is not nearly as lurid and blood-filled as the cover art would indicate.

At 1830, he hears Rogers rattle around in the kitchen and looks out from inside the trees.

“I’m cooking dinner.”

That’s a disaster in the making.

“Bucky, give me a break. This is the one thing I know how to make, just trust me.”

Well. If it sucks, at least there’s plenty of good bread and good cheese.

Thankfully, the dinner turns out tasty: pasta with red sauce that almost tastes. Familiar.

“This is your ma’s recipe,” Rogers says in a hoarse voice, halfway through. “Knob of butter, a good, big pinch of saffron. She used to say she got it from the Italians who lived next to you when you were a baby.”

“It’s good,” Barnes says.

The briefing is a shy and shivery feeling deep in his chest – it makes his voice sound breathy.

“Will you teach me to make it.”

“Yes, Bucky. Of course I will.”

This is a gift Steve has given him.

Followed by another: after they’ve finished, Steve takes the plates to the kitchen and pulls out the little mystery box from the bakery. He removes two cupcakes from it, then places a small candle in one and lights it. He sets the one with the candle in front of Barnes.

“Happy birthday,” he says.

What.

CONFIRM

Strong emotion makes it impossible to move for 43 seconds, impossible even to ask. He watches the little candle burn.

“What do I do,” Barnes says when he can.

“You make a wish and blow it out,” Rogers says softly.

What is he to wish for. He has a mission, backup, and a home. He has a list of good things. Safe spaces. A hope of recovery. Maybe even atonement.
He wishes for all this to remain, and blows the candle out.

It’s milk chocolate cake with peanut butter frosting.

“Rogers,” he says, “this is all amazing.”

And it seems appropriate to bend a little and allow a hug. After a day of good things, even close contact isn’t so bad.

“I did okay?” Rogers says into his ear.

“You did great,” Barnes says, then, “you gonna let me eat that cupcake?”

The cupcake is terrific. But –

“What’s the date.”

Rogers laughs, high and loud, and slaps the table twice.

“I don’t know why that’s funny!” he howls.

Yeah, I don’t either, pal.

Finally Rogers stops laughing and wipes his eyes.

“March tenth,” he says.

That’s good knowledge. Barnes knows he probably read it somewhere, but it’s good to hear the words. Maybe he’ll remember it now. March tenth.

Wait.

“Oh three one oh,” he says.

“Yes, that’s the date,” Rogers says.

“That’s the passcode on your phone.”

Why is his birthday the passcode on Rogers’s phone. That means something important.

Mission. We should try to figure that out.

CONFIRM

Rogers spends a minute being surprised, then annoyed, then settles on chagrin.

“Should I even ask how you know that?”

Well, shit. There goes that.

“Figured it out, in DC.”

“You figured out my passcode without knowing it was your birthday?”

“Confirm.”

Rogers squints at him.
“And what did you do with this knowledge?”

Sigh.

“Paired my phone.”

AND

Mission, do we have to.

SAY IT

“And changed your ringtone.”

How much trouble will we get in.

“What? Seriously? You made it the banjo? All the way back then? At Sam's house?”

“Confirm.”

Rogers. Smiles. What even.

“Well geez, thanks, Buck. I love that thing. Makes me smile every time my phone rings.”

WHAT

Confirm, mission.

It's almost enough to ruin an excellent birthday. But not quite.

Chapter End Notes

1. In the comments of the previous chapter, there are a couple of recipes for chocolate stout cake, but this is the one I was thinking of: (The cake: http://smittenkitchen.com/blog/2006/11/ganached-guinness-goodness/)

1a. There were also a couple of requests for onion-dill bread; there's a link to that recipe as well somewhere among the comments in that chapter, but I finally found a recipe very similar to my own: http://www.annies-eats.com/2009/01/07/cottage-cheese-dill-bread/

2. Whaaat, a TYP soundtrack: http://8tracks.com/beradan/this-you-protect ! Thanks, person!

3. All you commenters are amazing, with your encouragement, your recipes, your helping out one another, etc. You are the Best Commentariat, and I will FIGHT anyone who says otherwise.

3a. And I will WIN said fight, because I am old and mean and have Pointy Elbows of Doom.
Stepping among landmines

Chapter Notes

CW: brief mention of past sexual assault (no details)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It makes a new safe space in Barnes’s head, having a birthday like a normal person and the gift Steve gave him by coordinating a perfect day. He can stand a little closer. He can make smiles a little more easily. The nightmares he has are still bad, but for 2 whole weeks, they are only an interruption of sleep, not an ending.

The birthday breads and cheeses combine in interesting and mostly delicious ways. Some of them (goat cheese and quince paste on pumpernickel) are too good, in that Rogers po...
“You want to come, Buck? I know you don’t want me out in the field yet, but – maybe it’ll help. To know the lay of the land.”

Maybe. If nothing else, good information permits more effective planning.

The whole crowd gathers in a conference room on the security floor, around a table with inset monitors and the windows clouded enough to prevent glare but not so much as to make it feel like an enclosed box.

“Oh good, Boy Band Dracula joined us,” Stark says.

How does he know what Barnes has been reading.

“So. Our zombie fearless leader has sent us a gift,” Stark continues. “Sadly, it has nothing to do with Maggie Smith’s secret sex diaries.”

Good, people should keep those private.

“It’s a bunch of HYDRA files,” Banner says.

Barnes feels his guts drop and his skin go clammy.

“Ye olde metric tonne of them,” Stark says. “Encrypted six ways to Sunday, of course, not that JARVIS had much trouble with that.”

“Actually, sir, I found it quite the interesting puzzle,” building JARVIS says.

“That’s because you’re the actual best, buddy.”

A subject on which Barnes and Stark agree. Who could have guessed.

“Any idea what’s in them?”

“A cursory examination shows them to be rather old, Ms. Romanoff,” building JARVIS says. “As well as unrelated to anything you publicized last year. There are a number of photographs. Director Fury obtained them from the vault in a private residence in Dubrovnik.”

The briefing convulses so hard that Barnes flinches.

“Bucky?” Rogers says.

Barnes shakes his head.

“Barnes, you don’t need to be here,” Romanoff says.

“They’re just files, Red, how bad could it be?”

Barnes stares.

Barton laughs.

“Stark, come on. You know better than that.”

No. Atonement can’t be made only of baking and hair-brushing. Action requires motion.

TRY
Confirm. We can try.

“I want to be here,” he says.

“You sure, Bucky?” Rogers asks, while Romanoff rolls her eyes.

“Yes,” Barnes says, “but first. Confirm subliminal triggers disabled.”

“Subliminal? What?” Banner says.

“God, those are the worst,” Romanoff says, and types on the keyboard in front of her.

“A salient point, Sergeant,” building JARVIS says.

Barnes looks at the hazy view outside, focusing on the small, dim dot of Vinegar Hill and listening to the sound of fingers on keyboards until Stark says, “no, I see it. I got it. That’s a very naughty little program. JARVIS. You see this? Pull that bitchy underlayer out and quarantine it.”

After a moment, building JARVIS says, “done, sir. Those routines have been separated from the main body of the data.”

“What are they?”

“Unknown, sir.”

“Show them to me,” Romanoff says, then scowls at the screen directly in front of her.

“Бляд,” she says after reading, and covers her face with her hands.

“Are you okay, Nat?” Rogers asks.

“Yeah. Yeah. That particular string of code words predates me, but there was a run in the middle that was a little too familiar. Made an uncomfortable echo. You ought to be okay, Barnes.”

“And if not, you’re in a room full of the people on earth most likely to knock you down,” Stark says. Rogers growls.

Barnes elbows him. It’s pertinent, and perhaps even correct.

“Any message from Fury, other than the data?” Rogers asks.

“Negatory, Capitano. Just the packet with a thumb print. Didn’t even bother to say hi.”

Unsurprising. After the shitshow SHIELD became under his watch, makes sense that he’d keep his head down for the next couple of decades.

They go through the files as a group, under Stark’s direction, of course, one at a time. A list of safe deposit boxes at a bank in Munich, pages and pages of weapons purchases, large amounts of blackmail materials for European politicians no longer in power.

It goes on for long enough that Barnes is stupid enough to relax just the tiniest bit.

“What’s this ‘Charnaux’ they keep mentioning? Place or person?”

Barnes goes stiff as the briefing holds a download in place, but it waits for him to accept it.
That’s considerate.

Okay, briefing. Show me.

He sees, and the file in front of him is familiar now. Some of the numbers are dates, some are bank routing numbers. Some are serial numbers.

“Both,” he says. “Schlass Charnaux, owned by the Charnaux family of Luxembourg. Second column of numbers indicate mine output from illegal phosphorus and manganese mines in Congo.”

Barnes flips two pages further into the file.

“This page lists mining output for diamonds in Angola.”

He flips back.

“Routing numbers, purchase numbers. Charnaux was mid-level HYDRA, thought he was a hotshot. Money from the mines went through Luxembourg, came out clean on the other side.”

“Makes sense,” Romanoff says, “tiny country, full of people rich enough not to ask each other too many questions.”

“How do you know this?” Stark says.

“I remember.”

“You remember HYDRA’s money-laundering operations.”

Shrug.

“People don’t watch what they say when they think you’re a brain-dead, drooling shell.”

Stark flinches, as he was meant to. Unfortunately, so does everyone else.

“You okay, Bucky?” Rogers asks.

Nod.

“When’s this date from?” Stark asks, “there’s hardly any context in these things.”

Barnes prods at the download a little – gingerly, in case there are unpleasant surprises waiting there.

“Unknown,” he reports.

But he can see people, in the memory.

“Pleated trousers,” he says, “very large shirts and jackets. Bleached hair.”

“Late eighties, early nineties, maybe,” Banner says.

Stark’s body language indicates extreme anger.

“Why were you awake, Barnes?” he growls.

Oh.

Barnes identifies: sympathy. He identifies: regret. He cannot take back the actions of this body. If he
could, there are many he would undo. Including making Stark an orphan.

Mission. We have to have that conversation some day.

CONFIRM

But today, he can’t.

“You sure about that?” Stark says.

Barnes knows that his voice does not carry enough variety of expression to allow himself to speak in a tone that could be described as “gentle.” But he can speak softly, with firmness.

“You sure about that?” Stark says.

The tone and the forename use succeed: Stark stares for one breath more, then blinks, nods.

“Okay,” he says, “okay, off task, all right.”

Rogers squeezes Barnes’s forearm; he’s looking over with a status request written all over his expression. Barnes nods.

It’s good to feel useful – to be able to recognize the patterns of columns of numbers, or to name the substitution code needed to decrypt what looks like a letter about the industrial apple crop in Normandy in 1981.

“Jiminy Christmas,” Barton says when the contents are revealed.

Barnes raises his eyes from the screen and looks at Brooklyn. Unanticipated revelation.

Stark is staring at him again.

“There are not a lot of things worse than being presented with your own collateral damage,” Romanoff says.

“You got that right,” Banner says.

“Bucky,” Rogers says.

The briefing doesn’t try to push that memory at him. What it does give, instead, is the information that even the Asset was unhappy about all those kids.

Barnes looks at his right hand. In the hint of memory he has, it was severely damaged. Bone was showing, from the Asset’s attempt to pull a couple of the kids out.

“All of us have the ones we regret,” Rogers says, “even me, Buck. You know that.”

He looks at Stark.

“All of us.”

Stark glares, but he nods.

“Some of us even act like adults about it and get real professional help from actual licensed therapists,” Barton says, slouching in his chair. “I mean, I’m just saying. When I’m the big boy in the
“Bucky has that covered,” Rogers says. “Though I think maybe we ought to figure out how to pay Sam.”

“Pretty sure Sam would agree with you,” Romanoff says.

She flips past that page, and they take a little break. Stark calls for food, then stands at the window, staring out. Banner stands next to him and talks softly.

“You don’t have to keep doing this, Bucky,” Rogers says.

That is both correct and incorrect. He is not required to sit in this room and look at upsetting files. But the protect mission cannot encompass only Rogers’s immediate physical safety. Those mission parameters are too narrow for long-term success. Stagnation would set in. And Rogers’s emotional safety – plus his co-mission to protect the self – requires acknowledging the past. Rogers might try to say that atonement is not necessary, but it is. Replace negative actions with positive ones.

“It’s fine,” he says.

Which of course makes Rogers frown.

It would be easier if more words would come out.

Maybe he should write emails.

“Status report,” Romanoff barks at him.

Cute. Does she think she’s in charge.

He rolls his eyes at her, but he complies.


“Identify source of regret.”

This is nice. She makes it so easy.

“Previous actions caused harm.”

“Identify source of anger.”

Barnes stares at her. What is she up to.

“Identify source of anger,” she repeats.

“HYDRA motherfuckers used my body to do a bunch of bad shit,” he says.

Romanoff’s intent immediately becomes clear, in that everyone else laughs. The tension in the room decreases.

“Good job, Barnes,” she says.

“Thanks.”

Rogers rubs the back of his neck.
“What.”

“For a minute there, I kind of wished I could just report like that. Seemed so. Straightforward,” Rogers says.

That’s a ridiculous statement. No reason why Rogers couldn’t make a simple status report.

The food arrives. Building JARVIS appears to be attempting to further defuse the mood by exhibiting its sense of humor; it has ordered for them English-style afternoon tea in its fanciest, fiddlest form. Including a set of expensive-looking china.

“Ooo, Battenberg!” Barton says.

“What the hell, JARVIS,” Stark says.

It further distracts them to balance cups and plates, pour tea out, and pick through miniature sandwiches. Banner takes over pouring the tea, wearing a slight smile as he does so. Barnes won’t even touch the cup handle with his left hand. His fine-motor control is excellent, but the thing looks as fragile as a bird’s bone. It’s hilarious to watch Rogers sip tea out of a flower-covered cup one quarter the size of his hand.

Positive discoveries: smoked salmon sandwiches with preserved lemon, scones.

Note: *The Baking Bible* contains recipes for scones.

“It is so unfair the way you two can pack away that much double cream,” Hill says, watching him and Rogers swabbing out the ramekin with pieces of scone.

“Confirm,” Barnes says.

“Confirm,” Rogers says.

Hill throws her napkin at them. Barnes demonstrates kindness and lets it hit him in the chest.

After their snack, there’s a run of useful files: extant bank accounts that building JARVIS arranges to come to the notice of the SEC; photos of the house in Dubrovnik, which Barton and Romanoff remember (sparing Barnes from having to do so); plans for nefarious machines that make Stark squeaky.

It feels – good.

Confirm.

It feels good to pore through the files, to speak with the others, to help translate for the poor schlubs in the room who only speak 1 or 2 languages, and to identify actions that can correct past wrongs and prevent future ones.

One file describes the unsuccessful attempt in the late 1950s to assassinate a director of SHIELD preceding Fury – a woman named Margaret Carter – in the UN building in Geneva, placing the blame on Hungarian protestors to prevent the exit of Hungary from the Eastern Bloc. According to the file, she foiled the attempt herself using a briefcase and a flagpole.

Neat lady.

“Wow,” Rogers says, looking red around the eyelids.
“Aunt Peg was something,” Stark says.

“She still is,” Rogers says.

A woman both of them like. Curious.

Mission. Why has Rogers never mentioned this.

UNKNOWN

They come across a bunch of photographs. Barnes identifies several safehouses, one well-known humanitarian with exceedingly dirty secrets, and –

“Is that a Vermeer?” Barton says.

Unknown.

“She painting,” Rogers says.

“Don’t know,” Barnes says, “but that’s Schlass Charnaux.”

“There’s a lost Vermeer in Luxembourg,” Barton says in a weak voice.

“It’s a castle. The place was covered in paintings and crap,” Barnes says.

“Stark. Please tell me we can find an excuse to raid that place and liberate some art for the good of humanity.”

“Since when do you care about art?” Stark asks.

“Clint has hidden depths,” Romanoff says.

Barton. Giggles.

Makes for an abrupt contrast when they flip to the next screen and Barnes moves without thinking. The inside of his head is a metallic scream, and he’s crouched in the corner, with a knife in each hand and console glass stuck between the plates of his left hand.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

“Bruce. Butterflies and soft puffy clouds, okay? Don’t break my conference room,” Stark says behind the white haze that lies over everything Barnes can see.

“This guy’s still alive,” Hill says.

Barnes raises the knives to face level.

“Dammit, Maria.”
“You’re in the tower, Barnes,” Romanoff says.

“All access points are secure, Sergeant,” building JARVIS says.

Confirm.

“Right,” Rogers says. “You’re in the conference room on the security floor. I’m right here, Buck. Right here. With Nat, and Clint, and Bruce and Tony and Maria. We had scones earlier. Remember that? With raisins in them.”

INCORRECT

“Currants,” he says.

“Yeah?”


“Okay, Bucky. You know better than I do.”

Ain’t that a small miracle.

One.

Two.

Three.

“Okay,” he says.

“Okay enough to put those knives, away maybe?” Rogers asks.

Well. After a few more breaths. Stand up first. Breathe a little. Place knives in holders. Shake some of the glass out of his left hand.

“Can’t say I’m too happy that you came into my conference room armed, Barnes,” Stark says.

Romanoff, Barton, and Hill laugh. Stark’s expression suggests that he finds that unnerving.

“Better, Bucky?”

Nod.

“Can I?” Rogers says, and gestures like he wants to move closer.

“No hugging.”

Stark barks a laugh.

“Jesus, Buck, I know better than that.”

Barnes steps forward and grasps Steve’s wrist like he did before their first snowball fight.
Acceptable.

“It’s okay.”

“We should cool it for today,” Steve says, “you don’t need to do this anymore, you’ve done enough.”

“He was your handler?” Romanoff says.

Barnes watches Steve’s expression change from distress to anger.

His mission is yelling ‘PROTECT.’

CONFIRM

“Yes,” Barnes says.

“Bad one?”

“Nat, come on, don’t –“

Barnes squeezes his wrist, and he shuts up.

Barnes finds that the physical connection, his hand on Steve’s arm, provides an anchor. He can’t forget where he is. He can remember that he stands in a safe place, with safe people. Not in a place where Dieter Graummann has ever been or is likely to ever be.

The words can come out of his mouth. But he doesn’t want to see Steve’s face when he says them, so he stares at the window again, at the river and Brooklyn. He wouldn’t want to say the words there, either, because Esther would cry.

“Sexual sadist,” he says.

His grip on Steve’s arm is probably painful, but Steve doesn’t move. He stands still and lets the room move around them – the exclamations of dismay, the cursing, the recoiling.

“Okay,” Stark says, “okay, that’s enough of this shit for today,” and the monitors shut down.

“Dammit, Tony,” Hill says, and pulls out her phone, “give me those back, I’m going after this guy.”

What.

“Good plan,” Barton says, “send him somewhere really dark and really horrible.”

“You betcha,” Hill says, “legally and publically.”

Barnes looks at Steve, who makes a little smile.

“It’s good to have backup, right?”

“Yes.”

Barnes uses his handkerchief.

“Sorry I broke your monitor,” he says when his throat no longer aches.

“Totally understandable in this case,” Stark says.
That’s kind of him.

“We’re done,” Rogers says. “We’re going home.”

“Yeah, good work everybody,” Stark says. “Not only did we find some actionable details, we’ve reiterated yet again what a bunch of terrible assholes HYDRA are. I need a fucking drink.”

“I’m gonna go turn a target dummy into a porcupine,” Barton says.

The others are considerate enough not to crowd into the elevator with Barnes and Steve, but Romanoff barges her way in. Of course.

She doesn’t speak on the way up, but she exits the elevator with them and stands with an expectant frown on her dumb little face.

“Sure, Nat, welcome, come on in,” Rogers says.

Good use of sarcasm, Rogers.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Barnes goes to his safe spot on the sofa and sits. Romanoff can say whatever she wants, but he’s not going to deviate from his safety protocols.

“What’s this?” she asks.

“That’s his safe spot,” Rogers says, “Sam taught him that.”

“Nice.”

She sits on the coffee table and peers at him.

“You reliving it?” she asks.

NO

Confirm, mission. And thanks, briefing.

The briefing replays standing still, the sensation of holding onto Rogers’s wrist, feeling solid and secure.

“No,” he says.

Romanoff frowns.

“Promise?”

She is. Worried about us.

CONFIRM

Barnes leans forward and holds her eye.

“I promise.”
She exhales, and nods.

“Okay, good. Good. I just wanted to make sure.”

She pats his knee.

“You did good work today, Barnes. Be proud of yourself.”

That’s going a little far.

“Okay,” he says.

Chapter End Notes


I like to use AU prompts as story seeds - this one actually found a home (not child-appropriate): https://grendel-song.com/2016/05/14/on-the-acquisition-of-a-very-fine-steed-virginia-m-mohlere/
Thanks for your forbearance, everyone. I had an Incursion of Real Life Events that brought me to a screeching halt. (Things are fine, just a lot.) I'll try to maintain a more regular schedule throughout the summer, but there are some additional Real Life Events coming up the pike, so I might not achieve that goal. But I promise that I won't abandon this.

***

It’s not as if Barnes is surprised to have a bad few days after the HYDRA files. The briefing is good enough to withhold the memories of everything that was done to him by Dickface Grosshole, but his dreaming mind dredges it up, waiting until he’s fully asleep to pull out the full experience, so he wakes with the taste of blood (or worse) in his mouth and the scent of wet stone in his nostrils every time Rogers wakes him. Five times the first night, four times the second, five times the third. On the fourth day, they’re both too tired to do more than lounge around the apartment eating everything within reach.

Rogers has demonstrated excellence, suggesting helpful actions (e.g., 0300 pancakes and visits to the coffee bar, calling the Olds, telling stories from their childhoods) and accepting that Barnes does not need to talk through the damn details. In the afternoon, he hustles Barnes into the tub and leaves him there for 82 minutes. Barnes’s skin achieves a state of pruniness so complete it’s like evolving into a different type of creature. But afterward, he falls asleep sitting up in the safe spot, without dreams, for many hours.

He wakes to find himself under a blanket, and Rogers sitting crossways at the other end of the sofa, asleep, his feet not quite touching Barnes’s leg and his mouth wide open. He has kicked his own blanket off his feet. He’s wearing the sheep pants.

Barnes makes a smile and tucks the blanket back around Rogers’s feet. Of course, in the morning, (1) Barnes’s ass is asleep, and (2) Rogers’s feet are bare again.

“Rough few days, Buck,” Rogers says over breakfast.

“Confirm.”

“You been in touch with Sam?”

Barnes shakes his head.

“I feel like I want to lay eyes on him,” Rogers says. “I think that would make me feel better.”

“Yes,” Barnes says.

They’ve done okay – no outbursts, meltdowns, or violence – but flying Sam is a stabilizing influence.

Rogers continues to frown at his omelet. This is an inappropriate response to a mushroom, gouda,
and fresh thyme omelet. The omelet is delicious.

“What.”

“I feel bad asking,” Rogers says.

Mission. Can it be that Rogers is going to actually make a request for himself.

HOW POSSIBLE

No, you’re right, that’s so unlikely.

“Quit staring at me like Nat does, Bucky, it’s creepy.”

What.

“There’s the glare I’m used to.”

“Ask your damn question, Rogers.”

Yeah. That’s a totally fake smile he’s making, and he won’t meet Barnes’s eye.

“I would really like to – go to DC.”

Oh.

Identified: hurt.

“You don’t want me to come with you.”

Rogers moves so sharply that he’s lucky the chair survives.

“Bucky! No! God! No, of course I want you to come with me! I just figured. You know. How would we even get there?”

This is a stupid conundrum.

“Rogers. Flying Sam can come here.”

There he goes again, staring at the table. His face red. What is this.

“No, Buck, I.”

Barnes waits. Rogers sighs heavily.

“The files, the other day. It’s been a long.”

He shakes his head.

"I got to missing Peg, Bucky. I want to see her.”

Attempt to identify: ‘Peg.’

The briefing is curled up tight. Barnes suspects he has heard the name, but he can’t remember the context.

Rogers looks so sad.
“Peggy Carter. Remember? The assassination attempt?”

Oh. Margaret Carter, former director of SHIELD.

“You don’t remember her, Buck?”

Assessing.

“Negative.”

This is an incorrect answer: Steve’s expression shows deep sorrow. Why.

Assessing. Margaret Carter was a founder of SHIELD, as well as its director during the late 1950s to mid-1960s. She would be elderly now.

OLD

Correct, mission. Maybe she is Steve’s Old.

“She is like Esther,” Barnes says.

Why haven’t they been calling her on the TV.

Rogers looks surprised, and laughs a little.

“No, she’s. Hold on a second.”

He walks to the back, and when he returns, he hands Barnes a round metal case, obviously old and well-used. The metal is darkened from frequent handling. Barnes has seen this case before. Rogers places it in his pocket whenever they leave the apartment.

It’s a compass, with a picture inside. The photo shows a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman whose prettiness has the unexpected effect of causing tightness in the chest, the teeth to clench.

Barnes carries it to the window for better light. The greater distance from Rogers allows clearer thinking.

He rummages around current memories: The mentions by Rogers and Stark during the meeting. Rogers said ‘Peg’ near Christmas. There is a drawing in the sketchbook Rogers gave him of a woman with the Howling Commandos.

The compass was in one of the films in the Smithsonian. A Jeep, a map, a cold day before a dangerous mission.

The briefing uncoils like a whip, and Barnes shudders with the download.

“No, Buckey?”

Barnes waves his hand at Rogers while he organizes the information. It is a lot of information, all at once, and the briefing did not want to release it.

Oh.

The Bucky-person did not give himself an easy time.

“Red dress,” he says, “smart mouth. Made out of steel.”
“You do remember her.”

Rogers sounds so glad.

“A little.”

He hands the compass back to Rogers. Rogers smiles at it, runs his thumb across the top in a gesture that looks long practiced.

Barnes feels his throat tighten.

ROGERS

Confirm.

His right arm moves of its own volition to grip Rogers’s shoulder. The angle feels wrong. That makes it a very old gesture.

Rogers blinks at him, half smiling and half looking as if he’s about to go wet around the eyes.

“Everything okay?”

Rogers’s voice is a little hoarse.

Conjecture: he also remembers this old gesture.

Mission. Maybe it would benefit Rogers to speak of old things.

APPROVED

Confirm.

“You Bucky had complicated emotions,” he says.

“Um. What?”

“Regarding the Second World War. And Peggy Carter.”

Rogers goes red.

“Oh. Oh! You mean you – liked her?”

Assessing.

Yes. But not in the way Rogers means, and that’s not the point.

“Deny. Identified: sadness, anger, envy.”

“You know you talk like a robot when you mention feelings.”

“Confirm.”

“You know you don’t have to –“

“It’s a defense mechanism, pal. Deal with it.”

Correct action: Rogers laughs.
“Sorry.”

Barnes watches Rogers process. As if Rogers were any better at the feelings thing than he is. Stopping and thinking: never a strong suit of Steven Grant Rogers, in any century.

“Wait.”

There you go.

“Wait, why envy if you didn’t like her?”

“Rogers. Don’t be a dumbass.”

Rogers crinkles up his big dopey forehead. Then his eyebrows make a break for the stratosphere. Then he sits down on the floor as if his legs have given out.

“Are you in distress.”

Rogers doesn’t answer. Breathing appears slightly elevated. Complexion bright red. Fists clenching and unclenching on his knees.

Barnes joins him on the floor.


Rogers punches him in the (right) arm. Ow.

“Am I in distress? Dammit Bucky, of course I’m in distress! What does that even mean? You were – you were mad? About Peggy?”

Assessing.

The download he was given starts with one memory so strong Barnes could almost fall into it: massive bodily pain, the beginning of wishing to give up and die, and then Steve, face distorted so it looked giant, bent over him, calling his name.

There’s a slippery spot – information that needs to be processed – that resolves into another sharp image: a crowd. The Carter woman. Steve’s eyes locked on her, when before they had always sought him out.

Barnes has heard many stories of the Bucky-person’s kindness and loyalty. Rogers has never mentioned that said loyalty’s underside was jealousy.

Maybe Rogers didn’t know.

“Confirm,” he says.

“No. No, this is stupid, you can’t tell me you were jealous. You had more girlfriends than Casanova.”

“So what.”

“What do you mean ‘so what’?”

“Any of those girls important.”
“I don’t know, Buck, you never talked to me about that part of it. You were mad for a week when Jane Cadigan told you to shove off when we were seventeen.”

“Ever beat up anyone for a girl?”

“No.”

“Ever launch himself into gunfire for a girl?”

“Bucky. No.”

The briefing takes over his mouth. He didn’t know it could do that. Feels really weird.

“How about sign on for another fucking terrible tour instead of taking honorable medical discharge and going the hell home where it was safe?”

Briefing. Calm down there, champ.

“Bucky.”

“Sorry. New download. Ever do that for a girl?”

“Of course not! I – didn’t even know you did that for me.”

“Assessment: girls unimportant.”

“What are you trying to tell me, Buck?”

Ugh. Why did we even bring this up.

“Rogers. I broke seventy years of mental conditioning for you. Spent four months semi-secretly shadowing your every move. I agreed to live in Manhattan. Think my position is pretty clear.”

“It’s not clear, Bucky. You never said anything to me. Back then, I mean. I always thought. I thought you were happy for me.”

“Happy’s not the point, pal.”

“Then what the hell is the point? You were mad because Peggy was important to me? Bucky. That's ridiculous.”

Assessing.

MISSION

Oh. Yes. That’s a useful way to examine it.

“My mission is to protect you.”

“Yeah, Buck, I’m really glad about that.”

“So was his.”

Rogers is pale with distress.

“What do you mean?”
“Steve. My whole life. I have wanted for you to be safe.”

“But I don’t. Bucky. Safe even from Peg? You mean the war?”

“Safe from all harm. Including emotional harm. And yes the war. He was angry that you found a way into the fight.”

“Bucky. If I hadn’t. Bucky! If I hadn’t taken the serum, you’d have died in Italy!”

How many different ways does he have to say it.

PROTECT

It’s part of the packet the briefing gave him: that sense of futility, sitting in a tent in the Alps, every action of his life worthless, now that Steve was huge and present and embroiled in every kind of danger. Since Steve didn’t need him anymore, with his giant new body and a new person at his side.

“It would’ve been okay to die, Steve. To keep you safe. No matter when we’re talking about.”

Rogers recoils, flaps his hands.

“No, but you had everything. We were best friends, but I was the one who needed you. You were. Everybody loved you.”

Mission. This guy.

CONFIRM

“You think it was an accident. That he was always around.”

Steve’s mouth flaps open and closed several times.

“No. No, I guess not.”

He guesses not. What a model of generosity.

Barnes can see the gaps. The mountains of confusion and hurt that got shoved out of the way by orders and operations and Nazis. And the Bucky-person not wanting to sound like a dope.

“Ever talk about it. You getting big, what Zola did.”


“Sounds reasonable.”

Rogers makes his sad smile.

“So you’re saying I was an oblivious jerk.”

For shit’s sake, Steve.

“Sure thing, pal. I definitely bear no responsibility for keeping my own fucking mouth closed.”

“Jesus, Bucky.”
But Rogers laughs briefly, although it is not a happy sound, and wipes his hand across his face. Then his expression turns serious.

“Why tell me all this?”

“Emotional honesty is the key to successful adult relationships,” Barnes says.

“Don’t quote dating-site commercials to me.”

“Too late.”

“But seriously.”

Barnes shrugs.

“Secrets are bad. They make emotional wounds. Had enough of that.”

He stands and hauls Rogers to his feet with the metal arm.

“I need some time to think about this,” Rogers says.

“Approved.”

“Like about a year.”

“Well, Rogers, you always were slow on the uptake.”

Rogers hits him again. Probably deserved.

There’s a lot to process from their conversation. Barnes has many new memories to observe and place into context. Several times, he catches Rogers staring at him with a thoughtful expression. Barnes asks to know more about Carter, and it’s like blowing up a dam. Rogers talks so much that he makes his voice hoarse.

Barnes can’t judge how much Steve’s affection for Carter influences the stories. But it’s clear that she was smart and brave, and that she liked Rogers for himself, and not for Captain America.

That single fact is enough to make her worth knowing.

“I asked her to marry me, Buck, after the Chitauri. Just like I’d been planning way back when. She was already in the nursing home then.”

Oh, Rogers.

Barnes can see it.

What a self-torturing jackass he is.

“What did she say.”

Rogers stares out at the skyline with a tight jaw.

“She said no, of course. Wouldn’t even look at the ring. I left it with her, just in case. It’s still there
on the table next to her bed, hasn’t moved once.”

“Sorry.”

Rogers shrugs.

“She was right. I guess. No, I know. She lived a whole life without me. I just. Wanted to ask.”

What is the correct response to that.

He can’t think of anything, so he just sits next to Steve for a while, and that seems to be enough.

It makes curiosity in him, the stories about Carter. And their conversation on the kitchen floor successfully drives his nightmares away. Two more nights of good sleep make mental quiet.

Identified: desire to go to DC. Desire to make the effort.

“How will you travel,” he asks.

“Tony said I could use the jet anytime,” Rogers says.

He looks excited.

“You think that would work, Bucky? It’s bigger than a car, and it never gets dark like the train. You can see the sky. It’s ridiculously comfortable.”

TRY

Confirm.

“Let’s try it.”

Rogers makes the arrangements and lends Barnes a bag to pack clothing in. Romanoff even butts into the proceedings.

“This drawer’s empty! Are you taking every stitch of clothing you own?”

They will be gone for 4 days.

“Not my sweater or my coat.”

“Are you telling me those three shirts you wear all the time are everything you own?”

“I own four shirts.”

“Oh, well, pardon me. Are you serious, Barnes? We need to take you shopping.”

“Please make him shop for underwear, I’m tired of looking at his balls,” Rogers shouts from the next room.

“Nice comment from a guy who never wears a shirt,” Barnes says.

“Shut up, Barnes, you’re literally the only person on earth who feels that way,” Romanoff says.
There are seven billion people on the earth. He can’t be the only one.

“I don’t like shopping,” he says.

Which isn’t strictly true. He enjoys shopping for cheese. And books. And knives.

Just not clothing.

“Oh no,” Romanoff says, “you’re not getting out of this, even if you decide to stay in DC forever.”

Hooray, something to look forward to.
An important promise

Chapter Notes

Y’all, thanks so much for your kindness. I am okay! It’s just a summer full of Adulting. Bah humbug.

Also, some great new art!

http://aennadraws.tumblr.com/post/144459905587/a-plant-peanut-butter-cookies-orange-juice-no

http://potofsoup.tumblr.com/post/145546233702/so-one-thing-that-has-sustained-me-and-given-me

Peggyyyyyyyyy! *cry*

Somewhere amid the emotional distress and revelation of feelings past, both of them appear to have misplaced most of their brain function, because it’s not until they’re due to leave that either of them considers the fact that they have to actually get to the airport.

So dumb.

CONFIRM

Thanks, that’s helpful.

It’s useful to learn, however, that sometimes one can get around a difficulty just because it is a pain in the ass. Barnes is tired of being overcome by fear. He is tired of having to manage himself. He is tired of the way Rogers walks on eggshells around him. He wants one goddamn thing to just be easy for once. It’s a physical sensation rising in his chest: an irritation large enough to use.

Rogers’s distress is obviously ramping up to knee-jerk reaction level, and Barnes does not even want to deal. He sends a text.

“Screw it, I’ll get in a damn car.”

“Bucky. You’ve been balking at cars for months, you can’t just arbitrarily change your mind and make it be okay.”

“Can.”

“Bucky.”

“What’s the option, Rogers. Ask Stark to fly each of us over bridal-style in the suit.”

“Oh god. I can’t believe you put that image in my head.”

And that’s the moment that the car Barnes texted for arrives.

Sadly for Rogers, Barnes’s serum is strong enough to withstand even the ferocious bald-eagle glare
of Captain Annoyed.

"Fine, you win," Rogers says.

Hip hip hooray.

Building JARVIS has sent a large van with windows. As cars go, it’s optimal.

“Thanks a lot, pal,” he says, laying his head on the wall as they leave.

“Enjoy your travels, Sergeant,” building says.

That’s a stretch. The van is a relatively large enclosed space, but it’s still enclosed. It takes 34 minutes to cover the 19 km to Teterboro. He sits in the back, where there’s an illusion of easy egress through the back window; he turns the climate control down to arctic levels for the distraction.

Rogers stares at him the whole trip. Barnes focuses on looking out the window. No vehicles follow them in a suspicious manner.

That’s comforting. Ish.

“You okay?” Rogers asks when they climb out onto the tarmac.

Assessing. Physical stress response moderate: sweat, increased respiration, increased activity of left arm plates. Mental static. But all his weapons remain put away, and he didn’t even rip the upholstery of the seat.

“Good to go,” he says.

“Great. Do you mind if I stretch my legs for a minute before we board?”

Real sneaky, Rogers.

CONFIRM

But kind.

CONFIRM

They walk around briefly, watch another plane take off. It gives Barnes time to return to baseline. Helpful. They climb the tiny stairs into the plane.

It is terrible. Despite the welcome bright light, the ceiling is too low and the walls too close together. The air is stale, and the engines’ whine never ceases or changes.

“It’s only a little over an hour, Buck,” Rogers says.

Unfortunately, he says this while hovering 11 cm away, which just makes the whole space seem smaller.

“Sit,” he says.

And for once Rogers actually does as he’s told. He sits in the front row of seats. Barnes goes to the back.
Rogers moves to get up. Barns growls and points.

“Sit.”

Barnes sits in the back seats by the window, forehead pressed against the glass and feet drawn up. The door seals and the air changes, creating one very bad moment; Barnes has to consciously keep his eyes open and observing his surroundings, so he won’t see the tank and the last bone-creaking moments when his body was frozen but before his brain shut down.

Barnes practices breathing slowly. He practices pretending that the world outside – clouds and tiny landscapes – is more real than the enclosed space of the jet with its noise, its pressure, and its recycled air.

He knows that Rogers watches him for the whole flight, probably with a worried expression.

Live and learn.

When they land, Rogers steps back and lets Barnes off the plane first. The minute fresh air hits his face, Barnes feels calmer.

Rogers is very good. He stands outside arm’s reach.

“Pretty bad, huh?” he asks.

“Confirm. Too small. Artificially high pressure, formerly applied at the beginning of the freezing process.”

“Oh my god! Buck, why didn’t you say something?”

“Didn’t remember until it happened.”

“Jeez. I’m sorry. We’ll take the train back, okay?”

He has taken the train before. Known parameters. Acceptable.

This mutual protection detail is pretty nice sometimes.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Thanks.”

There’s another car, of course, in DC. They really let themselves go in the planning department. But it has normal air, so it’s not as awful as the plane. It’s practice.

“I should tell you,” Rogers says, because immediately following a moderately upsetting hour with more bad news is a great idea.

Barnes feels his guts take a trip to the center of the earth. What is it going to be now.

“Peggy has Alzheimer’s disease.”

What.

How often has Rogers visited her? What are the symptoms.
“Is it contagious.”

“What? No. No, it’s a brain disease. Dementia. She gets gaps in her memory. Doesn’t always know what year it is.”

Oh is that all.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Sounds pretty normal to me.”

Oops. Rogers draws back into the seat and raises his hands, showing dismay on his face.

“Sorry, Buck. I didn’t think.”

“Said it’s okay.”

Rogers doesn’t look as if he believes him.

The facility where Peggy Carter lives looks like an apartment building on the outside, brick with decent landscaping. A few nice trees, suitable for surveillance. But inside, it smells like a hospital. The smell of hospitals is terrible. Barnes would prefer to wait outside.

DENY

Confirm. Outside protection parameters. Also rude.

“Hey, Captain,” the man at the front desk says when Rogers signs them in. “Miss Peg is having a good day today.”

Rogers smiles. His smiles are better than they used to be. They even reach his eyes sometimes.

Barnes hangs back at the doorway to Carter’s room. He has only the memory of the Bucky-person’s feelings to go on – admiration mixed with distrust and envy. Information lacking about Carter’s opinion.

“Steve,” she says, and reaches out.

The pretty young woman she once was still shows in her face, though she is older even than Ollie. Carter barely makes a dent in the bed’s mattress. Her dark eyes brim with tears that soon spill over.

Rogers kisses her on the mouth for a long time, his hand cupped around her cheek. Her fingers rest against his wrist. Despite the close contact, their mouths appear to fit comfortably together. After, they press their foreheads together, each wearing a slight smile. What makes so much trust that one can put one’s mouth on someone else’s without a feeling of no air. It is so close. But Carter and Rogers make it look. Not so bad.

“Steve,” she says when he finally pulls away from her and sits, “I saw the news. The reports. SHIELD. HYDRA. I’m so sorry. I should’ve seen it. How could I be so stupid?”

“Peg. Peg, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay, Steve. I worked with Pierce for years! I rather liked him, even. In certain lights, when he was a young man, he looked a little like you.”
What.
File that away for future study.
CONFIRM
Confirm.

“Peg, it doesn’t matter. I have news. I have someone for you to see.”

He beckons to Barnes. Barnes hesitates at the threshold. Surely she can’t hurt him – a sick, elderly woman. Who knew the him that came before.

He would not wish to hurt her either. She loves Steve.

They have that in common.

“Come on,” Rogers says in a quiet voice.

Like he understands.

Barnes steps into the room, and Carter gapes at him.

“What, Barnes?” she says, and surprise gives her voice an edge that makes it familiar.

There are faint echoes of that voice and that name. And a downloaded memory: nothing concrete or dramatic. Just the certainty that he liked her a lot, even though he tried hard not to.

“Hello,” he says.

Carter looks back and forth between the two of them.

"Is this real?" she says.

“It’s true, Peg. It’s Bucky.”

“But how?”

“Fellow freezer pop,” Barnes says, “courtesy of HYDRA and the Soviets.”

Her eyes grow wet again. For him. That’s kind of her. She even reaches out for his hand. Acceptable. He takes it. Her fingers are cold.

“Oh, James,” she says, “I’m so sorry. How long did they have you?”

“Seventy years.”

She squeezes his fingers.

“Put you to work, did they? Made you think things that weren’t true?”

What is it in his face that people can see that – Ollie, Lidia, Mr. Hayashi. And now Carter.

“Spent a long time as a bad guy,” he says. "Trying to do better now.”

“You’re doing great now, Buck.”
Barnes rolls his eyes at Carter and finds her looking back with the same expression: ‘can you believe this guy?’

Barnes finds that his current incarnation likes her too.

Rogers tells her the bare bones of his side of the story of Barnes’s mission: getting pulled from the river, the tied-up agents outside flying Sam's house, hints and glimpses in New York. Tearful reunions, etc., blah blah. Sadly, this happens to be the boring side of the story, without any decent food in it or cat Eleanor. Rogers also leaves out approximately 85% of the punching. But they both smile at him, and Carter shakes his hand during the important parts.

It’s nice. How they smile at him. How they smile at each other. How Rogers lifts her hand to kiss the knuckles.

“I can hardly believe it,” Rogers says, and smiles at Barnes.

Carter smiles at him too.

“I’m so glad,” she says, “James. I’m so glad. No one ever took such good care of Steve as you.”

And it is as if all three parts of him raise up their heads inside: the briefing, the imperative, and the present self.

All of them saying, ‘what, me?’

“No one,” Steve says.

Barnes’s face does a new thing. It starts out like a smile but keeps going until his cheeks hurt. Rogers stares at it as if he’s been pole-axed.

“I haven’t seen that smile since nineteen forty-one,” he says hoarsely.

“I’m so glad,” Carter says, “so glad.”

The last bit sounds blurry, and Carter’s eyes drift closed. But her grasp on his hand doesn’t slacken.

Rogers smiles at him again.

“Hi, Buck.”

Not sure why we’re doing greetings, pal, but okay.

“Hi Steve.”

Rogers stares at him for long enough that Barnes would like to hide behind something. Then Rogers rises from his chair and walks to the window. Barnes is stuck – Carter continues to grip his hand in her sleep.

Rogers stares out the window, hand on the back of his neck in his trying-to-use-my-feeble-brain-for-coherent-thought pose, for several moments. What is he thinking.

Carter wakes abruptly.

She looks around the room with an expression of fear on her face and pulls her hand away from his.

“Barnes?” she says, voice indicating alarm, “Barnes, where have you been? We thought you were
dead. Steve went down in the plane. We have to find him.”

This is what Rogers described. She has lost her place in time. She is stuck in a bubble of the past. Disorienting.

“Oh, Carter,” he says. “We will find Steve.”

She glares at him, a ferocious expression on her face.

“You must find him, Barnes. We thought you were dead, you’re late. You have to look for him.”

“I will,” he says.

“Promise me you won’t ever stop looking.”

“I promise.”

“No,” she says, and tries to rise from her pillows.

Barnes places his hand on her shoulder, and she stops struggling, but her voice suggests urgency, and her fingers pluck at the bedcovers. She shakes her head.

“No, James. No. Don’t you stop until you find him and bring him home again. You bring Steve home. You promise me.”

It is frightening to be stuck in the past. Barnes knows this from his flashbacks. Doubly so to be physically helpless. The end of Carter’s life is rushing toward her, and she is stuck at the pivot point when all their lives changed.

Barnes wishes for Carter to not be afraid. He will offer her the kindness he has received when he is stuck in bad memories. Because she was his friend, long ago. Because she has been Steve’s friend longer than they have even been alive. He leans forward.

“I promise, Peggy,” he says. “I promise to bring Steve home and keep him safe. Always.”

She settles back into her pillows, and her body relaxes.

“I trust you, James. You’ll keep Steve safe for me.”

“I will.”

Her eyes close again.

Barnes touches her hand. She is like him. She shares his mission, and her brain is not so reliable. He will keep the promise to her.

“I promise, Peggy Carter.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

He looks up, and Rogers is hanging onto the windowsill as if his legs don’t work. His whole face is squinched toward the middle.

Aw, Rogers. So much drama.
He is breathing like the walls are closing in on him.

Barnes walks over and grasps Rogers's arm, to give him a focus point.

"Hey, pal."

"Bucky, my god, I just -"

“Come on, Rogers. Let’s get you outside.”

Rogers stops to kiss Carter’s cheek, and they walk down the hallway, Rogers leaning heavily against him. His arm over Steve’s shoulders does not feel too oppressive, for the moment. It’s not awkward. They walk with an identical gait.

They are due to meet Sam for dinner. The car that brought them from the airport waits outside the facility.

“Bucky, can we?”

Rogers is rigid with tension.

“Gonna make me walk across the city, huh?”

“No, you’re right. It’s fine, I – “

“Shut up Steve. We can walk.”

Rogers leans into the car to give directions for the delivery of their bags to flying Sam, and they set off.

It’s not so bad. It’s far, but the early spring weather is nice. Some of the trees have flowers. And it’s not running. They walk without speaking, at a high rate of speed, for a long time, but Barnes can hear Rogers's breathing gradually normalize. The handkerchief makes fewer trips up to Rogers's face.

“Query,” Barnes says after 2.5 km.

“Yeah?”

“Frequency and duration of Carter’s episodes being stuck in the past.”

“It’s not regular,” Rogers says. “I don’t think it works that way. I think it depends partly on stress. And it gets worse as time goes by. She spends more and more time in the past.”

“She is very frail.”

“Yeah.”

“It was useful to me to see her. Thank you.”

Rogers stops and looks at him with that hugging expression.

Ugh, fine, you had a big day pal.

“Me too, Bucky. What you. What you said to her at the end.”

“Was true.”
“I know.”
They still have 2 km to go when the hunting horn and the banjo sound simultaneously.

It is not a harmonious combination.

The text reads, 'I have 2 bags but 0 guests?'

Rogers calls to explain. Barnes listens to half the conversation. An unforeseen consequence of close surveillance: he hasn't bothered to pair the new phone from Potts at the new year. It is okay, to not hang on Rogers's every word.

He can trust. A little.

Flying Sam directs them to divert and meet at a restaurant instead of walking all the way to his home.

It has been a long day, filled with activity and stressors, but not much by way of sustenance.

Diversion approved.

The place has dim lighting and animal heads on the walls, as if it wants to look like a museum. Flying Sam is sprawled in a leather chair, waiting for them.

"Swanky," Rogers says.

"We are manly men, out for a manly meal," flying Sam says.

Like he watched Rogers kiss Carter, he watches Rogers hug flying Sam. How does one get to a point of so much ease, that close to another person. For that long.

Are they going to hug forever.

"Whoo, Steve, there goes any need I had to see a chiropractor," flying Sam says, and they grin at one another.

He holds out his hand to Barnes to shake.

"How you doing, Barnes? Holding up okay?"

"Holding up okay."

Flying Sam looks at them both and narrows his eyes.

"Mm hm," he says.

Maybe the day's stresses are showing.

They are led into the large, loud dining room and tucked into a corner table under the head of a sheep with large, curving horns. Barnes slips behind Rogers and into the chair against the wall before anyone else can claim it.

"Jeez, I gotta sit with my back to the room? I hate that," Rogers says.

"I watch your back," Barnes says.
Maybe they could've stood to walk a little farther, because Rogers's expression wobbles for a second.

"I know, Buck," he says.

There's an echo of the moment at the nursing home, when Rogers and Carter gave him mission approval.

Identified: good.

"Y'all ever been to a proper steak house?" flying Sam asks.

Barnes shakes his head.

"I got taken out to a few chop houses when I was on tour in forty-three," Rogers says in a tone suggesting that these were not impressive experiences.

Flying Sam makes an expression of deep disapproval.

"So that's a no."

He pulls the menus out of each of their hands.

This is unkind. Barnes was reading about soup.

Flying Sam rattles off a series of directions to the waiter, then sits back in his chair and stares at them both. Identified: discomfort.

Will there be more talking.

The waiter returns with three short glasses half-full of amber-colored liquor. Smells like Banner's scotch.

Flying Sam lifts his glass.

"Welcome back to DC," he says.

Rogers raises his glass and clinks.

Oh. That thing.

Barnes raises his glass and clinks.

"Kanpai," he says.

Flying Sam laughs.

"Where'd you learn that?"

"At the Carp."

Wait.

OH NO

Correct, mission.

"Steve," he says, "we haven't taken flying Sam to the Carp."
Rogers makes a weird smile.

"What's that, Barnes?"

"Japanese restaurant."

"In Manhattan?"

Nod.

"Cool, I look forward to going there."

Flying Sam's 'manly meal' skews heavily toward protein. They eat bivalves, which feel weird in the mouth but are accompanied by interesting condiments.

"Don't chew them!" flying Sam says, laughing. "Maybe one chew. That's it. Otherwise you'll be all day."

"Oh my god, we used to cook these things like civilized people," Rogers says, wiping his face clean of oyster juice.

He's laughing too. That's good.

"I am sorry, Steve, but cooked oysters are not a sign of civilization."

They talk so much that Barnes gets the entire container of sauce with the tiny, chopped onions all to himself. He follows the advice and only chews each oyster once. Still pretty weird, but not without merit.

“Thank god, food I recognize as edible,” Rogers says when the shrimp arrives.

“Wimp,” flying Sam says.

“Sam, I have eaten things you would not believe. I have eaten things that were green when they weren’t supposed to be. I’m allowed to have a damn limit.”

“Wiiiiiiimp,” flying Sam says.

“Sam! Bucky, help me out here.”

Sure thing, pal. Or I could continue eating shrimp. With this excellent new condiment.

“I got nothing,” he says, and eats another shrimp.

“Thanks a lot, Bucky,” Rogers says in a tone so dry it makes flying Sam laugh until he has to wipe his eyes.

“Oh, man,” he says, “I never thought I’d see the day when Captain America was such a sourpuss.”

Which is hilarious, because Rogers looks like that all the time.

“Don’t you laugh at me, Sam Wilson. Do you have any idea how many goddamn cans I carried across Europe? All you had to carry were those little envelopes.”

Flying Sam, still laughing, waves his hands in the air.

“No, man, I know, I know. I would rather cut my own ear off than ever eat another veggie omelet
And they’re off, comparing Horrible Military Foods of Bygone Days, which would ruin Barnes’s meal, except that he spent the late morning having a drawn-out panic attack and the late afternoon traversing Washington, DC, so caloric input is required.

This scintillating conversation transitions naturally into Who Had It Worse in Military Service.

It’s so cute.

Barnes could shut them down with 5 words, but then Rogers and flying Sam would stop enjoying their dinner. It would be no fun to win.

And anyway, talking would interfere with eating.

“You know that crease just under your ass on each side? Sand. Stuck there for weeks. Every time you move, scraping against the underside of each butt cheek,” flying Sam says.

“Yeah, I’m sure that would be terrible for somebody used to luxury,” Rogers says. “It definitely sounds mildly uncomfortable. Nothing like trench foot, of course.”

For fuck’s sake.

CONFIRM

Barnes hits the table with his left hand, and all the dishware rattles.

Why’s it always got to be feet with this guy.

“Bucky?”

“No.”

“No what, Buck?”

“No goddamn feet during goddamn dinner, Rogers.”

“Thank you,” flying Sam says.

Rogers grins like a loon and puts a large bite of steak into his mouth. Flying Sam laughs enough that he has to wipe his face again.

“Never get into a pissing contest with a man the size of a bear,” flying Sam says.

“Or whose stubbornness got beefed up along with his muscles,” Barnes says.

“I’m not stubborn, I’m dedicated to my ideals,” Rogers says.

What.

Barnes and flying Sam stare at one another.

“Just for that,” flying Sam says, “you’re paying for dinner.”

Enjoyable.

Every food eaten is worthy of adding to the list on his phone.
“Feel free to experiment extensively with cheesecake,” Rogers says.

“Confirm.”

They exit into a chilly night, and oh boy: yet another car.

Flying Sam’s car is small. As annoying as it is, all this bullshit Barnes has about enclosed spaces is a real thing, and he has already pushed it past its limits today.

“Gets easier with practice, Barnes,” flying Sam says. “It’s a short drive.”

Sure. Whatever.

He sits in the front seat for the extra breathing room and lets Rogers guard his back for once.

Symbolic, maybe. Still terrible.

Arriving at flying Sam’s house makes immediate comfort. He has only been inside twice, but he spent so many hours observing the space that it carries a sensation of familiarity.

The back door still has the same lock. Should he tell flying Sam how easy it is to pick.

Maybe later.

He scans the room. The sofa has a low back, making it unsuitable. But there is a rug with thick pile in the center of the room. He lies down on it.

“Bucky?”

“Safe spot.”

Flying Sam laughs.

It works, to feel the floor underneath him while Rogers and flying Sam talk.

Roger picks up the large books sitting on the coffee table. They are huge. Barnes cranes his neck to scan the titles: *Advanced EMT Workbook, Essentials of Emergency Care*, and *EMT Test Prep and Practice Tests*.

“What are these, Sam?” Rogers asks.

Flying Sam shrugs and looks away as if embarrassed.

“Figured I’d re-up my EMT certification, get back to that kind of work.”

“Don’t want to do counseling anymore?”

“Nah, I’ll keep it up part time. It’s important to me. But getting wings back on, man — it woke something up in me. I’d forgotten how much I like the adrenaline rush. I feel like. Maybe I’m ready to get back to what I was trained for. Healing bodies too.”

Sam and Rogers both look like they are on the verge of a handkerchief moment. Curious.

“Sam, that’s great.”
“Yeah, well. We’ll see. So far it feels good to flex those muscles again.”

“For the time being,” Barnes says.

“What’s that mean?” flying Sam asks.

Barnes looks at him. Flying Sam is smarter than this.

“Prediction. Within two years you will be living in the tower and avenging.”

Flying Sam blinks as if shocked while Rogers laughs.

“I’m in favor,” Rogers says.

Flying Sam looks pleased but says, “No way, Barnes, I told you I hate winter.”

It’s true, but he likes flying more.

The floor works. It only takes 22 minutes until Barnes can sit up and participate in the conversation.

“So,” flying Sam says, “rough day?”

Rogers rolls his eyes.

“And here I thought we were gonna get away without deep conversations,” he says.

“No, dude. But I’m not going to ask you about it in public. That would be rude.”

CONFIRM

No kidding.

“We visited Peggy Carter,” Barnes says, because there’s no point in letting Rogers bottle that up per his usual protocol.

Rogers goes wobbly.

“She’s not doing so good?” flying Sam asks.

“No, she was okay, actually. It was good. She recognized Bucky. Just. Really emotional.”

“Oh no, not emotions,” flying Sam says.

“Shut up, Sam.”

Funny.

CONFIRM

“Was that weird, Barnes? To have somebody else recognize you from before?”

Assessing.

“Confirm. But also good. Rogers told me many stories about her. She is an admirable person.”
That statement makes Rogers so happy that his smile has a hint of sunrise in it.

“But you don’t remember her?”

“A little. Rogers and I talked about it. Complex situation.”

Flying Sam raises his hands.

“Lord have mercy, y’all talked about something complicated without my having to knock your heads together; it’s a minor miracle.”

Barnes looks at Rogers and can tell that they are simultaneously thinking, ‘thanks a lot, jerkwad.’

Identified: excellent. Barnes makes a smile and gets one in return.

“We might be getting slightly smarter as time goes by,” Rogers says.

“Slightly,” Barnes says.

“Yeah, we’ll see,” flying Sam says.

Of course, all that comfort and good will are knocked out later, when Rogers takes it on himself to argue about the sleeping arrangements.

“I’ll be fine on the sofa, Buck.”

“No.”

“Come on, I have an easier time sleeping than you. You ought to take the guest room.”

The monitors have proved that this is only marginally true. Which means that Rogers ought to take the familiar surroundings. No sense in both of them popping awake every hour to check the perimeter.

“Deny.”

Rogers would clearly like to fight about it more, but flying Sam takes that moment to hand Barnes a stack of linens and a pillow.

Sam Wilson: mission assist.

Once Rogers and flying Sam have gone upstairs, Barnes makes a brief tour. He finds the apology plant sitting on a small ceramic platform with wheels by the front door, where it will get indirect sun most of the day. The plant has increased in size and appears healthy. Identified: satisfaction.

It would be good to walk his old perimeter from pre-contact days, but he doesn’t want to start that conversation so late at night. He settles for checking the door locks front and back and making sure all the ground-floor windows are secure.

The sofa is acceptably comfortable. He wakes only three times needing to re-check the doors and windows. Not so bad. At 0520 he knows it’s no use trying to sleep any more and examines the coffee machine until he figures out how to override the timer and start it.
Without the need to check perimeters again, he can make a closer examination of flying Sam’s home. The TV is large and the state of cleanliness high. Flying Sam seems to have a strong interest in condiments and Italian red wines.

On the wall next to flying Sam’s computer desk, there are three photos of Sam from his Air Force days. In one, he stands with a small group of men in dress uniform, as if from a ceremony. In the other two, he’s in fatigues with a brown-haired white man: one candid photo in a desert setting, both of them squinting away from the camera, the other inside an austere military building, with their arms around each other’s shoulders, laughing.

It looks like a different version of flying Sam than the one Barnes knows. He looks much younger, with an easier set to his mouth and more relaxed eyes.

Identified: curiosity.

Additionally identified: nostalgia. Perhaps Rogers and Sam will find it interesting to hear about Barnes’s activities in DC. Those were good days, when he discovered useful information about himself and established routines that made his brain quiet enough to allow it to start putting itself back together.

It all seemed very straightforward back then: follow Rogers, monitor all his activities, deactivate the various HYDRA agents running around in disorder subsequent to the destruction of their cushy setup ruining the world in the background.

Mission. Remember how we used to argue over contact.

CONFIRM

No need to sound so smug about it.

DENY

Shut up.

He feels comfortable in flying Sam’s home. Another safe space. In this city where he made his first safe spaces without even knowing what they meant.

Good.

He finds a travel mug in flying Sam’s kitchen that is similar in size to a Starbucks cup. He also, because he is not an asshole, writes a note so Rogers won’t worry.

Upstairs, Rogers is of course taking up every inch of flying Sam’s guest bed. He doesn’t even twitch when Barnes lays the note saying ‘outside’ on his chest.

He ties his hair back and steps outside for a reunion visit with the hedge.
The hedge is as excellent as ever, even with no one in flying Sam’s kitchen to observe for 36 minutes. Its untrimmed state has only increased since the fall; Barnes has to break off several new twigs in order to slide into his customary spot next to the forked branch that holds his cup. Once done (and once he has disentangled the other new twig that caught in his hair), he leans back, and the familiar posture results in mental quiet and physical comfort.

Nice.

He sees Rogers come downstairs, holding the note and looking around confusedly: he is still in the state of waking before his brain actually switches on.

He doesn’t even stop at the coffeemaker before heading toward the back door.

Bad choice, Rogers.

Barnes hears the door open.

“Bucky?” in a tone soft enough to be heard only by enhanced ears.

“Here,” at the same volume.

It takes Rogers a minute to find his way over to the greenery. When he finally makes it, he laughs in surprise.

“The hell are you doing standing in a bush?”

Barnes gestures and points.

“What is this?”

“Excellent surveillance spot.”

“Sure, for staring at Sam’s empty kitchen.”

“Wasn’t always empty.”

Rogers’s eyebrows dance around while he ponders that.

“Are you kidding me, Buck?”

Barnes removes his cup from the forked branch and drinks.

“Bucky. Seriously? You would stand out here eight feet away from me?”

“Confirm.”

“Goddammit, Buck.”

Barnes hasn’t seen that expression in a while.
If Rogers socked him one now, would he react differently from New Year’s.

Unknown.

Better not to risk it.

Rogers stomps away, toward the coffee that one hopes will improve his mood. Barnes follows, definitely because his cup is nearly empty and not because he feels a slight sense of guilt.

“How was the sofa, Barnes?” flying Sam asks after he has emerged, held up a silencing hand at the two of them, and drunk half a mug of coffee.

“Pretty good. Thanks.”

“Sam. Do you realize this asshole used to stand in that bush right there and watch us?”

“What, that big ugly thing my neighbors never trim?”

“Yes.”

Barnes braces for a lecture.

“Huh.”

Flying Sam pours another cup of coffee. Rogers scowls.

No lecture. Nice.

By contrast, flying Sam demonstrates signs of being a masochist, because he actually, consciously suggests a run.

Ugh.

Barnes longs for the days of bugged clothing.

“Dude. You’re gonna have a heat stroke in those sweatpants,” flying Sam says.

CONFIRM

Here is the first hint of a conundrum: it’s okay to borrow a pair of running shorts from flying Sam, but a long-sleeved shirt is not optional. Barnes strongly desires not to show his metal arm to the world. Not every response is going to be like an excited little kid. And of course, there’s almost certainly a standing retrieval order on him. He is fully cognizant of his good fortune in how little trouble he has had with HYDRA overall, since reset.

Set task: determine how to manage during summer.

They run over to the National Mall.

“Now we’ll see how obnoxious Steve feels like being today,” flying Sam says.

Rogers opens his mouth, so Barnes jumps in,

“Pretty sure he always feels maximum obnoxious.”
Rogers takes off at top speed.

Rude. Barnes, having once met a manner, runs at a pace suitable for flying Sam.

The third time Rogers approaches to lap them with a rude comment, Barnes clotheslines him.

He’s not horrible. The mission is protect, after all. So he telegraphs the motion 2 seconds early, giving Rogers time to grab the metal arm and spin them both until they skid to a stop. The action’s enough to pull across Barnes's torso, a painful internal burn along all the spots where the arm is anchored that throbs for the better part of an hour.

Rogers and flying Sam have to bend over and hold their ribs, laughing.

Worth it.

Despite being the only one in the group with a notable amount of hair, Barnes is first to emerge clean and dry after their run. He uses the time to take care of an important task. Rogers is drinking coffee at the kitchen table and flying Sam is cooking breakfast when Barnes returns from the garage and holds out his left hand.

Flying Sam frowns and stops whisking French toast batter. Smells like nutmeg. Barnes doesn’t put nutmeg in his French toast batter. He definitely plans to going forward.

“What am I looking at, Barnes?”

“Listening devices.”

Sam sets the whisk down on the counter, closes his eyes briefly, and breathes deep.

“You bugged my house?”

“Confirm.”

“The hell?” Rogers says.

“When did you bug my house, Barnes,” flying Sam says in a flat tone of voice.

“Last autumn. Haven’t listened to them since we moved to Brooklyn – “

“Sure. We moved. Right,” Rogers mumbles in the background.

“– but it is inappropriate to have the capacity to violate your privacy.”

“What?” Rogers shouts.

Barnes crushes the bugs and puts them in the trash can.

“You came in my house?” flying Sam says.

“I’m not sure I even knew you understood the meaning of the word privacy, Buck,” Rogers says.

“Steve, will you shut your mouth for one minute?”

What.
“What?” Rogers says.

“You’ll get your turn, don’t worry, but Barnes and me are talking.”

Sigh.

Taking responsibility for one’s actions is a pain in the ass.

“Confirm,” Barnes says. “Twice. Once to place the listening devices, and once to examine the folder about me and give Rogers some money.”

“You gave me that money?”

Flying Sam turns a facial expression on Rogers that Barnes hopes never to be the recipient of. Rogers sits back in his chair.

“You came in my house twice,” flying Sam says.

Time to deliver the bad news.

“Sam. Your back door lock is extremely easy to pick.”

Flying Sam then performs a strange action. He moves slowly to the refrigerator and removes the orange juice bottle. He calmly reaches down a glass and pours half a glass of juice. He then reaches down a large bottle of vodka from inside the freezer, fills the glass the rest of the way, and drinks the whole thing quickly.

Barnes looks at Rogers, who is no help because he is busy having an animated internal conversation, as indicated by flapping hands and bobbing his head around with an annoyed expression on his face.

Flying Sam sets the glass down, lays his hands on the counter, and takes a deep breath.

What is this.

This looks negative.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“Anything else?” flying Sam asks, “I mean, that you feel like you might want to apologize for.”

No.

YES

Dammit, mission.

“Borrowed your bicycle a couple of times.”

“Well, that at least explains where I found it after y’all left,” flying Sam says, still looking at the counter.

AND

Mission.

AND
“And I slashed the tire on your car.”

Flying Sam leans down and puts his forehead on the counter.

“You what? That day Nat found the bank?” Rogers says.

“Confirm.”

“Why’d you do that, Barnes,” flying Sam says to the countertop.

His contorted position makes his vocal tenor sound aggrieved.

Or maybe he simply sounds aggrieved.

This conversation is terrible.

“To give me time to get there first.”

“Oh, come on,” Rogers says.

But Sam rotates his head and opens one eye to look at Barnes, then straightens up.

“You were at the bank? You went all the way over to Lower Senate Park and then to the bank?”

“On your bicycle. It was very tiring,” Barnes says.

“Why’d you have to get to the bank first?”

Barnes identifies: hesitation. He looks at Rogers, who is exercising all his frowning muscles.

He doesn’t want to say it.

However, he has already said worse.

“Steve had seen the file,” he says. “I watched. From the hedge. It caused emotional damage. Had to destroy the tank, and the chair, to prevent further emotional harm.”

“Bucky,” Rogers says.

Flying Sam leans back against the refrigerator.

“This was what. September? Just a few weeks into this?”

“Confirm.”

Flying Sam stares at him for a long moment.

“How’d that feel? Tearing all that shit up?”

Barnes has little concrete memory of the process. But he remembers his exhaustion afterward, increased sleep quality, and decreased mental noise.

“Very good,” he says.

“Don’t sneak in people’s houses anymore, Barnes,” flying Sam says.

“No,” Barnes says.
Then he reconsiders.

“Unless they’re bad guys.”

Sam laughs.

“Okay, I’ll give you a pass on that one. And later on I might need to talk some more about how much I really, really do not like that you broke into my house.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. You’ll be sorrier after I change the damn lock on my back door.”

“No, Sam. That is a positive action and increases your safety. That will make me happy.”

“Man, shut up and fry some bacon.”

Barnes shuts up and fries some bacon.

Rogers remains suspiciously silent during the production of breakfast. Barnes avoids looking at him in case eye contact results in a lecture. But when he and flying Sam turn, hands full of loaded dishes, Rogers is sitting still at the table, head down, his hands grasping his hair.

"You okay, Steve?" flying Sam asks.

Rogers looks up, and it's not handkerchief time, but it's a near thing.

"Is it possible to get emotional whiplash?" Rogers asks.

Sam laughs.

"Hell yeah it is. Hold up a minute."

He grabs the bottle and pours vodka into Rogers's orange juice glass.

"I can't get drunk," Rogers says in a morose tone.

"Dude, I know. That's why you're the world's best designated driver. But you can still enjoy it, can't you?"

Rogers does that thing where he nods his head diagonally, like he's only agreeing provisionally.

"Yeah, sure."

Flying Sam proffers the bottle to Barnes.

"I don't like orange juice."

“More for me, then.”

Flying Sam says a prayer over the food before they eat. He asks for the food to give them health, and expresses thankfulness for friends being together.

Does that mean flying Sam considers him a mission assist.
“Amen,” Rogers says at the end.

“Okay,” Barnes says.

Why does that make them smile.

French toast with nutmeg in the batter is delicious. Barnes even gets to eat plenty of it, because Rogers is talky.

“Take a slug of that juice and tell me about your whiplash,” flying Sam says.

Rogers surprises the universe and does as he’s told. He drinks deeply from his glass.

Barnes remembers the bad day in January, when Stark sent them breakfast foods. He reaches over and fills Rogers’s plate.

Rogers takes a large breath and puts his hand on his face.

How is that an incorrect action Steve.

“God,” Rogers says. “It’s just. It’s just this.”

He gestures at his plate, then sighs.

“We had a bad few days, before I called you.”

“I figured,” flying Sam says.

“Caught both of us out of the blue, I think. Right, Buck?”

“Confirm. New set of bad memories.”

“Caused by what?”

“He was trying to help, Sam. Fury sent a data packet from Europe. Everybody was going through it, trying to see if there was anything that needed doing. Tony’s been. That’s a whole other conversation, but Tony and I were talking about me getting back to work, and Bucky didn’t like it. I said I’d stick around, but we’d had a really good run, and we thought going through intel would be okay.”

“That’s a lot of ‘we’ there, Steve. You agree with all that, Barnes?”

Barnes looks at Rogers and finds his own question mirrored. Weird thing to ask.

“Description correct,” he says.

“How bad was it?”

Flying Sam is looking at Barnes.

“Not so bad. Disrupted sleep, desire for safe spaces.”

“Disrupted sleep,” Rogers says. “Waking up screaming every hour and a half.”

Shrug.
Rogers runs his hand through his hair again.

“He can’t help his dreams, Steve,” flying Sam says.

Rogers demonstrates that it is possible to impale a regular stainless-steel fork into a wooden table, given sufficient force. Demonstrates for Sam, anyhow. Barnes already knew that. But it seems kind of rude.

“I know that,” Rogers says. “That’s not the problem. The problem is that he has to dream about that kind of terrible shit in the first place! Every time things get going well, something else comes along and cuts us off at the knees, Sam. How am I supposed to protect him from anything, when I don’t know what’s gonna hit him the wrong way? How am I supposed to make it right when he doesn’t want me to go out against the people who had him, or when half the time I’m the one causing the problem?”

Aw, pal. Your protect mission is about as loud as mine.

CONFIRM

Barnes puts more bacon on Rogers's plate. You don’t need a fork to eat bacon.

“And this! What do I do with this, Sam? He spent seventy years with his own self ripped out of him, and every time I turn around he’s – “

Rogers stops, clenches his jaw.

What are we doing wrong.

“He’s what, Steve,” flying Sam asks in a soft voice.

“He’s taking care of me,” Rogers says, his voice indicating upset. “He’s feeding me, or making some dumb comment that pulls me out of myself. He bakes cookies for everybody in the tower and flirts with Pepper just to make her smile. You should’ve seen him with Peggy, Sam. She had one of her episodes, forgot it wasn’t nineteen forty-five, and it didn’t phase him at all. He just sat and talked to her until she calmed down again. He promised her to – to bring me home.”

“Good job, Barnes, that sounds like it was really kind.”

Shrug.

“We are the same,” he says. “Trying to keep Rogers safe despite our brain troubles.”

Flying Sam smiles at him, but Rogers hangs onto the table and makes a distressed expression. Flying Sam looks at Rogers for a long minute, then makes a small smile at Barnes and nods once.

“So let me make sure I have this right,” Sam says, “your second-best friend –“

What.

“–returns from the dead, and it turns out that he went through most of a century of really bad shit, and you’re having a hard time understanding how it’s not all singing and dancing all the time.”

“Sam,” Rogers says.

“Second-best friend,” Barnes says.
“Hey, man, I just tell it like it is.”
“You are off the mission-assist list.”

DENY

Shut up, mission, I know it’s a joke.

Flying Sam smirks, and Rogers is almost able to laugh.

“No, I know it’s ridiculous,” Rogers says.

“Feelings don’t care about ridiculous,” flying Sam says.

“Confirm,” Barnes says with firmness, and they both smile again.

“Give yourself a break, Steve. The only one who expects you to be a hundred percent sunshine about all this is you.”

Barnes will not dignify Rogers’s skeptical glance with anything other than a scowl.

“Going back a little bit,” flying Sam says, “who put you in charge of making things right?”

What.

Samuel Thomas Wilson, codename: Falcon, is back on the mission-assist list.

CONFIRM

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” Rogers says.

“You didn’t hurt Barnes. Why are you supposed to fix him?”

Rogers scowls.

“I gotta do something,” he says.

“Who said?”

Rogers opens and closes his mouth like a fish.

“Barnes, is there something you want Steve to be doing for you that he isn’t?”

Besides not being a dumbass, you mean.

“He does plenty,” Barnes says.

“Yeah?”

“Confirm. He remembered my birthday.”

“Dude! Happy birthday!”

“Thanks. It’s March tenth.”

“What did y’all do?”
“Steve went to the coffee bar and made breakfast sandwiches. We went to the natural history museum. Sam. People traveled to the moon.”

“I know.”

“I liked the dinosaur bones. We ate Russian food and bought cheese and books. He made my mother’s pasta sauce for dinner.”

“Steve, for god’s sake,” flying Sam says. “Sounds like you’re doing just fine.”

“We’re not good at talking,” Barnes says.

“Believe me, I know it.”


Flying Sam sits back in his chair and blinks a few times.

“You see? You see what I’m talking about?” Rogers says.

What does that mean.

“I’m gonna answer your question with a question,” flying Sam says. “Have you ever, actually, in your life done anything boring?”

NO

Confirm.

“What?” Rogers says.

“I’m just going off what I know from hanging around with you the past year and, oh, every story about you I’ve ever heard. Seems to me like your whole life has been high drama.”

“Now that’s not fair, Sam, I’ve had plenty of –“

“Steve. You know I love you, man. But first you had the whole tiny dude with a chip on his shoulder drama. Then becoming a superhero drama. Then halfway winning World War Two on your own drama. Etcetera. You don’t do anything by half measures. Of course this is hard. Of course it’s tall highs and deep lows. That’s how your life is. Barnes’s too.”

The briefing plays, “I wonder what boring’s like? Sounds nice. Boring probably has better food and fewer Nazis.”

Jeez, briefing. We never get a damn break, do we.

CONFIRM

“So what do I do?” Rogers asks.

“Live it,” Sam says. “That’s what life is for, ain’t it? Instead of beating yourself up for not making life perfect, let yourself enjoy the good times and have faith that the bad times won’t last forever.”

Sam Wilson is wise.

CONFIRM
“What are you doing, Buck?”

“Typing that into my phone to remember later.”

“See? Barnes knows when he hears good sense.”

“It’s not that easy, Sam.”

“Nobody ever said it was easy. Just simple.”

Rogers shakes his head. He levers the fork out of the table with a rueful expression.

“What do I do now?” he asks, sounding so young that the briefing gets excited.

“How about eat your breakfast, pal,” Barnes says.

It’s all cold, and they have to reheat it in the microwave, but it’s still really good.

Flying Sam’s conversation unlocks words for both of them – which is good, because it seems that the plan for the afternoon is ‘hanging out, watching baseball.’ Horrible.

It starts with Rogers bitching and moaning about the hedge.

“Standing around in a bush eight feet away from us the whole time,” he says.

“Sure.”

“Sam.”

“What? It’s not like a surprise he was hanging around. For one thing, he already said he broke into my house twice, and for another, we had HYDRA agents tied up in the front yard like every other day. You want me to be surprised that Barnes was living in my hedge?”

What the hell, flying Sam.

“Wasn’t living in a goddamn bush.”

Do they think he was trained by morons. They may have been evil people, but they were not fucking morons.

“That’s right, you said at Thanksgiving. You had a base, right?”

Barnes rises and goes to the back door. It’s easy to find. Identified: pleasure. The condominium was a good place.

“It was there,” he says, pointing. “The new owners have changed the curtains. When I was there, they were green.”

Rogers and flying Sam walk over quickly enough that their curiosity is evident.

“With the blue curtains?”

“Yes.”

“Dang, Barnes.”
“Bucky,” Rogers says.

“What.”

“I just. I won’t ever understand why you would be so close by without contacting me.”

Shrug.

“How’s that work, Barnes? You had protocols or something?” flying Sam asks when they’re back in front of the television.

Barnes tells them about the protocols: the HYDRA jackass outside the hospital with his control passcode that the mission imperative was able to overcome, using supplies from that episode to acquire appropriate clothing, finding the condominium. Establishing routine and comfort. Rogers appears to find the experience discomfiting, given the way he twitches and squirms during the story. Flying Sam grins as if it provides him enjoyment.

“Man, I can’t wait for the day when you get to turn all that HYDRA training against them,” he says. “You’re gonna drive them nuts.”

CONFIRM

Sure. Whenever that will be.

That makes Rogers wriggle more than ever.

“Got ants in your pants, Steve?”

That sounds horrible. Insects do not belong inside clothing.

“Rogers wants to travel the earth and personally set a torch to every HYDRA base.”

“Don’t joke, Bucky, they need to be taken down.”

Shrug.

They do. But it’s not like they’re going anywhere any time soon.

“So why don’t you?”

Oh.

“Bucky said he doesn’t want me to. Makes him feel unsafe.”

Barnes watches carefully. Flying Sam merely nods his head, as if that’s a normal request.

Comforting.

“I get it,” Rogers says, “it’s just. I feel so restless.”

“Is it the going away part, or just the fighting part?” flying Sam asks, looking at Barnes.

That’s an interesting question. Assessing.

“Mostly the latter,” Barnes says.

“Maybe you ought to find something non-fighting to try out as an experiment, Steve,” flying Sam
Then the baseball game reaches some level that’s supposedly ‘exciting,’ and the topic doesn’t come up again.

By the time more calories are needed, Barnes has finished one of the books he brought and spent a profitable hour and a half paging through Sam’s EMT books (so he doesn’t finish either of the other two books before the trip is over). It is interesting to see how to put back together the parts he tends to make holes in. Or remove.

Rogers and flying Sam have watched two baseball games.

Ugh.

They spend dinner arguing over the relative merits of various professional sports in a manner that feels friendly. Rogers is easier, after the day’s conversations. It was a good idea to visit. Flying Sam, too, smiles a great deal, and the set of his shoulders is relaxed.

Still. There is a difference, between the Sam they know and the one in the photos on his wall.

Barnes rises and verifies by looking at the photos. It’s true. Flying Sam smiles currently, but it’s a smaller, stiffer expression than he wears in the photographs.

“What’s up, Barnes?” flying Sam asks.

“Who is the person with you in these photographs,” he asks.

Unfortunately, this is an incorrect question: flying Sam frowns at the table, and Rogers frowns at Sam, who clears his throat.

“That’s Riley,” he says after a pause. “My wingman.”

The tone is unmistakable.

“What happened to him.”

“He died.”

Oh.

Barnes looks at the photo again. It is.

Oh.

It is flying Sam’s version of the sunrise smile. That he doesn’t make anymore.

Wingman Riley would not have had creepy experimental serum. And there’s no coming back without it.

Identified: sorrow.

“Flying Sam, I am sorry,” he says.

“Thanks, Barnes,” flying Sam says.

Barnes shakes his head. He has been unclear. How to say it.
“No,” he says. “Clarify. We should apologize. Steve and I. We depend on you for assistance.”

“You always can.”

“But it is unfair. We should remember that. Steve got his back. Got me back. And you did not.”

“God, Bucky.”

Flying Sam’s expression is difficult to interpret. Is that anger. Did we say it wrong.

UNKNOWN

“That’s really.”

Flying Sam shakes his head.

“That’s really thoughtful, Barnes.”

Flying Sam’s voice indicates strong emotion.

“That’s real.”

He stands up and looks around.

“Sam?”

Sam looks at the kitchen, at the front hallways, but won’t meet Barnes’s or Rogers’s eye.

“We’re about out of wine. There’s a place just around the corner, won’t take but a minute. I’ll be right back.”

And he leaves.

There are four bottles of wine in the rack beside the refrigerator.

Dammit.

He has done it wrong. He has injured flying Sam.

Barnes turns to Rogers, who is also frowning. What a mess.

“I said it wrong.”

Rogers shakes his head.

“No, Buck,” he says in a soft voice. “No, I don’t think you did. That was really kind, what you said. You’re right. We shouldn’t ever forget that about him.”

“How do we assist.”

“Let’s ask him when he gets back.”

They pass the wait by cleaning up from dinner, making Sam’s home tidy. Up to the point that Barnes finds a small bag of flour in the freezer and a bag of chocolate chips in the cheese drawer.
It’s a ridiculous place to keep chocolate chips, but it makes possible Barnes’s preparation of the usual.

The usual improves every situation.

Sam returns 35 minutes later, when the first batch of cookies has just begun to scent the air.

He stands in the doorway. a cardboard box in his arms and a pinched expression on his face. Then he sighs heavily and plunks the box down on the table.

“Thanks for cleaning up, y’all,” he says.

“Sam,” Rogers says, but flying Sam raises his hand.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“God, Sam, don’t feel like you have to apologize, you –“

Sam looks at him, and Steve stops talking.

The timer on the oven goes off, and Sam jumps. But at the sight of the tray of cookies, he laughs.

Identified: relief.

Flying Sam pulls a bottle out of the box and sets about opening it, pours three glasses.

Barnes puts another batch of cookies in.

“Sorry I freaked out for a minute there,” Sam says, but with a smile on his face. “I’m starting to see what you meant, Steve.”

He raises up his glass and waits for Barnes and Rogers to follow his example.

“To whiplash,” he says.

Steve laughs and says, “to whiplash.”

Chapter End Notes

Day in and day out, your comments make me laugh, cry, and press my hand against my chest so my heart won’t fly out of it. You guys are amazing.
Flying Sam tells stories about wingman Riley until the early hours of morning, long after the cookies are almost gone and wine bottles are scattered across the coffee table. It is clear that wingman Riley had a strong interest in messy pranks, a sport called volleyball, and yanking flying Sam’s chain. The stories are amusing, but several of them inspire tears to roll down Sam’s face in a way that Barnes suspects is not amusement.

The stories get sadder as the empty wine bottles increase in number. When flying Sam’s speech develops a slur, Barnes takes away his wine glass and replaces it with a large glass of water.

Flying Sam stares at the glass for a moment.

“He like this when he was your sergeant?”

Rogers makes a smile full of strong emotion.

“Yeah. We pretty much went to pieces without him. Turned into a bunch of rampaging animals.”

Barnes has very few concrete memories regarding the Howling Commandos. Most of what he knows comes from Rogers’s stories and the ridiculous contemporary newsreels. He understands those men to have been highly skilled, if occasionally reckless. It would be surprising for an entire group of trained soldiers to fall apart over the loss of just one of their number.

The briefing hums in a suspicious manner.

Ah.

“Using the royal we there, pal?”

Flying Sam’s grin is fierce.

“Maybe,” Rogers says after a pause.

Then,

“I don’t regret a minute of it,” in a voice akin to a bear’s.

Flying Sam laughs.

Identified: surprise.

“Man, that’s the same look you had on your face when we were headed for the Triskelion. Screw everybody else, you were ready to burn the world down to get to Barnes.”

CONFIRM.

Barnes remembers: Rogers said that very thing once, at Arlington.

“Good thing you don’t have to,” he says, and some of the stubborn anger falls out of Rogers’s posture.

“Was wingman Riley your caretaker,” he says.
Flying Sam’s expression falters. He drinks half the glass of water and makes a smile that is not quite successful at the edges.

“Unit full of medics, we all took care of one another,” he says. “Always pushing hydration on each other, fighting to see who could make the others sleep. Riley was the one forever telling terrible dad jokes after messy ops, asking embarrassing questions about our childhoods while we were waiting to jump. He’s the one who kept us from cracking up.”

Barnes pushes the plate of cookies toward flying Sam, who takes the hint and eats one.

Unsurprisingly, Sam is slow to wake in the morning.

“There goes my chance to get caught up on paperwork,” he groans to the plate of amazing breakfast Barnes sets in front of him.

No vodka goes in the orange juice this morning.

Several minutes later, flying Sam says,

“Barnes, are you sure you don’t want to move back down here? You can live here rent-free if you make breakfast every day.”

“Your request for transfer is denied,” Rogers says.

Barnes makes a smile without having to try.

It’s pleasant to walk with them to the VA center, following the same path he walked so many days in the fall. He even wears a ballcap, and the physical memory of the outfit, the route, makes him habitually hang back several paces. The day is warm but cloudy. The trip makes a sense of calm.

One improvement over walking closer than he had in the past: when Rogers and flying Sam attempt to cross the street like a couple of foolhardy dumbasses, he steps forward and grabs them each by the back of their clothing.

“Look before crossing,” he says.

His voice has achieved inflection. Nice. (Not friendly inflection.)

“Okay, mom,” flying Sam says.

But they look. Both ways, even. Barnes chooses to ignore the fact that flying Sam does so by leaning forward and swiveling back and forth in an exaggerated manner.

Noted: hangovers bring out flying Sam’s sass.

Barnes’s tactical ability is at low function. What will he do when they arrive at the center: walk the perimeter, climb the tree where he used to wait for them? Or will he go in.

To do what. Speak to strangers.

No.

Barnes hesitates by the tree. He sees that if they had not moved to Brooklyn, his protocols would not have been sufficient for winter – the tree is just now starting to put out new leaves, small and pale
green. Nobody would be able to hide there.

“Okay, Buck?”

No.

A crowd of five people is even now entering the front of the center, all together.

“Too many people?”

Nod.

“Dude, that’s something everybody’s used to,” flying Sam says. “I guarantee you won’t be the only one standing with your back against the wall. Maybe it’ll do you some good.”

He pats Rogers on the arm.

“Steve can act like he doesn’t even know you. Come in a little after us, avoid the ruckus. You did undercover work, right?”

CONFIRM

A mission. We can do a small mission.

CONFIRM

“I’m taking that smile for a yes.”

Barnes takes the risk of letting them out of sight for long enough to go for a fortifying mocha. Familiar surroundings: positive. The baristas are all different, 8 months later. There is no one who might remember him.

Flying Sam’s plan is successful. Everyone in the building is so excited by Rogers’s presence that no one cares about ‘Jim,’ other than to greet him without touching, point out the table of snacks in the largest meeting room, and twice ask him where he served. As it did for Ollie on their first meeting, ‘Afghanistan’ is a sufficient answer.

One particularly enthusiastic young man in a t-shirt reading ‘MARINES’ hustles him over to “meet Captain America, man, can you fucking believe it?”

Barnes and Rogers shake hands as if they were strangers.

Hilarious.

The twitching in Steve’s eyebrow at the sight of the Starbucks cup inspires such a desire to laugh that Barnes has to exert effort to keep his face still.

Then another veteran moves in to introduce himself. The crowd around Rogers moves farther into the building. It’s easy for Barnes to let himself get left behind.

Barnes has not previously been inside the VA building. He goes up to the second floor and works his way down to the basement. The top floor is all small offices off a central hallway. He steps inside the one with Sam’s name on the door: there’s an institutional-looking grey metal desk, a chair on either side, and a bulky computer. A different photo of wingman Riley hangs on the wall, in which he stands with his hands on his hips, staring down at an unpacked parachute.
All the other offices are furnished similarly, as if their budget for décor is in the negative. Barnes stands outside one office for several moments and listens to a staff member talk a veteran through the complexities of applying for housing assistance.

“I know it’s confusing,” the man says, “it’s just a lot of bureaucracy. We’ll sort you out.”

The ground floor is mostly meeting spaces: four small rooms and one large. One of the small rooms has a bookshelf sparsely filled with faded hardbacks and tattered paperbacks, not one of which looks the least bit appealing. There’s only one upholstered chair (which sags ominously in the middle) – the rest are plain wooden ones covered in writing.

The basement smells musty. On one side are boxes and old pieces of furniture even more battered than throughout the rest of the building. File cabinets line the walls, most with file boxes sitting on top of them. On the other side of the room is a pile of gym mats, a weight bench, and an incomplete set of weights.

Identified: dislike.

“Have a good tour?” the dark-skinned young woman at the front desk asks as he passes by back on the ground floor.

“Hope it’s okay,” he says, and she grins at him.

“Sure, lots of people need to take a look around. And it’s not like the VA lets us have anything valuable. Did you meet Steve Rogers?”

“Yes.”

“I met him last fall, when he first starting coming in with Sam. I had forgotten how big he is! It’s like my brain wouldn’t let me remember.”

What is the correct response to that.

Especially given that it’s true. The guy’s enormous.

But the young woman doesn’t appear to require an answer. She continues,

“Nobody’ll care if you go in late to group meeting. Or did you need to see somebody about your paperwork?”

“No,” he says, “I’m good.”

“Okay. Yell if you need anything.”

Chance of yelling: <5%.

Barnes wanders. He stands outside the group session for a while. It is interesting to see flying Sam at work: like he has done with Barnes and Rogers, flying Sam asks the sort of questions that prod one to self-insight. He provides comfort without glossing over the unpleasant parts.

Barnes remembers the first time he observed one of these counseling sessions, from outside. That was when he first understood himself to be the mission head.

CONFIRM

Not the mission development he had expected, but it has worked out okay.
CONFIRM MISSION HEAD

Thanks, pal.

“I don’t know how to let it go,” one man in the meeting says.

“Maybe you don’t have to,” Rogers says. “Maybe it’s not letting go as much as it is finding a way to be okay in spite of everything.”

Oh hey, Rogers used a brain cell.

“Not bad, Steve,” flying Sam says.

CONFIRM

Confirm. To find a way to be okay, despite incomplete memories, spatial problems, and a strong dislike of touch.

By that metric, things are going pretty well. Considering.

Considering is required. Barnes retreats to the stairwell for a while, to sit on the stairs and run through his progression since the fall. Flying Sam has said numerous times that recovery takes an inconsistent course. Focus on monitoring Rogers allowed him in the past to ignore the unpleasantness that has become evident since moving into the tower.

Greater physical safety has made possible a space for emotional instability. Not weakness – boundaries within which to remember.

The briefing may have taken over on occasion, but recently it has tended to wait with large downloads. To let him prepare and give permission, as with the data packet, and the conversation about Peggy Carter.

All the parts of him, working together to overcome bad days. This must be progress.

CONFIRM

Thanks, mission.

He walks again, and when he passes the front desk, the young woman stands at the copy machine, hissing, ‘come on’ under her breath as she jabs and the machine beeps at her.

“This stupid piece of crap,” she says in answer to his inquiry. “We don’t have anything that works around here. It jams on every third page, no matter what anybody does.”

1. This falls in line with his projects. 2. Who knows how long the group session will last. It would be good to have something to do.

“I’ll take a look at it,” he says, and the young woman – Danesha – smiles her gratitude.

It is a satisfying puzzle. The instruction manual for the copy machine is in a plastic bag hanging from a piece of yellowed tape on the back panel. Barnes learns from reading this that the most likely problem is a small piece of paper stuck on one of the rollers. He follows the diagrams and disassembles the machine piece by piece. Danesha fetches him the center’s tool box, and then its first aid kit. Just at the time he hears flying Sam say,
“Hey, have you seen a long-haired guy,”

he uses the tweezers from the first-aid kit to pull a crumpled, toner-blackened triangle of paper, only 1x4 cm, from one of the interior rollers of the machine.

“Did you fix it?” Danesha asks.

“I think so.”

“You’re the best person I’ve met this week,” she says. “Sorry, Steve.”

“Are you kidding? If he fixed that damn copy machine he’s the number one person of the month,” flying Sam says. Nice.

Taking apart and putting back together the copy machine has the same pleasure of any defined task. It additionally reminds him that he has not performed basic maintenance on his arm in more than a month.

“That’s the thing causing all the trouble?” Danesha says, taking the tweezers and examining the blackened shred of paper.

“Hope so,” he says.

It takes less time to put the machine back together than taking it apart – much less time than it takes to scrub his flesh hand clean of toner.

They go to a pizza restaurant for dinner. It takes 26 seconds to learn that the reward for eating chicken wings is not worth the experience of trying to keep sauce out from between the plates of his hand. The ratio of mess to reward is unfavorable. They have to ask for another stack of napkins, and Barnes requires a clean drinking glass after dunking his hand to clean it.

“Water bother that thing?” flying Sam asks.

“Not small amounts. Submerged is okay for short periods, then it gets glitchy.”

Flying Sam wears an expression like he’s formulating further questions about the arm. Barnes does not wish to discuss the arm. The arm is what it is. Other topics are more pressing.

“Sam. Why is the furniture at the center so crappy,” he says.

Rogers blinks his surprise over his chicken wing. Identified: ridiculous, to see such a large man eating such a small food.

Flying Sam purses his mouth, shrugs.

“Budget cuts,” he says, “year in, year out. I guess our lobby isn’t as good as the ones from oil companies and the CIA, because they all seem to find it easy to get money out of Congress while vets keep getting screwed sideways. We need to spend every penny we can on actual services. If that means I gotta have a chair in my office that kills my damn back, so be it.”

“That’s not right,” Rogers says.

“No it is not,” flying Sam says.
CONFIRM

Confirm, mission.

He looks at Rogers, and they nod at each other. Project action 2: demonstrate mission-assist status through helpful action. It is possible to assist. They will find a way.

Additionally, an afternoon’s interaction with a larger number of people than usual appears to have done Rogers good. He and flying Sam speak all evening about the veterans, especially the ones Rogers remembers from last fall. His face is animated and his body language relaxed.

Later, Barnes waits 25 minutes after all the noises have quieted upstairs, then climbs to the guest room and looks inside. Rogers is still awake, looking at something on his phone, so Barnes knocks softly.

Rogers looks up with a smile.

Verification of what he has come upstairs to say.

CONFIRM

“What’s up, Bucky?”

“It was good to come here,” he says.

Roger’s smile broadens.

“Yeah, Buck. I think so too.”
Just as Barnes has reached a basic level of comfort with his surroundings and flying Sam’s sofa, it’s time to go back to New York.

Seems like the state of being comfortable never lasts when you’re self-aware enough to actually want it.

But travel aside, maybe that’s okay. He has good places in New York, and now another in DC. Like flying Sam said: find one safe spot, and then make it bigger. Achieved.

The revelations and conversations they have had add up to something important. He’s still calculating exactly what.

“What makes the train better than flying?” Sam asks him.

Because of course he would rather fly.

“Artificial air pressure,” Barnes says, “too much like cryo.”

Flying Sam winces.

“Yeah, okay. Makes sense.”

Rogers is on the phone in the back yard, pacing back and forth, talking to someone at Peggy Carter’s nursing home. He looks unhappy.

“You know it’s okay to think about yourself sometimes, right?” flying Sam says in a soft voice. “It doesn’t always have to be totally about Steve.”

When Barnes had been in DC before, it had in fact been all about Steve: constant monitoring and griping. Close contact has turned things into the Barnes show, which is uncomfortable most of the time. It’s a relief to focus outward.

But nice of flying Sam to say, anyhow. Barnes makes a smile.

“I know,” he says.

Rogers still stares at his phone when he returns inside.

“I never know what to do when they tell me Peg’s having a bad day,” he says.

Makes sense. Rogers has demonstrated that he has a hard time with other people’s bad days in general.

CONFIRM

“What do they tell you to do,” Barnes asks.

Rogers makes an unhappy shrug.
“They tell me not to come. That it upsets her more. But I don’t know, it doesn’t seem right to leave her alone.”

“Even when it riles her up?” flying Sam says.

“I just feel like I should be there, yeah,” Rogers says. “No matter how many times I have to tell her that I’m alive.”

What.

WHAT

Confirm, mission.

Does this guy stab himself for fun.

CONFIRM

“How many times have you had to tell her that?” flying Sam asks.

“I dunno. Maybe twenty? At least.”

WHAT

Confirm, mission.

PROTECT

Confirm.

“Steve,” he says.

Rogers looks at him.

“No.”

“Bucky, you can’t just unilaterally say that. I owe her. I love her, Buck, I can’t just –“

“No.”

Rogers juts his chin out, ready to fight.

“Steve. Peggy Carter asked me to keep you safe. Think making sure you don’t rip your heart in half fucking counts. Denied, pal.”

“Good job, Barnes,” flying Sam murmurs.

The fight drops out of Rogers, leaving him looking miserable.

“I just don’t want to let her down,” he says.

“That’s the cruel thing about Alzheimer’s,” flying Sam says, “sometimes you have to do what’s super hard for you because it’s in their best interest.”

“It sucks,” Rogers says.

“Confirm,” Barnes says.
Achieved: Rogers’s face relaxes a little.

So they go out for breakfast instead, to a place that’s trying hard to look fancy even though it serves diner food. Barnes can’t fault the place, though: they do an excellent corned beef hash. Rogers lets at least 20% of his morose mood go over the course of the meal.

The car is so bad that the Amtrak station feels like a relief. Flying Sam’s method of dealing with Barnes’s wheezing and sweating is a good one. He stands close by and keeps watch but otherwise pretends it’s not happening and keeps up a steady conversation with Rogers while they purchase their tickets and wait for the train.

Nice. Rogers should learn that trick.

Rogers makes a long speech about friendship and gratitude that detonates a charm bomb on flying Sam’s head, leaving Sam looking woozy. There’s another long, spine-cracking hug.

“I’m so glad y’all came to visit,” he says to Barnes after, shaking hands and smiling wide.

“Me too. Thank you for your assistance.”

“Hey, man,” flying Sam says, “thanks for yours.”

Assessment: successful trip.

CONFIRM

Late morning on a Tuesday is not too horribly crowded on the train. They sit in the quiet car. Barnes reads, and Rogers draws in his sketchbook, punctuated by long periods of time when he stares out the window with a solemn expression.

The staring comes more and more often, and Barnes can feel through his right shoulder that Rogers is stiffening up.

‘Dumb comment that pulls me out of myself,’ he had said to flying Sam. Can’t quip at him on the quiet car. Instead, Barnes pulls the pencil out of Rogers’s hand and slides the sketchbook over. He turns to an empty page and thinks for a moment.

He writes ‘spangle circuit’ on the page.

Rogers jerks his surprise, then grins. He takes the pencil back and draws swiftly. In 30 minutes there’s a cartoony sketch of Rogers, physique inflated to a bulky triangle, holding a motorcycle in the air with 3 preening women sitting atop it and a man dressed as Hitler tumbled into a heap in the foreground with a large goose egg protruding from his forehead. The picture is funny, but there’s something about the figures’ exaggerated features that’s a little mean.

Interesting.

Barnes pulls out his phone and stares meaningfully at Rogers until the psychic message is received and he pulls out his as well.

‘You were unhappy?’ Barnes texts.

The initial notes of the banjo sound out. Rogers jumps, fumbles to silence it, and turns bright red.
For shit’s sake, Rogers. It’s the damn quiet car.

“Sorry,” he mouths.

Barnes rolls his eyes, and Rogers squints back.

Then he types for a long time. When he hits ‘send,’ Barnes’s phone vibrates.

It vibrates silently. Because Barnes knows how to follow directions. Now it’s Rogers’s turn to roll his eyes.

‘Hated it,’ the text says. ‘It was nothinf but raising money and giving blod to ship to scientists. Some things were great. I liked making little kids happy. But they wouldn’t let me talk to the kids. Only got to talk to ppl with money or connections. Most of the girls were pretty nice, esp once they found out I could help fix their costumes and wasn’t gonna try to take advantage. Bill, who played Hitler, was a real stand-up guy. 4F on account of flat feet. They tried to teach me how to dance, did you know that? That was hopeless. Didn’t really understand how stupid it all was until we got to Europe. I thought I was making a difference, but out in the filed, seeing guys with their legs blown off, half starved. Felt like I was nothing but a waste of time.”

Barnes looks at the drawing again. That’s what shows in the bubbly-looking muscles and pouting lips of the figures – that sense of futility. Trappings but not real action. Surely it’s an indicator of Rogers’s talent that he can convey that emotion in a quick sketch.

The train pulls out of Wilmington, DE, halfway through their trip. Rogers’s tension has eased.

‘What was your first real mission,’ Barnes types.

Rogers grins, quick, and pulls his sketchbook toward himself. This drawing takes longer – Barnes gets through 4 chapters of *Lirael*, which is emotionally complex and enjoyable, despite being written for children. If it were possible in the real world to go on missions to defeat monsters inside large magical libraries, Barnes would declare himself immediately ready to get back to the field.

Too bad.

They’ve left Philadelphia before Rogers hands the sketchbook back. This drawing has a more realistic style, though as Barnes examines it, he sees that the scene is still a funny one: Rogers, standing over the collapsed structure of a standard-issue officer’s tent. He has his hands on his hips and his head bent so low that it looks like he’s examining his abdomen as if he might find wisdom in his own navel. In the background, the Howling Commandos sit around a campfire, eating. Most of them have grins on their faces. Barnes recognizes the Bucky-person, who sits hunched over in a posture suggesting irritated despair, both hands over his face and fingers dug in his hair.

Rogers is grinning.

‘Did you ever get the tent up,’ Barnes texts, and Rogers grins even wider.

‘Nope.’

After a pause, another text comes through.

‘In the niddle of the night I crawled in yor tent. Too damn cold to sleep in the open. You elbowed me so hard it about busted my kidney.’

Barnes looks at Rogers and blinks twice.
‘Reasonable,’ he texts.

Rogers puts his hand over his mouth and laughs silently.

‘You asshole,’ he mouths.

Shrug.

Confirm.

It’s a good tactic. Much of the train trip has been taken up by their drawing and conversing via text. Rogers has not had time to brood, and Barnes has not had time to freak out over being trapped for several hours in a metal tube.

Still, matters improve greatly when they arrive in New York and are able to disembark.

“I guess you want to walk,” Rogers says.

Nod.

The weather is much cooler than in DC, but still pleasant for walking back to the tower. They cross the threshold, and Barnes identifies: calm. It feels like returning home.

Nice.

They take the elevators up, and Barnes is already thinking of all the tasks that must be accomplished: check and water the plants, launder his clothing, ensure that none of the food in the refrigerator has gone off, choose what they will eat for dinner and begin preparations.

He is so busy cataloging these tasks that he lets Rogers enter the apartment first.

“Hey what’s that?” Rogers says.

What.

“Geez, it’s huge. Bucky, did you –“

There is an unfamiliar box sitting in the middle of their living room floor.

Rogers cannot identify it. Barnes has not purchased anything so large.

Someone has been in their apartment.

PROTECT

Confirm.

Barnes hooks Rogers around the waist with his metal arm and throws him at the still-open door. He takes off and meets Rogers just as Rogers hits the floor, right outside the door. Barnes slams him farther away, pulls the door closed, and angles himself in front of Rogers, metal arm crooked around Rogers’s head.

“Building,” he says, “intrusion.”

“What the fuck are you doing,” Rogers says.
“I apologize,” building JARVIS says.

What.

“Sergeant Barnes, please do not be alarmed. That is a delivery from Ms. Potts. It did not occur to either of us that you would be so alarmed by an unfamiliar parcel. Please accept my deepest apologies.”

What.

“Oh my god, Bucky!” Rogers howls, laughing. “Jesus! Buck, are you okay?”

Thanks so much for asking while laughing like that, pal.

Barnes stands and hauls Rogers to his feet.

For shit’s sake. His shoulders are going to ache the rest of the night from that throw, and it wasn’t even necessary.

But still.

You don’t just put a large, unmarked box in someone’s house without any goddamn warning.

“Okay,” he says.

They go back inside, and Barnes chooses not to deal with the box until he is damn well ready. He waters the plants (which all look fine despite their 3-day drought), starts his laundry, and stands in front of the refrigerator for 6 minutes, by which time his pulse has returned to baseline.

“You know,” Rogers says while Barnes is filling the washer, “we should try that throw again some time. I threw Nat like that once, fighting the Chitauri. That could really come in handy.”

Barnes cannot decide whether Rogers is serious or mocking him. Either way, the appropriate response is definitely a scowl.

“Are you ever gonna open this thing?” Rogers says while Barnes is trying to decide whether the milk is okay for another day.

Might set the thing on fire.

DENY

Sigh.

Confirm. If it’s from Potts, she would be upset.

The box is. Full of clothing.

“What is this?” Rogers says.

Unknown.

Barnes pulls the top layer of items out: four button-down shirts folded neatly around tissue paper, one black, one grey, one dark red, and one a bright cobalt blue. Just under them is a selection of long-sleeved shirts similar to the ones he already owns, mostly black and grey, but also one in dark green.
“Are these for you?” Rogers says.

Unknown. But they are all in his size.

Someone knocks at the door. Rogers goes to answer it while Barnes stands staring at the box, trying to decide whether to keep digging through it.

“Hey, your fan club is here,” Rogers calls out.

“Excuse me, you have the relationship backwards,” Hill says.

Rogers laughs.

“What is this,” Barnes says when the women have come in.

Romanoff installs herself in their one armchair as if she were a permanent resident.

“Well, I was going to make you go to Macy’s and find out once and for all whether the mirrors make everyone look four feet tall and nine feet wide even in the men’s fitting rooms, but someone thought that would cause you undue stress and discomfort. Boring,” she says.

“Thanks, Pepper,” Barnes says.

Potts grins until her nose crinkles.

“You’re most welcome, Barnes,” she says.

“Okay. But why are you giving Bucky a giant box of clothes?” Rogers asks.

“Rogers,” Romanoff barks, “the guy only owns four shirts.”

“Seriously?”

Rogers is staring at him with a mildly distressed expression.

“How do you not know that?” Hill says.

“I just figured. Maybe he had multiples of the same thing. Like he does owning all those pairs of black jeans.”

“Two,” Barnes says.

“You only own two pairs of pants?”

Why are all these people so hung up on his number of possessions.

“Uh, clearly not anymore,” Hill says, gesturing at the box.

Right.

The women are excited to pull items out of the box and hold them up against Barnes’s chest. They have chosen an entire wardrobe for him. All of the fabrics are soft.

“There are two kinds of people getting over stuff,” Hill says. “The ones who want snuggly clothes and the ones who want armor.”

Barnes squints at her. Her work suits are always severely tailored, and even at present she’s wearing
trousers that are narrow in a very precise way and a sweater that covers her neck. He has never seen her with her shoes off.

Nod.

“See, you get it,” she says. “You’re like Nat and Bruce. So everything in here is stretchy.”

“Tony’s like that too,” Potts says. “Most of the stuff he wears around the tower is technically pajamas.”

“It’s a damn sight different from the old days,” Rogers says. “Clothes fit better, mostly, because so many people knew how to sew. But a lot of it was itchy, or stiff, and Jesus. Women had to wear about nine different layers.”

“How would you know, Steve,” Romanoff says.

Rogers turns several distinct shades of red, finally settling deep crimson.

“I’m not a damn babe in the woods,” he mumbles.

The women shriek with laughter, which does nothing helpful to Roger’s complexion.

When they’re done, Romanoff reaches over and pats Rogers on the shoulder.

“Well done,” she says. ‘I figured you were going to make some dumb excuse about sharing a dressing room while you were on tour. That would’ve gone a lot worse for you.”

“I can imagine,” Rogers says in a dry tone.

“Okay, I have to see Barnes in this blue shirt,” Potts says.

He takes the shirt and one of the new pairs of jeans (dark grey) to his room.

“Aw man,” Hill says behind him.

That would be creepy, except Barnes knows that she’s part of the No-Touch Club.

“You are such a perv, Maria,” Romanoff says.

The clothing fits well. Potts has correctly deduced his size.

“Okay,” Potts says when he emerges, “I knew that color would look amazing on you, but come here.”

She unbuttons the top two buttons of the shirt, then unbuttons the cuffs and rolls them up.

“There you go. A little more relaxed,” she says.

He looks at Rogers, who is grinning like he’s the one who got a giant box full of gifts. He looks at Romanoff, who will provide a realistic opinion.


Nice.

They don’t make him try on everything – which is good, or they would’ve been there until the small hours of the morning. But he tries on a few more shirts, and a dark indigo pair of jeans. He tries on
both pairs of shoes: lace-up dress shoes in black leather, and low, narrow tennis shoes.

“Aw, wow,” Rogers says. “They look like the basketball shoes from when we were kids. Except back then they didn’t come in bright green.”

“You can exchange them, if you don’t like the color,” Potts says. “I just thought the green was fun. They come in all kinds of colors.”

“No, I like them,” Barnes says.

‘Fun’ was not a distinguishing trait of the Winter Soldier. Maybe it could be one of Barnes.

At the bottom of the box, packed in next to the shoe boxes, are packages of socks, undershirts, and underwear.

Rogers pulls out one of the packages of underwear and frowns at the photo on the front.

“You’re the one who complained about seeing his balls, Rogers,” Romanoff says.

“Natasha!” Potts says, turning pink.

“So he’s getting boxer briefs, because they are the superior choice for modern people.”

Rogers rises from the sofa and goes to the back, taking the package with him.

What.

Hill snickers.

They stare at one another like dopes for 1.5 minutes, when Rogers stick his head out into the hallway and says,

“Sorry, Buck, I’m keeping these.”

“Fashion show!” Hill yells.

“Yeah, not a chance, Maria,” Rogers says, coming back out into the living room.

Thankfully, wearing pants.

“You’re terrible,” Hill says.

“I know, I really ought to be ashamed of myself,’ Rogers says.

Which is all very hilarious Steve, but you stole my stuff, so you’d better not bank on getting your sushi pajamas back any time soon.

They order dinner, and Romanoff helps him put his new clothing away.

“I hope this is okay,” she says once they’re in his bedroom. “I mean. I was going to make sure you had more clothes anyway, but if you’re mad, I’m sorry.”

“They’re great,” he says. “Why do I need them.”

She pauses, bent over his dresser drawer. She folds shirts almost as neatly as he would himself.

“They don’t give you anything, when you’re a possession,” she says.
Oh.

That’s true.

“Anything they give you is for a purpose, or for a mission. It makes you feel like a person, to have things just to have them.”

That is meaningful. That is another facet of this gift they have given him.

Then Romanoff grins.

“Don’t get sappy on me, Barnes. On top of that, we had a terrific time picking everything out for you. Best girl date we’ve had in forever.”

She leans in.

“JARVIS insisted that we had to use your bank account to pay for it. I told him that was bullshit, but he said otherwise you’d feel weird about it.”

Barnes identifies: surprise.

It does make the gift of clothing less awkward, to know that he paid for it.

“Oh god, JARVIS was right? You’re such a weirdo,” Romanoff says.

Barnes scowls at her.

She always has to ruin the moment.

“Hey,” he says a moment later, “don’t put the green one away. I’m going to wear it.”

Her smirk carries with it a sense of deep self-satisfaction.

“I picked that one out,” she says.

Brat.

The food arrives just as they’re putting the last items away. In the living room, Rogers is telling Potts and Hill about their trip visit with Sam, leaving out all the weeping.

“You need to get that guy up here more often,” Hill says.

“Yeah, I agree. Bucky freaked him out at one point and predicted that he’ll be living here and avenging some time soon.”

“The more the merrier,” Potts says. “At least Sam doesn’t seem like the type to do expensive structural damage.”

Rogers goes still.

“Uh, is that directed at me?”

Potts laughs.

“No, Steve. Bruce had a bad weekend. It’s fine. He’s fine. One of the labs on the ninth floor is very much not fine.”
Aw. We missed our chance to meet green-thing Hulk.

SAD

Confirm.

Potts has ordered up quiches and salads in a quantity sufficient to feed them all even counting two outrageous metabolisms. Barnes, having made forays into experimenting with wine and cheese pairings, provides the wine. Served in tumblers.

Mission note: purchase proper glassware.

Another thing to have just for having. Because he is a person.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“Hey Pepper, maybe you can help me with something,” Rogers says during dinner. “Bucky, don’t get upset.”

What.

“You know how Tony and I had been talking about getting back to work, making sure HYDRA can’t regroup.”

This bullshit again.

Barnes puts his plate down.

“Bucky. Bear with me. Anyhow, as you can see, Bucky is not a fan of that idea. Sam said maybe I should try something that’s not fighting, to see how we do apart for a few days. I was thinking maybe some kind of volunteer thing. Like I did back in the day.”

Okay. That’s worth examining. Barnes retrieves his plate.

“Yes, Steve, that would be easy to set up. Pretty much anybody would be thrilled to have you come speak to them about any topic. What are you thinking? You want to visit schools or something? Or raise money? What’s an issue that you care about?”

Rogers glances at Barnes briefly.

“I think Bucky and I both are interested in doing something for Sam’s VA center. But kids. That’s a good idea. You wouldn’t worry if I were hanging around with kids, right, Buck?”

Barnes shakes his head.

“I had terrible asthma when I was young,” he says, staring into the middle distance and speaking slowly. “Is that still a problem?”

“Yes,” Hill says firmly.

“Oh gosh, there’s a whole network of children’s hospitals across the country, Steve,” Potts says. “My PR team would be beside themselves to set that up for you. You could meet some patients, maybe give a speech, have a fundraising lunch. Pick the number of days you want to be away and we can set it up with the hospitals. You’d be tremendous.”
“That’d be great, Pepper. That sounds perfect. Bucky? Do you agree?”

YES

Confirm, mission.

It’s as low-pressure an experiment as he could wish for.

“Sounds great,” he says.

The women leave after dinner – the conversation briefly goes awkward, inspiring Romanoff to laugh and declare her intent to “get the hell out of your hair.”

“Thank you,” Barnes says, looking at each of them in turn. “The clothes are great. I really appreciate it.”

Romanoff rolls her eyes. Hill grins, and Potts squirms a little.

“It was our absolute pleasure, Barnes,” Potts says, and leans over to kiss his cheek.

In this instance, acceptable.

Better not tell Stark, though.

Barnes walks them to the door. Hill hangs back slightly, with a frown on her face. Just as the elevator arrives, she digs in her pocket and pulls out a folded wad of paper.

“Here,” she says. “You might want to read these.”

She darts out and into the elevator as the doors close.

Barnes unfolds the paper, which is a pile of four articles clipped from newspapers: two in German, one in French, and one in English, each of them bearing a headline reading roughly ‘BANKER CHARGED WITH SEX CRIMES: Billionaire Dieter Graumann Indicted on Multiple Counts of Pedophilia, Rape.’

Instead of reading the articles, Barnes sits down on the floor.

Rogers is beside him in under 5 seconds.

“Bucky? What’s wrong?”

He hands over the clippings.

“My god,” Rogers says, reading. “This is the guy, right? From the data packet?”

Nod.

“Jeez, Bucky. This says the case is pretty much air-tight. This guy’ll go away for the rest of his days. Where’d you get this?”

“Hill.”

Rogers blinks several times and takes a deep breath.

“Bucky. You know she did this.”
Confirm. She said she would, that day.

Nod.

Rogers reaches out and grabs Barnes’s wrist, just as Barnes has done. It’s good. It’s a solid point of focus.

“This is a big deal, Buck.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not just me that you can count on. They're your true friends.”

Barnes doesn’t know why. He has tried to assist them when he can, and to make clear that he enjoys their company. That doesn’t seem like enough to warrant their caring about his wardrobe, or that he should have things because he’s a person. Or to use resources to tease out the secrets of a person who once treated him horribly and make that person pay.

Rogers is right. It is a big deal. It’s part of the calculation he has been pondering since he sat on the steps at flying Sam’s center and reviewed mission progress.

True friends. Mission assists.

Who is he, that he should acquire these things?

It bears thinking.

“Yes,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be out of town next weekend. I'll try to get the next chapter posted on Sunday per the usual protocol, but there might be a delay.
They have a run of busy days. Barnes combs through all 2000 recipes in *The Cookie Bible* and *The Baking Bible*, none of which seem adequate to thank Hill for her actions. Rogers meets several times with people in Potts’s office to set up his tour of children’s hospitals. He returns from each meeting with extensive conversation about plans and itineraries and a level of enthusiasm that causes discomfort.

Which apparently shows.

“It’s okay, right Buck? We should test this, don’t you think?”

Sure.

Barnes tunes up his arm during one of these meetings, so Rogers doesn’t have to see its inner workings.

He finds himself twice stymied by the abundance of choice in his closet and resorts to pajamas instead.

He and Rogers take to eating breakfast on the small balcony outside the living room. The mornings are still cool, but it’s a half-hearted chill that dissipates by mid-morning.

He tries an experiment and wears one of the short-sleeved t-shirts from the box down to the coffee bar at 0430.

The only other customer is one of the security guards, who passes him with a yawn so huge the man probably doesn’t even notice him.

Katie, however, makes her eyes wide.

Katie is reliable. She will inform him if it’s too much.

“Look at you!” she says with a broad grin. “That pink looks amazing on you! Brings out some color in your face, so you don’t look like a cave creature, like me.”

Why would she say that.

Katie is older than Potts, who in turn is older than Hill and Romanoff. Katie has small wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, which suggest that she smiled a lot before boyfriend Rodney was killed by falling architecture. There are grey hairs among the pale brown. Her face is round, like the rest of her, and when she sits writing at the counter, her face wears a dreamy expression that contains the
beginning of a smile. Even the times when she has frowned at him, the expression has held concern and warmth.

“Katie,” he says, “I like your face.”

She stares at him.

“Thanks?”

“Why is that a question.”

She grins again.

“It’s not. I’m just bad at hearing compliments. So thank you.”

She makes his mocha, and stares at the cup when she hands it over to him.

“Barnes. Would it be okay for me to look at your arm?”

His initial instinct says no. The arm represents harm done to and by him.

Except.

Except that it’s his arm, to use as he chooses now. To perform actions that make Rogers and flying Sam laugh. To haul sacks of coffee for Katie, and fix the copy machine at the VA center.

It’s like project goal #2: he can perform positive actions to show that he values mission-assists. Maybe he can perform positive actions to overlay all the harm done by the arm.

“Okay,” he says.

He holds his left hand out, and she holds it gently in both of hers, running her fingers over the edges of the plates.

“Can you feel things with it?”

“Some. Pressure, mostly.”

“This?” Katie asks, scratching very lightly.

“No.”

It’s weird to see her fingertips touching his palm but causing no sensation input. Even though he knows it falls under normal parameters. She presses harder until he says, “there,” and she nods.

He shows her how he can expand the plates to make his arm and hand bigger, stopping when a thread pops in the sleeve hem of his brand-new t-shirt.

Wouldn’t that’ve have been great.

“That is so weird-looking,” she says.

Confirm. The inner workings show when he does that.

“Useful sometimes, though.”

Escaping from bonds. Shredding the boxing glove at New Year’s. Grasping objects too broad to
cling to with a regular-sized hand. Obtaining information from recalcitrant subjects.

Katie squints.

“Do I want to hear any examples of that?”

DENY

Okay, mission.

“No.”

He pops open the anterior forearm access panel, and she bends over so far that her nose is practically inside.

“Wow!” she says, then jumps when he wiggles his fingers and the interior components move.

“What powers it?” she asks.

“There are small power cells with the motors, charged by kinetic energy.”

She thinks briefly.

“Wait. But didn’t they – keep you asleep for a long time? Did your arm even work at the beginning, if it hadn’t moved in a long time?”

The briefing gives him the answer, but he’s not sure she wants to hear it. It’s one of the memories he prefers not to dwell on in any detail.

“You don’t have to tell me. I’m sorry,” Katie says.

“High-voltage electrical stimulation,” he says.

He leaves out the part that the stimulation went through his face.

“Oh!” Katie says, and presses his hand, looking distressed.

“It’s okay,” he says.


Shrug.

“It’s over now.”

She nods.

“What is it attached to you? Can you take it off, like a prosthesis?”

Is this rude.

Even if not rude, it’s very personal.
“It’s attached,” he says.

Katie winces.

“That sounds terrible,” she says.

It is kind of her to ask, though the answer gives her discomfort.

It is kind of her to speak as if the person is more important than the arm.

CONFIRM

Oh.

Confirm.

“You okay, Barnes?”

More of the equation he is building. Additional variable: all those who acknowledge that he is a person with a high-tech weapon grafted to himself, not a high-tech weapon in toto.

“Yes,” he says.

She squeezes his hand again, then lets go.

“Thanks for letting me ask about it. I know I was really nosy.”

He shakes his head.

“It’s okay,” he says.

Rogers has his own preferred coffee drink now – a latte with cinnamon. Barnes takes one back upstairs with him. Rogers even wakes up before it gets too cold. Good job, Rogers.

He can see Rogers take in the short-sleeved shirt, and the gears in that oversized head start to turn. So Barnes is braced for it when, halfway through the latte, Rogers says,

“How’d that go, short sleeves in public?”

Barnes feels his face go hot. Hypothesis: he has turned the same color as his shirt.

CONFIRM

How would you know, mission.

“Katie asked eight questions about my arm.”

Rogers grins.

“Pretty smart, starting out with her. She’d never say anything mean to you.”

“She is a mission-assist.”

Rogers raises his cup in a salute.
“That she is.”

Still, when they head out of the tower later, Barnes changes into a long-sleeved shirt. The day’s just a bit too warm for a jacket, but he wears one anyway. He has reached the day’s exposure limit.

Rogers notices this, too, but he doesn’t mention it until they’ve returned with their purchases from the Greenmarket. Rogers spent a notable amount of time staring at a display of early hothouse flowers – long enough that Barnes had poked him.

“Sorry, Buck. It’s that color combination. Makes me itch a little to paint again.”

Interesting.

Less interesting and more awkward, when they’re unpacking cheese, sausages, excellent breads, and acorn squash, and Rogers says,

“I can see why you want to keep your arm under wraps. There’s no telling who might – take an interest. And we’ve been really lucky so far. But what are you going to do when the weather gets hot?”

Shrug.

“Don’t know.”

“We’ll figure something out, Buck.”

Or stay in the tower. It’s pretty nice.

Though not as nice as walking around Manhattan.

Dammit.

Additionally, though Barnes hoped that his travel phobia would’ve abated by the extensive practice going back and forth to DC, he finds the opposite to be true. He’s back to needing 20 m between himself and every subway entrance, and he can’t even get off the elevator downstairs in the garage.

It sucks.

“It’s okay, Bucky,” Rogers says.

Which it definitely is not.

Barnes spends approximately 30 hours winding himself into upset about this regression. Before he has a chance to reach a state requiring countermeasures, the television makes the sound indicating a call.

From Lidia. Excellent. He texts Rogers and accepts the call.

The sound that comes over the screen is at first difficult to discern. Identified: elevated pulse. What is wrong. The screen shows Lidia's bookcases, though the picture wavers.

Are they having an emergency.
"Oh, Lidia, give me that thing, you can't even speak," Esther's voice says.

The screen jerks sharply, and he sees Esther's face. Behind her, Lidia is bent over with her hands on her thighs. Judging from her facial expression, the sound coming out of her is laughter.

"Jimmy!" Esther says, "good gracious, are you wearing an actual color? That green is very handsome on you."

Supposition: if there is time to compliment him on his clothing, there is no emergency.

"Thanks."

"<That dried-up little goat scrotum!>" Lidia shouts in Polish.

What.

Esther rolls her eyes.

"Lidia, as you can see, is having a slight bout of hysterics."

"Are you okay."

"Oh yes."

"<Brain the size of a gherkin!>" Lidia yells, "<and twice as pickled!>"

Ollie’s face appears on the screen.

“Well, you look a lot better. How was DC?"

Ollie speaks with calm, as if Lidia were not still shouting in the background in Polish about ‘skin-flint greedy sons of syphilitic whores’ and miniature genitalia.

“Traveling is difficult,” he says, “but it was good to see Sam Wilson.”

“He’s good people,” Ollie says. “Next time, make him come up this way. Steve around today?”

Lidia has progressed to wishing that someone be reduced to penury and living under the docks at the Navy Yard.

“Ollie, I think Jimmy would rather hear our news,” Esther says.

CONFIRM

No kidding.

Ollie rolls his eyes.

“As you may have guessed –“

The apartment door opens, and Rogers jogs in.

“Hey, are they still on the line?” he says. “Hi, Ollie, hi Esther. Um. What’s wrong with Lidia?”

“Nothing!” Lidia shouts, switching to English.

Ollie rolls his eyes again. Esther leans in.
“Our old building is for sale!”

What.

The dumpy building.

“Oh yeah?” Rogers says.

“Jimmy, that awful landlord.”

Awful indeed. He made Esther cry.

“Yes,” he says.

“Oh, ho!” Ollie says. “Rat bastard O’Riley’s still not your favorite person, I see.”

“<Porridge-faced sheep fucker,>” Lidia says, back to Polish.

“What happened?” Rogers asks.

The Olds unanimously cackle.

“Steve, you never saw O’Riley’s wife. What a battle axe! Our Jim helped bring to light some of her husband’s less savory activities, and she’s divorcing the bastard. Building’s on the market so they can divvy up the proceeds.”

“Jesus, Bucky, what did you do?”

Shrug.

“Wrapped up a thug and left him on O’Riley’s doorstep.”

“That guy he sent after you?”

Nod.

Rogers makes his ‘I’m so proud of your service to humanity’ face.

Identified: strong positive response.

“What goes around, comes around,” Ollie says. “I hope that lady takes him for every nickel he’s got.”

Lidia shouts with laughter again.

Identified: conflict. On one hand, it is always positive to see the Olds happy, and it would be appropriate for Maddalena Jimenez O’Riley and her children to remove themselves from Michael Bernard O’Riley, Sr.’s influence. On the other hand, the dumpy building is a safe space.

What will happen, if it is sold.

“What’s wrong, Jimmy?” Esther asks.

“Living there was good,” he says.

The Olds wear expressions of surprise.
“It was better after you arrived,” she says in a hesitant tone.

“Well, it was still a rat trap, but at least the conversation was better,” Ollie says.

Rogers leans over and knocks against Barnes’s shoulder.

“Yes,” he says.

Rogers does him the favor of taking over the conversation. He relates a little of Barnes’s difficulties with travel. It seems more stupid than ever, with the Olds staring at him over the television.

He misses cat Eleanor.

So dumb.

CONFIRM

“Well, we miss having you close by, but it’s all right,” Esther says. “We understand.”

“More than you know,” Lidia says. “We’d rather wait and see you when you’re ready than have you here but suffering.”

“I guess that’s mostly true,” Ollie says, and Esther swats him on the arm.

Their understanding is meaningful. It makes his difficulty worse, in that he feels undeserving of it, but it also makes things better, that they are not injured by his distance.

“Thinking hard, Bucky?” Rogers asks during their largely silent dinner.

“Confirm.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

“Not yet.”

The next day brings two developments: Barnes determines a suitable recipe to make for Hill, and Thor arrives for a visit.

The recipe is extremely fiddly and involves more steps than anything he has yet attempted. The special flour is made of nuts. He has to turn egg whites into a texture that resembles foam. He has to make a filling and assemble them like tiny sandwiches.

It takes all fucking day.

“All that for a cookie?” Rogers says.

Barnes lets him try one of the broken ones.

“Never mind, I take it back,” Rogers says.

They look so nice that Barnes slips down to the coffee bar and uses hints supplied by the briefing about techniques the Bucky-person used to cadge favors to cajole a good-looking box out of the staff in which to pack the cookies. He takes them to Hill’s office on the security floor.

“Barnes, what the hell,” Hill says upon being presented with the box.
He tied it with a blue ribbon. That was the only ribbon they had at the coffee bar.

“To say thanks,” he says.

Hill glares at him.

Then she eats one, and says,

“My god. Okay. Don’t mind me. I’m just going to take a moment. I can’t believe you made homemade macarons, Barnes, who does that? And who told you about my deep love of hazelnut? That’s supposed to be top secret. Now I have to save your life on the moon or something. Jiminy Christmas, is there anyone else you’d like me to have sent to prison? Feel free to let me know any time. Now get out, I have eating to do.”

Definitely worth the effort.

Thor is in their living room when he returns.

“Barnes,” Thor says, doing the weird bow thing again, “I have just been telling Steven that my Jane attends a scientific conference this week, so I have come to lay my eyes on my other friends.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t head home to visit,” Rogers says.

Because Thor is looking at him, Barnes sees how the smile drops off of Thor’s face, leaving him looking older and tired.

“Asgard holds – difficult memories for me, at the moment,” he says.

“Thor, I’m so sorry,” Rogers says.

Thor makes an unsuccessful attempt at a more cheerful expression.

“It is not anything I wish to speak of, but I thank you for your concern.”

Stark has quite the collection of hurt people.

Unpleasant to contemplate what could possibly injure a guy that huge.

Identified: dread at Thor’s suggestion to Rogers of a workout. Rogers agrees. Of course.

“If you’d rather stay up here, Buck, I don’t – or not. Okay. Suit yourself.”

Either Barnes’s facial expressions are gaining clarity, or Rogers is getting used to reading the cues.

The dread turns out to be unnecessary. Watching Rogers and Thor play Magic and Vibranium Baseball does not result in negative responses other than envy. He can recall just how much effort was required to injure Rogers – and Thor is not only larger but also apparently almost as old as human civilization, thus it is reasonable to conclude that he’s tough enough to withstand substantial amounts of hitting.

Not all of him reacts negatively to the idea of doing a little constructive violence. That little bit of the Asset still rattling around inside is curious and slightly bored.
Barnes watches from his preferred spot at the top of the climbing wall. Someone must have been tattling to Stark about his use of it. The wall has been modified. There’s a bitchy section in the middle that tilts outward at a 20-degree angle, and some of the handholds have been replaced by a material that’s too slick to be grasped with his metal hand.

Nice. By the time he reaches the top of the wall, he has worked up a good burn. And thanks to the contributions of Hair Club, he’s not even melting from it. Smaller workout clothes are a palpable improvement, if nothing he would wish to wear in front of strangers.

The observation is interesting. Thor has his tricky moments, but mostly he relies too much on being the strongest guy in the room. He’ll take punches from Rogers rather than trying to get out of the way. Rogers has a little of that habit too, and it gets him in trouble twice, because he’s not actually the strongest in Thor’s presence.

He and Rogers together could probably overpower the guy, though. Especially if Thor could be separated from the hammer.

It scratches an itch deep inside Barnes's brain to observe them and note the openings, see the weaknesses that could be used to advantage. If he’s ever able to spar with Rogers, this will come in handy.

If he had a way to communicate that didn’t involve shouting, he could tell Rogers to try a leg sweep followed by a hip check. If Rogers timed it right, he could probably catch Thor in the wrist with the edge of the shield and cause enough of a sting that Thor would drop the hammer.

Wouldn’t that be hilarious.

He can feel Rogers gazing at him in the elevator back up to their apartment. Polite of the guy not to ask in front of a relative stranger.

“You okay?” he asks the minute Thor exits at the guest floor.

Nod.

“Looks like you’re thinking again, Buck.”

“Confirm.”

“Gonna tell me what about?”

“You rely too much on being strongest.”

Rogers grins.

“Yeah? Except I’m not when Thor’s in the room.”

“He does the same thing.”

“Yeah, Bucky. I guess he does.”

“You could take better advantage of that.”

Rogers makes a smile Barnes hasn’t seen before: narrowed eyes and lots of teeth.

The briefing gives him some data: ‘Hey, Bucky. How do you feel about parachuting into the middle of a Panzer division and blowing the hell out them?’
“I take it you have an idea,” Rogers says.

An idea, and guidance how to phrase it.

“How do you feel about close surveillance.”

Rogers laughs.

“I didn’t realize I was allowed to have feelings about it, Bucky. I figured it’s my permanent life condition.”

Nice to know the guy is a realist.

“Confirm.”

Rogers shows him the Captain America helmet before dinner, and the audio capabilities inside it. Pretty decent tech.

Bunch of wobbly memories associated with the thing as well: the Asset attempting to think how stupid the thing looked, but also drawn to it. The upwellng of confusion when the helmet was discarded and the target showed his giant dumb face.

It’s a slightly different helmet from the earlier one.

“This isn’t the same.”

Rogers gives him that expression of deeply-moved-yet-happy that so often accompanies anything provided by the briefing.

Flying Sam might suggest that Barnes should examine his sense of discomfort at Steve’s affection for the briefing.

Flying Sam is not in attendance, so too damn bad.

“It’s not. Stark made that one. That’s why the comm’s embedded. Pretty big improvement. Trying to use a standard earwig with my vintage helmet in DC was kind of a nightmare. The thing kept working its way out of my ear.”

“No wonder you dumped the helmet.”

Rogers makes a laugh that’s a little wet in the eye region.

“Yeah, I definitely had no other ulterior motives.”

This is a moment. Identified: this is a good moment. A shared memory. He reaches for Steve’s wrist, and Steve holds his arm out in reaction.

A good moment.

Hill helps with the comms, the next day. Stark has good ones, wireless and a little sticky, so they’re secure inside ear canals.
They do not inform Thor ahead of time about this change in parameters.

Barnes pretends to follow his usual pattern, climbing the wall, letting Rogers establish his own usual pattern of trying to punch his way through a mythological figure holding a magical lightning generator. But up at the top of the wall, Barnes watches. Mindful that Thor’s hearing is likely as good as theirs, he mutters softly into the microphone that he tucked between two plates at his wrist.

“Watch for when he drops his left shoulder.”

“That exhale through his nose is a tell for an overhead strike.”

“Knee to the balls – now” is not a successful direction. Rogers loses focus completely, laughs, and ends up on his back on the mat.

But the move Barnes envisioned the day before does work, and Thor drops the hammer, which thuds to the mat accompanied by a long curse.

Thor shakes his hand out.

“You’ve gotten trickier since yesterday,” Thor says. “Am I correct in my assumption that you have assistance?”

Rogers gives the game away by grinning up at Barnes, but Thor merely grins in return and bows in the general direction of the climbing wall.

“A worthy fight,” he says.

Agreed. Pretty fun, even if he does have to lie on the floor in their living room for 22 minutes afterward and let the adrenalin bleed out of him.

Stark has – of course – declared a group dinner owing to Thor’s presence. Even Colonel Rhodes shows up. Thor speaks of the afternoon workout as if it were an adventure story. He makes Rogers and Barnes sound amazing: clever and tough. Excellent. Everyone laughs a lot.

“I’m in for tomorrow,” Barton says. “Sounds like Thor could use some backup.”

He lifts his glass as if toasting Barnes.

Barnes feels his face make a grin to match the one on Rogers’s face.

It’s not just Barton who arrives in the gym at 1100: it’s pretty much everyone on the avenging side of things. Romanoff has even brought a paper bag filled with popcorn.

It smells delicious.

She doesn’t share.

Barnes shows Stark what he thinks of the alterations to the climbing wall. It takes 196 seconds. From the top, he can see Stark frowning. Assumption: the climbing wall will shortly undergo yet another transformation.

Barton is good. Barnes has no idea where Barton even is, until the first arrow comes out of shadows at Rogers’s eight o’clock. Barnes mutters the warning; Rogers drops and rolls backwards. The arrow misses, its suction cup sticking to the floor with a smacking sound, but that gives Thor a brief chance
to regroup.

Divided attention is a challenge that digs into skills that live inside Barnes’s bones but that are creaky from disuse. The first few arrows cause Rogers to retreat, even with Barnes’s warnings, until Rogers works his way around into an open area near the front of the obstacle course, where his legs are protected by a low wall. Thor gets a little fancy with hammer and fist, using up time and giving Barnes the opportunity to watch the northeast corner, until his eyes adjust and he can see the bare hint of movement that is Barton nocking an arrow.

“Barton’s at your eleven,” he whispers into his comm, and Rogers angles, putting Thor between himself and any airborne projectiles.

Barton’s good. He holds fire until Rogers gets in a lucky shot (ha ha ‘lucky,’ in that Thor telegraphs a two-handed hammer swing so obviously that Rogers moves before Barnes even has a chance to speak) to Thor’s abdomen with the shield, then sends an arrow straight at Steve when Thor buckles.

Objective time: 0.4 seconds. Subjective time is long enough for Barnes to feel every muscle in his body clench, ready to leap off the climbing wall, mouth forming ‘no’ while the mission shrieks PROTECT.

The thing sticks briefly to Steve’s forehead, then falls to the floor.

“I believe that means you are dead, Steven,” Thor says.

Son of a bitch.

CONFIRM

Despite the ignominy of losing the practice battle, Rogers remains in high spirits for the rest of the day. He even goes so far as to drop a cold, wet towel onto Barnes, enabling cool-down and cleanup without having to leave the floor. The whole crowd convenes in the common area by mid-afternoon, where Barton crows his victory. So obnoxious. No wonder he hangs around with Romanoff.

It’s interesting to observe the conversation that develops. Rhodes, Hill, Barton, and Romanoff do a lot of ‘did you see’ and ‘remember when,’ deconstructing moments of inattention. Smart, given that they’re the normally-powered people in the room. Stark speaks in incomplete sentences, many of which contain phrases like ‘training program’ and ‘semi-controlled chaos’ – he’s clearly working up an idea. Thor and Rogers are enthusiastic about training together to develop synergy between their relative strengths.

Banner shrugs a lot.

“Train for what?” he says at one point. “I have one schtick: smash.”

“Heck’s schtick is smash,” Stark says. “Banner’s schtick is schmarts. I’m thinking biometric suits.”

Banner’s face relaxes into something resembling happy. Nice.

“It’ll be good to have a second set of sniper’s eyes out in the field,” Barton says. “Not a lot of folks would’ve seen me up in the corner, Barnes.”

“Man, what we could’ve done to HYDRA back in the forties if Bucky had had comms and not just a rifle when he was up in all those trees,” Rogers says.
Barnes gets a sense-memory from the briefing, of that rifle, and tree bark against his cheek.

But no matter how good a sniper he may have been, the Bucky-person didn’t have the enhanced vision he has now. If the files and the briefing are correct, the Bucky-person could see pretty well in the dark after his preliminary serum dose. But he wouldn’t have seen Barton up among the pipes in the gym.

Interesting.

He calculates, down at the end of the table during dinner. Rogers and Thor are on either side of him, presumably so the distance will create the illusion that Stark –at the other end of the table – is bigger than teacup size.

It's a complex equation:

- The PROTECT detail, which gives him mental organization and the will to remain himself.
- Rogers, who has his own need to protect. Rogers who doesn't always remember that Barnes is not the Bucky-person.
- What does that mean: not the Bucky-person, but not the Asset either. Does Steve think that's okay.
- His promise to Peggy Carter.
- The 3-part project, assisting others. The way that people say 'thank you' and 'you're the best person I've met this week.'
- The use of Stark's private jet. The box of clothing. The set of newspaper clippings.
- Katie examining the arm without fear.
- The arm that broke Steve's face, but also threw Steve into the hallway when they did not know the provenance of the large box. The arm that pulled Steve from the Potomac, on the first day.
- The terrible skills given to him, to kill and injure. Skills that protected the Olds from O'Riley and his thug, that took down an entire HYDRA warehouse with only one death.
- The gaps in his brain.

It doesn’t add up to anything immediately – just makes an itch on the inside of his head that keeps him awake far into the night. Long enough that he gets restless and wanders. It's not patrolling. Barnes doesn’t need to verify safety, just to move, to let his thoughts take on the rhythm of walking. He doesn’t want company, and so heads for the common area instead of the coffee bar. There’s usually a jar of peanut butter in the common-area kitchen.

He finds company anyhow: Thor, brooding in the dark. One fancy space prince wanting to chat.

It makes an interesting conversation – Thor and multiple bottles of alcohol.

And then: an offer that makes all the calculating Barnes has done since DC become clear. This trajectory he is on, the three parts of him together, is a thing made up of broken parts that is not itself intrinsically broken. He doesn't need to forget, to move forward. He doesn't need to erase his long past. It is sufficient just to be who he is.

He can sit on the balcony with Thor and watch the sun rise, eating cookies and answering Thor's questions about memory and mission. And by the time Steve finds them, rumpled looking in the flying-pig pajamas, the itch in Barnes's brain has eased. Something long untethered inside him has found an anchor. Maybe some other day he will define it, name the thing that ties all the parts of himself together with a new solidity. For the moment, just to feel it is enough.
Barnes practices compartmentalizing during the run-up to Rogers's departure on his fundraising tour. He runs the obstacle course several times with Barton shooting those damn suction-cup arrows at him. Assessment: positive activity. Barton is highly skilled and tricky. Barnes is highly skilled, tricky, and enhanced. He is particularly pleased to find a gun in the armory that shoots light, and that Barton does not know about prior to its being used to target him.

"You're a pain in the ass," Barton says at a post-draw lunch at the Carp. "I knew I liked you."

It's good to be valued for one's skills.

Barnes also spends time in the garage, acclimating to vehicles. He does this early in the morning, before any staff will be in attendance. The first day, he only manages 51 seconds with the door open, and his hands are still shaking hard enough by the time he arrives at the coffee bar that Katie threatens him with decaf.

She does not make good on this threat.

By the time Rogers leaves, Barnes is up to 2.5 minutes in an unmoving car with the door shut before his pulse goes haywire. Notable improvement within a short span of time. Barnes attributes this to the new settled feeling in his brain, this acceptance that the three (at least) of him are okay. That it's okay to be fragmented – they're doing all right.

But then he doesn't even get to use his hard-won vehicular sitting skills, because Rogers takes a helicopter to Boston. It leaves straight from the floor above the common area.

"Bucky!" Rogers says on the helipad as the rotors are spinning up.

He's laughing, but there's a crease between his eyebrows.

"Your face! It's only eight days, and I'll be in touch. It'll go by fast."

Deny.

CONFIRM

This is a stupid idea.

(Maybe a necessary experiment, but still a stupid idea.)

The first day does not go by quickly. Experimental grilled cheeses for lunch and laundry take up very little time, proportionally, during a day.
'Her safe,' Rogers texts at 1325.

'Hotl room as big as our aparmnt,' at 1410.

'I'm gonn ahate wearing siuts by the end of this' at 1826.

Rogers needs a phone with a bigger keyboard. How do those spelling errors not make his eye twitch.

'How is Boston,' Barnes texts back at 1827.

'SMALL'

Ha.

He watches the little Rogers-dot on his phone's map travel to the Boston College Club, indicating that Rogers has begun the first item on his itinerary.

Of course Barnes has a copy of the itinerary. He has two: a hard copy, resting on the kitchen table next to a map of the United States, and an electronic copy on his phone. He has already drawn a line on the map from New York to Boston.

He might be rusty, but he's not fucking dead.

Assessment: if it's time for Rogers to eat, it's probably time for Barnes to eat.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

The grilled cheese tastes like dust.

Then, at 2250, a new experience: his phone makes the UFO sound. His first phone call. Appropriate that it should be Rogers on the other end of the line.

Assuming, of course, that it is Rogers and not some flunky calling from a hospital morgue.

"Yes."

"Bucky, hey. You know what I just realized? We've known each other since 1923, and this is the first time we've spoken on the phone."

Huh.

"Pretty weird," Barnes says.

"No kidding."

Rogers yawns. If he were home, they would not need to speak.

Sigh.

“How was dinner.”

“It was fine,” Rogers says in a tone suggesting that ‘fine’ was in no way synonymous with ‘fun.’

“I kept reminding myself that it’s for a good cause. But jesus, Buck. So many pictures. And so little food. And there are always a couple of people with wandering hands. How bad do you think the PR
would be if I broke just one person’s wrist?”

Good to know that the guy has at least some instinct for self-preservation.

“Worth it,” he says, and is rewarded by the sound of Steve laughing long and loudly.

“Bucky, you would hate this.”

“Confirm.”

CONFIRM

“What did you do today?”

Watched the little Rogers-dot move on his phone.

“Not much. Tried that ale and mustard cheddar on a pretzel roll.”

“Oh yeah? Any good?”

“It was fine. Worth trying again I guess.”

There is a silence.

“You okay, Buck?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’ll tell me if it gets bad, right? I can cancel the tour, I’ll come right home. Promise me.”

Sure, that would be great. Disappoint all those kids and rich bougies, just because Barnes can’t deal with only three voices in his own damn head.

“Promise me,” Rogers repeats.

“I’m okay,” Barnes says.

CONFIRM

Thanks, mission.

“All right. If you say so,” Rogers says in a tone indicating deep skepticism.

Barnes braces for further lecture, but Rogers yawns again.

“You sound tired,” Barnes says by way of deflection.

“Yeah. Too many people.”

Barnes can relate to that.

They ring off several minutes later. Roger makes Barnes promise to sleep, which is ridiculous coming from a guy who can’t stop yawning.

Sleeping is marginally successful. But he wakes even earlier than usual, and although Rogers is generally a quiet sleeper, the silence of the apartment is deeper: the silence of being alone.
This drives him out of bed, but not down to the coffee bar. He doesn’t want Katie to cheer him up. He’ll just have to turn around and cheer the hell up the next day, and the day after that. Might as well conserve the energy.

Anyway, he has a perfectly good coffeemaker that he could stand to use more often.

But it makes the day long, to sit silently in the apartment and mope. Even while wearing the moose pajamas – and the case could be made that the moose pajamas are even more ridiculous than the giraffe pajamas. It is well known that moose are not bipedal, and they don’t drink martinis. That’s what makes them funny.

He gets a good-morning text from Rogers at 0633, and another at 1040 stating his departure for the children’s hospital. Barnes watches the dot move on his phone. Then nothing until 1416:

‘Bucky these kids
Theyre so graet
It’s unbelievable
Just incredible
I was so moved it was amazing
Mor later almost to providence will call tonight’

Barnes marks the map.

By 2130, the Rogers-dot has moved to New Haven, and Barnes’s phone rings for the second time in as many days.

“Thank god for room service,” Rogers says when Barnes picks up the phone. “All the food at the cocktail party was so tiny, I thought I was gonna faint. I literally made the driver stop on the way out of town so I could get a sandwich.”

“They bring food to your room.”

“Yeah, it’s great. I can’t even look at the prices, they’re ridiculous. But I’m just about desperate enough not to mind it at the moment.”

Did anyone vet the kitchen staff to ensure none of them are HYDRA. How much protection does Rogers’s serum provide against poisons or drugs.

“For pity’s sake, Bucky, it’s just a pizza and a fucking salad.”

Oops.

“Bucky, you would not believe the kids I met today. Why didn’t I bring the uniform? They would love it. Hell, half of them were dressed up like me, girls included. I took a million pictures. You want me to send them to you? I’m definitely gonna do some paintings from a couple of them. Maybe the families would like it, what do you think? Oh man. How was your day? God, this little guy, Taylor, he’s nine years old, he was in a fire. Lost his whole family, burned pretty much head to toe, but he knew almost as much about me as I do. Buck, it was amazing! He’s had eleven skin grafts so far, but he couldn’t stop smiling. So much heart, Bucky, it was incredible. They’re all so damn incredible, I’m so lucky.”
This is important. It’s not just about him and Rogers practicing how to get along without being yoked together at the neck. This is a thing for Rogers to do to help himself feel useful.

Oh.

After the SHIELD debacle, it is a way for him to remember that Captain America has worth.

It’s Rogers’s own equation to work through, until he finds his conclusion.

“Tell me more,” Barnes says.

Rogers talks his way through the entire pizza and salad. Hypothesis: the families of the children Rogers met would be gratified that he remembers so many details about each of them. Rogers texts a few pictures of himself holding tiny people exhibiting various signs of ill health. But all of them have enormous smiles on their faces.

“I gotta go,” Rogers says finally. “I’m up early tomorrow.”

A breakfast with fancy people and more visits with kids.

“Glad you had a good day,” Barnes says.

“It really, really was,” Rogers says.

It makes for uneasy sleep – the contrast between knowing that his discomfort and dismay are unfair to Rogers but feeling them anyway. It makes for a long, dull morning, with only a few texts between Rogers’s busy morning and subsequent flight to Memphis.

He will never admit to anyone his feeling of relief that Romanoff barges in and bullies him into visiting Brooklyn. In her presence, he would rather gnaw off his metal arm with his own teeth than reveal his discomfort in the car – which then turns out not to be so bad. The practice has been helping. And the rain, which makes a soft, comforting sound against the window glass.

To see the Olds in person – to be hugged by Esther and thoroughly climbed (at last) by cat Eleanor – strips away another layer of trouble-feelings, further anchors the sense that for now, his progress is acceptable. That the choice he made back in the fall to re-form himself, to be good-guy, nonlethal, is working.

Ollie says that they had considered fighting Steve to bring him back to Brooklyn. Barnes places this memory next to the one of sitting in his closet on New Year’s Eve, certain that they would withdraw their friendship because he injured Steve.

Has he been wrong about his value, this whole time.

How does one tell.

Even if he never figures that one out, he can adjust his actions. He’ll never go this long again without visiting the Olds.

For one thing, their presence is strongly desired. For another, someone has to try to keep Lidia from causing trouble.

(Try and probably fail.)
Even Romanoff has enjoyed herself during the visit: she lets it show, which Barnes knows is kindness on her part. She is being polite to the Olds, but she could be polite without meaning it and they would never realize. She is being kind to Barnes by letting him see. Maybe the Olds will adopt her too and bring her comfort.

Not that they’ll like her as much as they like him, of course. He knew them first.

Confirm?

CONFIRM

Okay, good.

“Hey,” Romanoff says as the car approaches the tower, “all this rain is making me cold, I need something to warm me up. And don’t even open your mouth about your Japanese place, I’m completely offended that you keep taking Clint there but not me. I’m talking something that’ll burn my eardrums out. Want to come with?”

Is she actually offended about the Carp.

Likelihood of ever finding out for sure: -97%.

But dinner out will make the time pass more quickly. And spicy food is on the good list.

“Oh, okay,” he says.

They pick up Barton at the tower, and he squeezes into the back seat, making sure to do so in the most awkward way possible, elbowing Romanoff twice and making Barnes squash against the opposite window.

“You’re terrible,” Romanoff says.

“Yeah, I know,” Barton says.

Those two deserve each other.

They go to a place that looks like an actual hole in the wall made by an actual sledgehammer. Barnes is cheered by the sight of it. They sit in a booth of cracked leatherette, and Barton rattles off a long order to the tall, beautiful woman who comes to take their order.

“What is that language,” Barnes asks.

“Amharic.”

Ah. He hasn’t been loaded with many African languages.

Briefing. Did we spend any time in Africa.

He sees a huge rock surrounded by city and knows it for Cape Town. He sees a scene of great terror and blood and knows it for Congo.

That’s enough, briefing.

The images stop.

Nice.
The beautiful woman has come back and put a jug of gold-colored liquid on the table.

“Stop looking woeful and drink this, Barnes,” Barton says.

The stuff is so sweet that it makes his ears ring. The alcohol content is so high that if he drank the entire jug all at once, he might actually feel it for a minute or two.

“Tej,” Romanoff says in a worshipful tone, then, “hey. Barnes and I had a great day today.”

“Here’s to a great day!” Barton says, and they clink glasses.

“Kanpai,” Barnes says.

Why do people keep laughing when he does that.

Romanoff scowls.

“Will you please stop reminding me that I’m not good enough for an invitation to the Carp.”

What.

“Nat, you’re gonna ruin the guy’s appetite.”

Clint Barton: mission assist.

The food is a revelation. All of it is eaten using sour, spongy bread to scoop it up in the hand, and as promised, most of it sets the inside of his head on fire. He is used to cabbage being a thing that rests limply in soup – not a thing that is crunchy and covered in a red sauce that makes his eyes water.

Clearly the spice is a ploy to get people to drink more tej, which he does. Barton and Romanoff get slightly impaired.

‘Where are you’ his phone screen reads at 2145 from Rogers.

‘Ethiopian food with Barton and Romanoff,’ he texts back. ‘They are drunk.’

‘Find out all her secrets and call me when you gt home.’

Right. Like she’d give up any secrets even on the verge of blackout.

“Texting Steeeeve?” Barton says.

Nod.

“Nat, do you ever wish I were as devoted to you as Barnes is to Steeeeve?”

“God no,” she says, recoiling, “gross.”

Aw. Aren’t they cute. It’s like they think he’s a moron.

He pours more liquor into their glasses and eats more fish, wipes his eyes.

They don’t spend the whole evening needling him about Rogers. They talk about the visit to Brooklyn, and adventures on the obstacle course. Barton requests that Barnes make more cookies. He and Romanoff lean into one another and stagger a bit between the restaurant and the car. They’d been slow-moving enough that Barnes was able to pay. He leaves the beautiful woman a large tip. Ethiopian food is added to his considerable inventory of worthy foods.
In the car back to the tower, he plans that the three of them will go to the common area and he will bake Barton’s cookies, but they get off the elevator at Barton’s floor.

“Hey, Barnes,” Romanoff says in a quiet voice, “thanks for today. This was great.”

“Thank you for coming after me,” he says.

She grins.

Well. Maybe it’s just as well to have some quiet time. Anyhow, he owes Rogers a phone call.
You guys. You are the most patient, and the kindest. Thank you for not writing snippy comments at my lack of updates. Thank you especially to the ones who have sent messages asking whether I'm okay. All is well. I've had some medical stuff this summer that I thought would be easy-peasy but instead has been a bit rough, so I'm moving at a slower pace than I'd like. I'm working to get back up to regular posting as soon as I can. I promise promise that I'll see this story through all the way to the end.

---

Tactical flexibility was always one of the Asset’s strengths. It serves Barnes well now. He makes the decision not to recriminate himself for having let his previous troubles lose sight of it.

“You do what you can,” flying Sam has said.

What he can do is adjust. Rogers may be traipsing across the United States attempting to extract cash from the wallets of the star-struck and patriotic in the service of improved child health, but that’s no reason for Barnes to purposely increase his own misery. The visit to the Olds was instructional.

He makes his own itinerary, to go with Steve’s. Scheduled activities prevent sitting around creating increased misery. Like the conversation after his intel dump, when flying Sam made him list positive activities.

- daily workouts (no running)
- regular meals
- regular contact with mission-assists

It still sucks. The days are still too quiet and too long. The dark monitor in his bedroom impedes sleep. But it helps to take actions. To force himself to do things.

Thus, Barton stares at the plate in Barnes’s hands.

“What the hell even are those, man?”

Suboptimal response

“Lemon tuiles, amaretti, and thumbprints with lime-raspberry jam.”

“God damn,” Barton says.

Barnes looks at the plate. He attempted to arrange it in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Also, he happens to know through extensive testing that each of the varieties is delicious.

But if Barton doesn’t want them.

“Nat!” Barton yells behind him. “Nat, come look at this!”
Romanoff apparates behind Barton’s left shoulder.

Show off.

“I guess he likes Ethiopian food,” she says.

“I don’t think I’m fancy enough to eat these,” Barton says.

Clarity: achieved.

“Oh,” Barnes says. “Sorry. I’ll take them back upstairs.”

“Don’t you dare,” Barton says.

He snatches the plate away and slams the door. Barnes hears Romanoff laugh on the other side.

Nice.

Barnes management is not the only task. Rogers management is required as well.

On days 1, 2, and 3, Rogers had been full of spelling errors indicative of enthusiasm. His spelling starts to improve on day 4. His voice on the phone is deeper, his speech slower. These increase on day 5, when Rogers goes so far as to even use correct punctuation.

“Sorry, Buck,” Rogers says on the phone that night, from Cleveland. “I just keep thinking about when we were kids, and all the stuff they’ve solved. Polio, rubella. Everything they can cure with antibiotics. But there are still so many of them. They’re all so little, Bucky, in their dumb-looking hospital gowns and those hideous, freezing cold rooms. And here I am. Like this. And doing what? Glad-handing and taking pictures. It seems pathetic.”

The Soviets should’ve captured Rogers. He’s so gloomy, he would’ve made a much more appropriate Winter Soldier.

DENY

It’s a joke, mission.

NOT FUNNY

Well. Okay. Maybe not.

“And saving the world a few times,” Barnes says.

“So I’m good at crashing planes and hitting stuff. Like a million other people. It doesn’t help all these sick little kids.”

For fuck’s sake.

“That’s what the glad-handing’s for, Rogers. To put money in the pockets of the people who can do something about the sick part.”

“I know. It just seems so small. And slow.”

“Learn to love delayed gratification.”
“Fuck you, Bucky,” Rogers snarls.

Supposition: it is an indicator of improved relations that Rogers will allow himself to express anger directly.

CONFIRM

Nice.

Not that he's going to get away with it.

“Sorry, pal. That would violate the boundary of my safe personal space,” Barnes says.

That does the trick, finally, and makes Rogers laugh.

But this conversation lodges itself in Barnes’s brain. It is still rattling around in the morning.

This is a clear indication to text flying Sam.

‘Sam. Good morning. I hope you are well. Query. All of the sick kids are making Rogers sad. Unsure about appropriate response. Please advise.’

'Oh lord,' the screen reads after 23.5 seconds. 'Are you telling me Steve's mad that he can't punch childhood asthma into surrender?’

Unsurprising that flying Sam understands immediately.

'Confirm.'

'I'll be sure to tell him how stupid that is when he gets here.'

Excellent.

(Less excellent: Rogers visiting flying Sam without him.)

'How are you holding up, Barnes? Not hiding in yr room?’

Has Romanoff been reporting on him.

'Deny. Visited Olds w/ Romanoff. Successful car trip. Doing stuff on good list. All is well.'

'Dude I'm really proud of you.'

WHAT

Identified: pleasure.

'Thank you flying Sam.'

'Keep up the good work, man.'

'Confirm.'

Barnes reads Rogers's itinerary (morning in Cleveland, afternoon in Indianapolis, gala dinner in Chicago) and reviews the previous day's reports from Rogers's security detail. Prediction: continued
trajectory of gloom. The next day's travel ends with him in DC. Flying Sam will assist.

The day after that, Steve will be home.

This is an event that requires planning. For one: mood enhancement, which is not exactly Barnes's forte. A trip to Brooklyn should be a top priority. For another: Rogers has complained endlessly about the poor quality and quantity of food offered during travel.

Resolving that, at least, is an achievable damn task.

Mocha in hand ("You're here? I thought you went on that trip with Steve," Katie says. Oops.), Barnes moves his maps to the kitchen counter and spreads laptop and cookbooks across the table to plan meals for Rogers's return. Seems like a good opportunity to try some of the numerous recipes he has bookmarked online as having high deliciousness potential.

This activity causes quiet in his mind, and time passes without undue weight until 1320, when his hunting horn sounds, and the text from Romanoff reads 'EMERGENCY BAD DAY PROTOCOLS ENACTED. 40TH FLOOR. BRING CHOCOLATE. WEAR PAJAMAS.'

What is this.

The 40th floor is where Potts and Stark live.

Is this a Hair Club meeting?

EMERGENCY

I know, mission. I'll get a move on.

Barnes chooses the black PJs with the elephants. The only chocolate in the apartment is in chip form, but he takes both bags up to the 40th floor. Romanoff, who opens the door, is wearing men’s-style PJs in pink flannel with squirrels on them and slippers shaped like bear feet.

Barnes has to take a minute.

“Nice elephants,” she says.

“Nice claws,” he says.

“I know,” she says.

Hill is on the sofa with a large cocoon in her lap. The cocoon appears to be made of a sage green duvet with pale feet sticking out one end of it. The cocoon wails in Potts’s voice.

“I’m the CEO of an international corporation!” the cocoon moans, “why am I being like this?”

“It’s your squishy human feelings,” Hill says. “You should try cold-hearted bitterness, like me.”

The cocoon goes “hrumph” and flops over to the other side of the sofa, away from Hill.

Someone has upset Potts. Who would even dare.

Barnes walks to the sofa and crouches down until he can see her face inside the duvet. Her eyes are red from crying. Unacceptable.

“Pepper,” he says, “do I need to kill someone for you.”
She looks at him with her mouth open briefly, while Hill laughs aloud.

“Barnes, that’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me,” Potts says with a sniff.

That’s almost certainly an exaggeration. But okay.

She wipes her face and sits up.

“No, I don’t want you to kill anybody. It would make Steve mad, and it probably wouldn’t be good for you.”

Oh good.

"Okay," he says, "offer still stands."

He hands over one of the bags of chocolate chips. She pours some straight into her mouth.

Not what one expects from such a classy person.

Romanoff pats him on the arm.

“Good job.”

“Thanks.”

It becomes clear that Romanoff was serious about there being actual bad-day protocols. First, Hill (black yoga pants, charcoal top, as if even her sleepwear is ready for action) mixes together orange juice and champagne in a pitcher and fills a glass for everyone.

Next, Potts (peach shirt, grey capri pants with llamas) lists off the litany of every upsetting and annoying thing leading up to her outburst. Some of them (spilling an entire travel mug of vanilla latte on a white silk blouse) sound worse than others (a Stark Industries subsidiary losing 60% of its value on the stock market [whatever that means]). Each complaint is followed by a drink.

Barnes identifies: dislike. Carbonation is not on the good list. Potts, meanwhile, averages almost half a glass with each swallow, which makes her simultaneously more weepy and more apt to laugh.

Once she has finished listing her tribulations, it’s like a regular meeting of Hair Club but slightly drunk and with pajamas. Romanoff has brought a box of chocolates in a fancy gilt box that are embossed with flowers. Hill keeps trying to swaddle Potts back up like a caterpillar, until Potts threatens to bite her.

The women all pour chocolate chips from the bag straight into their mouths. Barnes attempts to demonstrate proper behavior and pours them into his hand first. It leaves a smear.

"Inefficient!" Hill says. "That's what you get for trying to be fancy, Barnes."

He pours chips into his left hand, which is not warm enough to make a smear.

"You're a jerk," Hill says.

"Confirm."

Romanoff rolls over on her back and waves her bear feet in the air. Barnes takes this as a sign of approval.
Twenty minutes into a movie about people setting ridiculous romantic obstacles for themselves, the hunting horn sounds in his pocket. Hill throws a pillow at him.

He catches the pillow and throws it back, fast enough that her unenhanced reflexes can't quite catch it in time, and the pillow gets her square in the face.

"I will have my revenge," she says, but Potts laughs, which was the intention.

'Sorry I was such an asshole last night,' the text from Rogers reads.

'It's okay, I'm used to it,' Barnes texts back.

'Prety sure that technically I could call the president and have you deported for speaking to an American icon that way.'

This is a positive development. The children of Cleveland, Ohio, must not have been too wheezy.

'As long as you send me somewhere with good cheese.'

Rogers sends back a small cartoon of a rude hand gesture, copied eight times.

Nice.

Also: how did he do that.

'Gotta go, in Indy, tlk to yuo later.'

Who knew terrible spelling could be such a welcome development.

A snack break and another movie later, Stark bangs through the door with flowers in one hand and a brown paper bag in the other that smells of garlic.

"Babe! JARVIS said you. What the hell, is this the annual convocation of princesses?"

Stark is obviously jealous that he doesn't have enough hair to braid into a crown. It's extremely flattering to all three women.

(Not so much on himself, but Barnes was not about to purposely disrupt Emergency Protocols.)

"Is that garlic chicken?" Potts asks.

"Only the best for my girl," Stark says, "and me, and not enough for anyone else."

"Tony, be nice."

"I'm nice! Just unprepared for my home to look like a sixth-grade sleepover."

"There is not nearly enough nail polish around for that to be the case," Hill says.

"Alas, I wouldn't know. "Romanoff says in a light voice that makes the hair on the back of Barnes's neck stand on end, "at that age I already knew fifteen ways to kill someone before they could cry out."
Stark's complexion goes something toward purple.

"Jeez, Natasha!" Potts squeaks.

There are hugs. Not from Stark, so acceptable.

"Thanks, you guys," Potts says, untangling from her blanket and walking over to take Stark's hand.

"Gotta keep the boss happy," Hill says with a grin.

Potts rolls her eyes.

"See you, Ol' Sparky," Stark says.

Potts elbows him.

Barnes does not understand the context, but he assumes it's unflattering.

He has a mental file of responses to Stark's digs. But this is Potts's home, on a day requiring emergency protocols. Pissing her off would be impolite.

Instead, he simply smiles at Stark. Slowly. He thinks about knives while he does it.

Stark turns pale.

Nice.

His description of the Emergency Protocols carries Rogers out of his grump after the Chicago gala. Barnes read the security report: 175 well-heeled (and -vetted) guests, with Rogers speaking during the entrée.

Charity tours are hard on blood glucose levels.

Hill's security detail writes acceptable reports. They make note of the number of photos taken, the number of people who get close. The morning updates give URLs of photos posted on social media.

Rogers is highly photogenic.

The security updates also give updates on the online activity of persons who comment inappropriately on said photogenic nature.

Twice Barnes has had to lie down on the floor for an extended period of time after reading some of the more explicit comments.

How many people would retain their desire to achieve intimate contact with Rogers if they knew they had to be vetted by Barnes first.

ZERO

Thanks, mission.

Rogers travels to Atlanta, and then to DC. Barnes watches the Rogers-dot closely and is not surprised to see it travel, after several hours at Children's National, to Peggy Carter's care facility.

Ninety minutes later, he gets a text from flying Sam.
'Lord save me from my friend Steve, the patron saint of suffering.'

For fuck's sake.

'What can I do,' Barnes texts back.

'Nothing @ the moment. Gonna take him out for a pile of food and at least a keg of beer. Miss Peg was not in a good state today. Heads up for later.'

This comment makes it impossible to remain still. Three traverses of the climbing wall, a shower, and a foray into muffins later, Rogers calls, not drunk (of course) but exhausted and overwrought, and it is a damn mess of vague apologies and long diatribes involving guilt and healthcare, as if he were fucking Doctor America.

"Okay, that's enough," Barnes hears flying Sam say 20 minutes in. "Get your ass in the bed or you'll look like the mummy tomorrow and scare all the little kids."

'Because you know,' he texts 135 seconds later, 'he's gonna try to squeeze in another visit to Miss Peggy between the NIH and heading up to Baltimore. Your boy's a mess, Barnes.'

'Planning on meatloaf and a visit to Brooklyn as soon as he gets back.'

'Good man.'
YOU GUYS

Thank you times one million for your kind comments. I am so lucky to be part of this beautiful community. You inspire me to write more and better and to *be* better. I so, so appreciate all your lovely comments and private messages wishing me well. I'm happy to report that although I'm still pretty weak and noodly, I'm feeling TONS better, able to move sufficiently not only to get back to the gym but: I even dyed my hair! It's the little things, y'all.

I'm working hard at getting caught up and back on a regular publishing schedule. You are the best.

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Day One

Task list:

- Read morning security updates
- Text morning greetings to Rogers, flying Sam
- Eat breakfast
- Tidy surveillance paraphernalia
- Wash Rogers's sheets
- Make own bed
- Bake pound cake
- Clean and oil sniper rifle
- Exercise
- Hygiene
- Eat lunch
- Check apartment; tidy as needed (put rifle away)
- Make salad
- Prepare meatloaf
- Call for car

This fills the hours of the day sufficiently that Barnes has no time to pre-load any dread about the car trip to Teterboro. It's not great – 35 minutes alone in the backseat of a sedan with a stranger driving – but it's bearable. The walls of the vehicle close in but do not smother him.

When the Stark plane has landed, the driver gets a phone call, then pulls onto the tarmac and right up to the small jet. Barnes climbs out: it may be overly warm outside in his jacket, but better too hot than closed in. Still, it's another victory, and worth all those early mornings of practice in the garage.
A narrow set of stairs folds down from the plane, and after a pause, Rogers emerges from the small doorway, frowning out into the glare.

ROGERS

Barnes's knees lose 20% of their ability to hold him upright – good thing he's leaning in a casual pose against the car.

ROGERS

Yes, mission. There he is.

ROGERS ROGERS ROGERS

I'm glad to see him too.

Then Rogers catches sight of them. The change in his posture, the way that his shoulders immediately sag and a smile flashes briefly across his face, makes the mission stop its excited chant. Makes the lungs briefly forget how to expand.

The insufficiencies of long-distance surveillance become obvious. Texting and phone calls are pathetic substitutes.

Target acquired.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

"Bucky, I swear to god, if I were any more glad to see you, I would. I don't even know," Rogers says when he gets close.

So sure thing, pal. A little hug is probably an okay idea.

Riding in the car with Romanoff was not much different from riding alone – she takes up very little space. Rogers is not like Barton. He doesn't attempt to obnoxiously stick all his bony edges into the nearest available soft parts. But Rogers takes up a great deal of room, both objectively and subjectively.

Also, they keep staring at one another like dopes.

Rogers has dark circles under his eyes, and the corners of his mouth are tight. Clear signs of stress.

“How was your flight,” Barnes asks as the staring gets so bad that he considers the virtues of hiding.

“Tony’s plane is a damn sight more comfortable than flying commercial. But I’ll be happy not to get on another plane for at least a month.”

Nod.

“How are you, Bucky? I was afraid you.” He pauses. “You look good.”

“Thanks.”

Rogers grins.
“All is well,” Barnes says.

Rogers stretches and groans a little.

“You do not even know how glad I am to be home.”

Sure. And you haven’t even seen the meatloaf yet.

Rogers stops in the doorway to their apartment.

“Tell me that smell means you baked,” he says.

“Confirm.”

Upon crossing the threshold, Rogers’s posture indicates increased relaxation. He rubs his hand over his hair.

“Well,” he says.

He is obviously experiencing strong emotion. About what.

“Welcome home,” Barnes says.

Rogers makes his I-am-deeply-moved smile.

“I feel like I’ve been gone for a month.”

Me too, pal.

“If you’d stayed away for a month you’d have starved to death.”

Rogers laughs.

GOOD JOB

Thanks, mission.

By the time Rogers has finished unpacking, Barnes has set out a variety of high-calorie snacks and is scrubbing potatoes.

Rogers is wearing the dancing collie sleep pants.

Huh.

“Taking a page out of your book,” Rogers says.

Nice.

That’s what happens after recent contact with flying Sam, probably.

“Skipped too far ahead,” Barnes answers, “I’d be in the bath right now.”

“I thought about it, but the food’s all out here.”

For fuck’s sake, Rogers.
“Good point. Since the plate’s nailed down to the counter.”

Rogers rolls his eyes.

“There’s just no place like home. You glaring at me, yanking my chain.”

“Take the damn plate and go soak your fat head.”

Rogers follows orders. It’s a minor miracle.

He emerges with only 6 minutes to go before the rest of dinner is ready, pink-faced and carrying a plate entirely devoid of cheese, prosciutto, and fancy crackers.

Barnes, having made the tactical decision to keep back one-third of the pre-dinner snacks, does not begrudge the empty plate. Prosciutto wrapped up in provolone: highly suitable fuel for cooking.

Rogers babbles his way through the meal – gratitude for its presence and quantity, descriptions of the morning’s hospital visit and the bravery and cheerfulness of the sick children of Wilmington, Delaware. The tedium of attempting to extract funds from donors.

“I don’t even know whether it did any good, Buck.”

That’s easy enough to find out. Barnes asks JARVIS.

“Your efforts have raised approximately six point eight million dollars to date, Captain.”

Rogers looks surprised.

“Add a hundred k to the total of the one that raised the least,” Barnes says.

How did that slip out.

“Of course, Sergeant.”

“Bucky.”

Shrug.

“You don’t have to do that,” Rogers says softly.

GOOD GUY NONLETHAL

Right, mission.

“You did a good thing, Steve. I ought to help if I can.”

Rogers is not successful at determining how to hug across a table covered in food. Barnes can see him think about it, though.

Day Two

Routine is the optimal state of any surveillance detail. Routine is additionally comforting to the less-stable mind.
It is therefore an excellent day. Barnes and Rogers wake early, after high-quality sleep enhanced by the renewed view on the monitors. Barnes wakes four times overnight. Three times he sees Rogers sleeping, then rolls over into his own unconsciousness. Once he wakes to see Rogers watching him. Barnes gives a thumbs-up. Rogers grins.

ROGERS

Confirm.

The familiarity of their morning activities makes a quiet place in the mind:

- Gym: after 8 days, running almost looks less objectionable
- Coffee bar: Katie demonstrates a high level of gladness at Rogers’s return (the mission concurs)
- Breakfast: cooking for 2 is demonstrably less stupid than cooking for 1
- Post-breakfast: Rogers does the dishes
- Brooklyn

The visit to Brooklyn is obviously as useful to Rogers as it had been to Barnes. They take one of Stark’s cars and treat the Olds to lunch at the little café Rogers has always liked. Rogers overflows his tiny chair, eats two lunches, and beams at the room.

Back at Lydia and Esther’s apartment, Barnes spends some time ensuring that there is no millimeter of cat Eleanor unscratched while Rogers describes his tour, speaking of the children in great detail and showing off the pictures in his phone. Rogers visibly perks up under the onslaught of compliments and amid the stories of enthusiastic tiny people.

Barnes would not have described himself in need of perk, but sitting 2 m away from Rogers and the Olds and under a busily kneading cat, Barnes feels a knot behind his sternum loosen. He did not want to go on the speaking tour, but he can identify: gladness that the tour is over and Rogers is back home where he can be properly watched.

“That’s a very good thing you did, my darling,” Esther says.

“Really, it felt like nothing. I mean, compared to what those kids go through.”

“It’s not nothing, and you know it,” Esther says in a sharper tone.

Barnes feels his face make a smile.

Confirm, Esther.

CONFIRM

Then Ollie tries to ruin it.

“Must be pretty different from punching evildoers.”

Thanks a lot, Ollie.

Rogers’s face turns several colors in succession.

“Yes,” he says, “it is.”

What is that tone.
Is it sadness.

Did the charity tour fail in its objective to distract Rogers from the desire to go on missions.

Maybe there is no distracting from that. It is what he was made for, after all.

“Easier on the knuckles, though,” Lydia says, and the subject returns to sick children.

They stay in Brooklyn all afternoon. Rogers helps Lidia move some boxes around, and Barnes puts screens in Ollie’s windows. He checks Hill’s app first. Yes, there’s still a (loose) security detail on the building.

Screens: approved. Outside air flow will be pleasant for Ollie.

Barnes and Esther put a dinner together. They all sit at the table together, and Barnes watches the last remaining bit of tension drain from Rogers’s face. He speaks of the sick children with affection and enthusiasm. He says,

“It was really great. But I’m damn glad to be home.”

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Day Three

Barton slouches into the gym on the third day, as if he didn’t mean to, just rolled out of bed and found himself miraculously at the start of Stark’s obstacle course with a bow in one hand.

Rogers has not been privy to the light gun, but he knows about the suction cup arrows, and the ensuing 2.5 hours are both effective training and enjoyable. Romanoff, who apparently never trains in public in case she might show a hair out of place, magically appears for breakfast after.

“I think she might’ve secretly put an implant in my brain,” Barton says.

“There’d be plenty of room for it,” Romanoff says.

Barton sticks his tongue out at Romanoff, and she shoves his arm. Rogers grins at the two of them.

For non-enhanced humans, they make a good attempt at caloric intake.

Stark announces a requirement for team dinner over the TV at midday, so Barnes and Rogers walk most of the afternoon. Re-establishing routine.

Quiet in the mind.

Walking through Manhattan next to Rogers wearing a short-sleeved shirt is an instructive experience. At first, Barnes finds himself tensing, brain focused to narrow attention and a heightened awareness of each knife on his person as he perceives the number of people staring at Rogers and practically slavering. Gazing at him as if he were delicious food, not a person with autonomy. It reminds Barnes strongly of the comments people made to the online photos during the charity tour.
He sees Rogers notice the stares, then choose to not acknowledge them. He also notes that all the oglers are so busy having their minds blown by the amount of real estate sort-of contained within Rogers’s t-shirt that none of them look up at his face and recognize his face under the ball cap. Aside from the odd whistler, they are left unmolested – both verbally and physically.

It’s always a good day when you don’t have to separate a civilian from their own hand.

Another benefit of Rogers’s biceps turning everyone’s thoughts to viscous intimate contact is that no one notices Barnes. A couple of times, he even experimentally removes his left hand from his pocket for several strides, to no effect.

Surveil and protect. Walk in the open air, under bright sun and an intermittent breeze when they hit cross streets, wearing only a linen shirt to hide his arm. Rogers asks questions, clearly seeking reassurance of Barnes’s mental state. This is easy to give.

They find themselves at a farmer’s market – Rogers laughs when Barnes strides toward a table bearing a sign reading ‘CHEESE free samples.’ They buy flowers to take to Potts.

Home with their bags, Barnes chooses to demonstrate generosity and take some of the locally-made cheeses with them up to the common area, which is filled with Avengers and Avengers-adjacent. Excepting Thor, who seems to view the non—world-ending parts of avenging as a hobby.

“Is this a goat ricotta?” Colonel Rhodes asks. “Bruce, my god, come taste this stuff, it’s like eating clouds from heaven.”

Barnes has no identified religious beliefs, but the description is reasonable.

“Jesus, this’ll keep the big guy away for a week, Barnes, where’d you get it?”


“Is there any chance I can convince you to let me take this and a spoon and go sit in a quiet corner?” Rhodes says.

Colonel Rhodes is not so far been a member of Team Barnes. He would like to say yes.

“Only if you think Pepper won’t mind.”

Rhodes and Banner sag dramatically.

“Dammit,” Banner says, “Pepper’s always inspiring us all to be better people. It’s so unfair.”

“Did I hear someone take my name in vain?” the woman herself asks.

Banner hands her a cracker with the ricotta on it. Her eyes flutter as she chews, and she makes a little moan.

“What even is this?”

“Goat ricotta from some little dairy in the country that I guess is about to get a huge influx of cash,” Rhodes says with a grin.

Interesting.

This is a typical start to a typical group dinner: everyone involved tries to top the next in quippage. Rogers gets caught up in a conversation with Hill about his security detail, which, Barnes is surprised
to note, is entirely boring. Instead, he stands near Potts, which has the benefit of being a safe space
and the detriment of being close to Stark.

Oh well. Potts keeps him on slightly better behavior, anyhow.

The dinner is Italian, many dishes passed clockwise around the table, and it’s easy to sit quietly at
one corner (at the opposite end from Stark) and listen to the conversations flowing around him. Stark
shouts a number of inquiries down to Steve about the comfort of the jet, the obtrusiveness of the
security detail, and the number of rich jerks attending various fancy dinners.

Mission. The argument could be made that we’re a rich jerk.

CONFIRM

Jeez, thanks.

Just when the plates are half-empty and the talk is getting more bawdy, Stark starts waving his hands
around at the other end of the table, and Potts frowns at him with an expression that bodes ill for his
sleeping arrangements.

Hill makes a joke about green-thing Hulk’s giant pants.

Banner answers back with a self-deprecating comment suggesting genital inadequacy.

Romanoff boasts knowledge of medical files contradicting Banner’s assertion.

Barnes considers sitting under the table.

Rogers groans,

“You guys are almost as disgusting as the Howlers.”

Barton takes that for a challenge and starts in on a story involving an undercover operation in Laos
and a cylinder of intel smuggled out in an intimate body area.

“And wasn’t that just the beginning of some truly fun times,” Romanoff says.

Barnes considers ripping his own ears off.

Colonel Rhodes describes a college girlfriend who was wont to carve carrots into non-standard
shapes for non-consumption purposes.

Barnes considers throwing himself off the balcony.

“Bucky, the look on your face!”

Rogers laughs while he says this.

Thanks so much for your support, pal.

“You guys,” Stark says, in a sharp tone that silences the table, “there’s someone using Chitauri guns
to rob banks in Philadelphia.”
Support operations

Chapter Notes

Some dissociation and some violence in this one, so take care if you're feeling tender.

---

They move quickly, shaking off jocularity and wine. Stark waves his hand, and a video plays in the middle of the room. Split screens: two groups of humans in black tactical gear and balaclavas, blowing holes in the side of two different banks using long rifles that shoot blue light.

The briefing shudders.

The burglars are clear professionals. Professional assholes. Each group has two of the spooky rifles: one goes inside, Barnes presumes to make holes in the vault, and one stays outside to blow limbs off civilians and ensure maximum chaos.

Barton is making a sound like a low growl.

"Quinjet in ten," Stark says, and nearly everyone scatters. Rogers breaks for the door. Barnes follows, waiting for coherent thought to catch up with the threat assessment and the fact that there's a mission happening, right now. Rogers just got back. They haven't discussed this, he doesn't know -

"Not you, Rogers," Stark says. "You come with me. I made you a suit."

"What? Why?"

"Can't have you wearing antiques. For one thing, they're irreplaceable. For another, they're a little saggy in the ass, and you don't want to disappoint Barnes that way."

What.

A muscle in Rogers's jaw clenches.

"See you at the quinjet?" he asks in a soft voice.

Asks.

"Confirm."

Rogers grasps his right arm once, then hustles after Stark.

In his room, Barnes stares at the duffel on the floor of his closet. Seven minutes to rendezvous. Seven minutes to decide.

What is the correct action.

He drags the duffel from the closet and eyes the tactical vest while he tops off his knife supply and adds a few handguns to the mix.
Barnes lifts the tactical vest. It is objectively heavy. Dread makes it seem even heavier. But if he is to go on this mission, it would be stupid not to wear the thing.

For increased safety.

Even though lifting it makes static in the mind.

Even though the weight of the vest increases static volume.

The pressure of it against his ribs as he tightens the straps is.

The pressure.

…

…

The pressure is.

…

…

Who

…

…

What is the.

…

…

"--cky?"

…

…

"Bucky, come -"

…

…

"-- get him out --"

…

"Fuck it, Steve, he's not gonna care about the damn vest."

…

What.
The body lurches.
Pressure alleviated.
Inhale.
One.
Two.
Three-
What the fuck is Hill doing in his bedroom.
What the fuck is Steve wearing.
"Bucky, are you -?"
Hill smacks Rogers in the arm, hard.
"Save it. Barnes, we have to go. Are you with me on support ops or staying home with Pepper and Bruce?"
What.
Hill's face is pale, and she speaks through clenched teeth. Her anger makes her seem half a meter taller. Why is she so angry.
"Barnes!"
"Ops," his mouth blurs without even attempting to acquire brain function. "I'm on ops."
"Move," she says.

They follow her sprint through the apartment into the open elevator, which drops them at a high rate of speed down to a floor Barnes has only ever visited during security sweeps: a dark, featureless room containing a stubby, triangular jet with no obvious form of egress.

"--it's stupid of me, you should have a suit here," Stark's saying to Colonel Rhodes as they run forward.
Stark mimes looking at a watch, even though Barnes knows the object around his wrist is an Iron Man component.

"I know the suit looks great, Barnes, but we're a little busy for makeout sessions at the mo," Stark says.

"Now is not the fucking time, Tony," Rogers says in a voice that's all jagged edges and deep holes in the ground in faraway places no one will ever find.

What even is going on.
Stark steps back to let the three of them barrel up the gangway, frowning surprise. Staring at Barnes.
"Are we okay here?"
Unknown.
"We're fine, let's go," Hill snaps.

The amount of free-floating tension in the air prevents standard functions from returning to baseline.

How did he get on this damn plane.

What the fuck is Steve wearing.

"Hey, Barnes," Romanoff says in a bored tone that makes the hair on his right forearm rise, "gonna fight Clint for the sniper position?"

"He's on support ops with me," Hill says in a voice that makes all of them stand up a little straighter – even Barton. "And for right now, he's going to sit down, strap in, and you guys are going to leave him the hell alone."

What.

Why is she -

"Sit. Down," Hill says.

Barnes sits.

Everyone who's not sitting sits, and the ones who are already sitting sit harder.

Barnes straps in. It's not so bad. He has no idea what the fuck is going on, but he has an order to follow, so it's easy. Sit down, strap in, get left the hell alone.

Okay.

Rogers sits next to him. Straps in, as ordered.

"You okay, Buck?" he murmurs.

That is not leaving me alone Steve.

Rogers stares.

"Pay attention, assholes," Hill yells, and all eyes snap forward to where she sits at a small computer screen.

Barnes listens with half an ear. Support ops. Okay. So he'll be at that other screen across from her, probably. The information will worm its way in past this static, maybe. He can catch up when they land.

Where are they landing.

The hell is Steve wearing.

Some kind of variation on the Captain America suit: high-tech fabric, obviously bolstered by something Kevlar-like in the torso: good. High neck: good. All the white parts are silvery, as if reflective: good. Dark, red-brown boots and gloves.

The briefing shows him different outfits. The old one, from the vehicle in DC and from before they both fell. Not much protection provided by it, not even warmth. The one from the alien battle in New York, cartoony and lurid, almost as bad as the one he almost-remembers, that maybe Steve wore in
his tap-dancing days. (Might as well wear pajamas.) Dark blue and silver, with a star on the chest like this one: the SHIELD suit, which he has seen in one of the many videos of Rogers online.

This is from Stark. He remembers. There was a rude comment.

It looks reinforced, but possibly also relatively comfortable. Good.

Stark did a good job. Approved.

CONFIRM

Not that we're going to tell him.

CONFIRM

One.

Two.

Barnes reaches for the helmet sitting in Rogers's lap, to check that there is an earwig embedded into the side. As he does, he notes that there is a ragged cylinder of black leather on his right arm.

What.

What is it.

Is that the – tactical vest?

CONFIRM

Barnes peels the remainder of the sleeve from his arm and looks at it. The leather is shredded midway across the upper arm, as if the tactical vest had been torn from his -

Oh.

Right.

Oops.

Bank robbers in Philadelphia. Ten minutes to ready. The question of whether it would be okay to wear the old Asset gear.

Apparently not.

Okay.

Focus, Barnes.

CONFIRM

"Back to the goddamn grind, yippee," the briefing gives him, with a sensation of cold, achy feet and gnawing hunger.

Aw. Briefing doesn't want to go on the mission. Sorry, pal. Didn’t really stop to think.

Barnes listens to Hill and Stark. They've divided themselves into two teams: Stark with Barton, Rogers with Romanoff. Hill passes out buttonhole cameras to those not wearing magic robot suits.
Building JARVIS is attempting to trail each group's escape route from TD Bank and the Philadelphia Federal Reserve using traffic cameras, with only moderate success.

Hill takes over in the pilot's seat and drops each pair off, then heads for the warehouse roof targeted as their landing site. JARVIS has triangulated these positions to have a high probability of surrounding both vans and coralling them.

Barnes has his monitor up and earwig in before Hill has even begun their descent to the roof. The jet has no infrared scanner, but their sweep with the light shows no movement, and they land. Barnes listens to the chatter of each pair, hunting. Stark and Barton trading quips. Rogers and Romanoff all business.

"Clear on this block, heading east," Romanoff says.

She and Rogers are running along rooftops, as in a film.

Respiration increased. Adrenaline increased. Pulse rate high. Within functional parameters.

"Same over here, headed south and toward you," Rogers says.

"I could totally have carried you in my arms like the world's ugliest baby," Stark says.

"Didn't want you getting any ideas," Barton answers.

Rogers: "Gotcha. Two blocks north of you, Nat. Gonna let them see me."

"Dammit, I hate coming second," Stark says.

Romanoff makes a sound of disgust.

"They took the bait, Nat. Look out."

A shadow flickers outside the cockpit window. Barnes stares out, but he sees nothing, even after his eyes adjust.

He can hear his own pulse.

"Nat, 15 seconds. Drive them south."

"Got it."

"Four o'clock," Barton says, then whoops, and the feed on his camera blurs; Stark has dropped him.

Something moves outside again. What is it.

"Natasha, do you see –"

"This is too easy," Barton says.

There's a faint clank outside the hatch door.

"Does anybody else feel like these dudes are naturally going in the direction we want them to?"

Stark says.

Three bullets in quick succession break the glass of the cockpit window, and a cylinder falls through, leaking yellow gas.
“Dammit,” Romanoff says.

For fuck’s sake.

They have landed on the warehouse the robbers are using for a base.

Barnes’s body takes over and heaves the canister back out the window while Hill grabs her computer and dives under the seats.

“Barnes! You okay?”

“Bucky?”

Shit the comms are open.

“Fine,” he says, climbing up to clear a path for his egress through the cockpit window.

Support ops. Great. Very safe. This is terrific.

One.

Two – no, there's no time for that.

Four black-clad figures outside go down, clutching their legs.

Barnes climbs out of the jet in time to see more figures scuttling out of a narrow doorway. They go down, most screaming some version of ‘my knee’ or ‘my leg,’ except for the two who ducked sharply enough to receive low gut wounds.

Oops.

“Bucky!”

Goddammit, Rogers is going to go off task.

“Still fine,” he says.

“Headed your way, Vanilla Ice,” Stark says.

Terrific.

Barnes arrives at the door to the warehouse concurrently with Stark, who looks around at the twitching bleeders and says,

“What the hell? Are these guys all alive?”

Barnes rips the door off its hinge and heads into the dark. Maybe Stark will follow. Maybe not. Either way, he’s going to make sure the welcoming committee is out of commission by the time Rogers arrives.

PROTECT

Confirm.

“Jesus, you don’t – you’re as bad as Rogers,” Stark says over the comm, and Barnes hears clanking behind him.
A dark stairway. The left arm held in front of his face to protect what remains of his brain.

This is not fear.

Identified: there is no room for fear at the moment. This is a mission. Rogers would otherwise run into an ambush. Rogers. Romanoff. Barton. Even Stark.

PROTECT

Yes.

Shots fired. They bounce off the arm. One makes a line of heat across his right thigh. Set status: ignore.

On the ground floor, several things happen at once. Barnes runs straight at the knot of people milling about a table with a computer on it. A van screeches through the open loading door and to a halt. The people around the computer scatter, and Barnes hears Stark’s hand lasers behind him. Rogers runs through the doorway and stops, looking around.

For shit’s sake, Steve.

The members of the van emerge. One of them points a long, spooky rifle in Barnes’s direction. Barnes drops to the floor and launches a knife in that direction. He misses – but only because the guy goes down under many kilos of angry super soldier.

Thankfully, there was another bad guy standing just behind to provide a nice landing spot for the knife.

Barnes rolls and comes up against the computer table. Fights briefly hand to hand with a squishy standard human who so sadly seems to have a highly crushable wrist.

“Bucky!”

Barnes turns in time to see Rogers running in his direction, holding the creepy rifle out in his direction. Barnes jumps and grabs. Like the move on the running track in DC, Rogers plants his feet and converts the momentum into spin, releasing the rifle in time to launch Barnes in the direction of the second van, another group of people, and two more alien guns.

Barnes lands and swings hard, cracking one person hard in the head and knocking another aside. One burglar gets a shot off, but the blue light goes wide – he has a small redhead attached to his back, applying something that looks unpleasant to the back of his neck.

Another villain is shooting blue light beams seemingly at random around the room. One of his compatriots loses an arm. A beam catches Rogers's shield by the edge, and the shield goes flying.

TARGET INSECURE

Target insecure, confirm.

Task: move.

Task: duck.

Task: shake off that blow to the face.

TARGET INSECURE
Confirm.

Task: run.

Task: tackle.

Task: hit.

Task: hit again.

Task: hit again.

Task: hit again.

Task: hit again.

Task: hit again.

Task: hit again.

The wrist is caught.

Who the fuck would dare.

"Barnes!"

Romanoff?

What.

"Stand down, Buck. He doesn't have any face left."

What.

Oh, shit.

Dammit.

Rogers lets go of his arm.

"I'm sorry."

"I know, Bucky."

TARGET SECURE

Okay.

SECURE

Okay. Okay, confirm, okay.

With the whole team having arrived, it takes little time to clean up the burglars and separate them
from their contraband alien weaponry. Barnes makes the executive decision that one fewer such would provide material improvement to the world and breaks the rifle by his knee into tiny alien shards. He looks up to see Rogers staring at him with a fierce grin.

Barnes nods.

Authorities are phoned. Barnes turns his back on the wet thing he made on the floor and goes back up the stairs to the roof to drag down all the incapacitated bad guys for transport to the hospital. He had a good run of nonlethal for a while there. He finds Hill standing with a gun in each hand, keeping the bleeders from misbehaving.

“Barnes,” she barks at him. “Status report.”

How does she not know that they have overcome all the villains. Surely Hill would not abandon support operations.

“It’s over,” he says.

“Not that, dammit, you.”

What.

“Intact and functioning,” he says.

He wipes the left hand on his leg.

She glares at him.

What even, lady. You’re the one who brought me here.

Sirens sound in the distance.

“You need to get in the jet,” Hill says.

“Going to carry a couple of these guys downstairs.”

“No you’re damn well not. You’re getting your ass in that jet where no passing beat cop can see you.”

I can glare as well as you can, Maria.

“Move it!”

He moves.

She might actually have a point.

Barnes sits in the jet, replaces his earwig, and listens to all the boring official business of transferring custody of evildoers and the corpses thereof to civilian police. Romanoff arrives first, bearing the three remaining alien guns in her arms and stashing them inside the jet.

“Let’s just keep these in a place where we know they aren’t going anywhere,” she says with a wink at him. “You doing okay?”

Nod.
He can feel not-okay-ness is rising in the background as his adrenaline levels drop, now that the necessity of mission focus is gone.

He examines the graze on his thigh, prods his broken cheekbone. Methodically scours the jet for its first-aid kit. By the time the Avengers return, Barnes has sprayed a pain-relief concoction on his face, wrapped his leg, secured the creepy rifles for transport, and had a brief internal meltdown.

That’s good. Better alone in a dark jet than around Steve.

Maybe it's dark enough that Steve won't notice his right hand trembling.

Rogers has a bruise on his jaw. Barton has a black eye. Romanoff appears unharmed, though she might have as many as seven hairs out of place.

It’s a shame that bandages don’t come in black. Hill growls at the sight of the bandage on his leg, and Rogers draws his eyebrows together.

“Graze,” he says, and Rogers nods, but Hill continues to look like she would prefer to dump him out on the street and make him walk back to New York.

The flight back is long and intensely unpleasant. Only Stark in the Iron Man suit can pilot it, given the broken window, and they have to stay low and slow to avoid damaging the non-supers. Despite this, the noise, cold, and wind make distressing echoes that do not enhance his sense of well-being.

And it’s not as if being watched by the unblinking trio of Hill, Romanoff, and Rogers helps with that.

If only he could be like Barton and sleep through all the excitement.

By the time they return to the tower, Barnes’s reserves of being able to deal are so far in the negative that he sets aside any semblance of politeness and goes straight for the apartment and the safe spot.

Controlled breaths.

Inventory:

- Mission successful: evildoers contained and alien technology retrieved
- High likelihood that he personally caused only the one fatality
- Companions unharmed
- Safe space achieved

Rogers bangs through the doorway, hair rumpled, the bruise on his jaw already faded to green.

“Bucky? You okay?”

He moves toward the sofa. Barnes holds up his hand. Rogers stops.

“Okay,” he says.

“You sure, buddy?”

Shrug.

“It all happened so fast,” Rogers said. “One minute you were freaking out in your room and the next
we were on the plane. I’m sorry, I didn’t stop and think. I should’ve –“

Freaking out.

“The gear, Buck. The – Winter Soldier gear. It was like you were in another world.”

Memory: the sleeve on his arm in the plane.

Further back.

Memory: his bedroom, Hill, and Rogers in the outfit he’s currently wearing, but clean, and without that rip along the left side.

“Are you okay,” he says, pointing.

“What? Yeah, just a long scratch. It’s already closed up.”

Rogers sits on the coffee table.

“Bucky. Do you remember freaking out?”

“A little.”

“You had no business being out there, Bucky, I should’ve –“

Three brisk knocks sound at the door, and it opens. Hill marches in at a swift pace. She stands by the sofa, her hands in fists, glowering.

“Look,” she says, “this is all my fault. As I’m sure you noticed, I completely lost it when you freaked out. I made a bad decision.”

Wait.

“I’m sorry. I should never have made you come with us. I don’t know what I can do to make it better.”

Wait.

What.

He looks at Rogers. No help on that front: Rogers looks equally confused.

She glares but makes an apology.

Hill looking angry is her version of worrying.

Doesn’t that just figure.

Rogers nods.

“That’s his safe spot,” Rogers says in a gentle tone.

ROGERS

Yeah, mission.

“What?” Hill says.
“I’ve been doing the same thing. Trying to apologize,” Rogers says. “And the whole time Bucky’s sitting here in a place he decided is safe, staring at me like I’m an idiot.”

GOOD JOB

“Confirm,” Barnes says.

Hill’s shoulders relax just the tiniest bit.

“Thanks for getting rid of that tear gas canister,” she says.

Rogers laughs.

“Thanks for clearing out half the bad guys before we even got there,” Rogers says.

Barnes can see it. He’s definitely in for some nights of broken sleep. He might be spending a lot of time in this corner of the sofa. Maybe it’ll be a struggle again to get into cars or speak aloud. Maybe his hands will shake when he cleans his guns.

He knows what to do. Even if it’s difficult, he can follow the protocols until he regains equilibrium.

He knows how to work to get back to okay.

Barnes leans back into the sofa.

“Pretty sure it was at least two thirds,” he says.

“Oh for pity’s sake,” Hill says.

“Now that we’re forgiven, would you like to join us for the traditional post-crisis grilled cheese?” Rogers asks.

That does sound pretty good.

“Yes I would,” Hill says.

Barnes makes an effort to impress.

Hill eats two.
Aftermath

Barnes remembers:

In January, the mission imperative had screamed at him, endlessly.

MISSION PROTOCOLS VIOLATED

It doesn’t do so currently. His disquiet arises in the self. Identified: dismay, despite the pleasure of introducing Hill to a proper post-activity grilled cheese.

He has to scrub blood from under his fingernails before cooking.

Task: fold that fact up, tuck it far in the back of the mind for later.

This is made impossible after Hill has gone, when he picks at something stuck between two forearm plates. What he pulls out is a gob of hair, matted with blood and possibly brain matter.

He makes it to the toilet in time to avoid a mess when the grilled cheeses eject. When that’s over, he looks up, sees the metal hand curved over the back of the seat, and heaves bile, which burns his throat.

“Bucky,” Rogers says from the bathroom doorway.

Vocal tenor is. Gentle.

What does that even mean.

“Here,” Steve says, and hands him a glass of water.

The water is cool and tastes clean, and it soothes his throat.

“Sorry.”

Steve makes that smile that’s nothing but sadness from the mouth up.

“This is actually really familiar,” he says.

“What does that mean.”

“Clean up first,” Rogers says, “talk later.”

Easy enough to do. Barnes stands under water as hot as he can bear, even though the heat makes his cheek ache, now that the pain-relieving spray has worn off. No other gross bits rinse out of his arm, though the water briefly runs reddish. His shoulder aches 62% above standard levels. From killing a guy.

It is. Difficult. Partial protocol violation: not of good guy but of nonlethal. Barnes can feel the level of effort he exerts in the background, refusing to replay the memory of his fist meeting the bank robber’s face multiple times.

Lethally.

“Hey,” Rogers says from the other side of the shower curtain, “don’t mind me. I’m just gonna wash
my face.”

“Okay.”

Barnes takes this as an indication not to stand under the water for a month. He washes his hair, and the water does not run red.

That’s something.

Not enough to regain nonlethal status. That’s done. But it’s something.

PROTECT

Fuck off, mission.

NO

In his bedroom, Barnes finds that the remnants of the tactical vest are gone, and the sheep pants have been laid on his bed.

Identified: strong emotion.

He has not previously worn the sheep pants.

He puts them on.

Barnes finds Rogers in the kitchen, futzing with the coffee machine.

Don’t you mess up my settings Steve.

“Here,” Rogers says, and hands him a mug. “Sit.”

Barnes sits and watches Rogers assemble sandwiches out of leftover meatloaf, which proves definitively that the super soldier serum induces genius-level intelligence.

Identified: hunger.

Additionally identified: surprise.

How does Rogers know.

PROTECT

Maybe.

Rogers slides a plate across the kitchen island and places an open bag of chips on the counter.

“You’ll feel better if you get that in you,” Rogers says, “and drink up.”

Barnes follows these orders. He finds that Rogers is correct. The act of eating helps him sit more comfortably in his body again. He can look at his left hand without feeling nausea. It’s good. Improvement.

“Why,” he says.
The question causes Rogers’s face to turn deep crimson; he rubs the back of his neck and smiles with only the right side of his mouth.

“This is something I actually know how to do. This is familiar,” he says.

Oh.

Post-mission care. Does he know this from avenging or from before.

Rogers cuts the last hunk of pound cake in two and puts a piece on each plate.

“You want to hear about it?”

Nod.

“This was SOP in the war,” Rogers says to his slice of cake.

Briefing. Query.

“Ain’t I a nervous nelly,” the briefing gives him, along with the burn of alcohol in his mouth.

“Every time,” Rogers says at a low volume, “every job. I didn’t notice for months. I was. Wrapped up, I guess. It took me a while to notice that you always disappeared after things were done. One of the men always went to find you and bring you back.”

The briefing gives him only sensations, not images. Identified: loneliness, dread.

Rogers nods to himself.

“Now that I think about it, I guess that was when they had really accepted me as one of the squad, when they sent me to find you.”

Barnes watches. Rogers’s posture indicates that he is fully engaged in thought. Far away in the past.

“You always took such good care of the men, Buck. God, you were a pain in our asses. Always hectoring us to clean our weapons, never letting us go to sleep without eating first.”

He shrugs.

“But first, you disappeared for a while. Somebody always had to go find where you’d taken yourself.”

He looks up, and Barnes can see a question in his expression. Then Rogers shakes himself, and instead of asking, says,

“But yeah. Heaving your guts out after a job. So that’s normal. I know that. I know how to deal with it without fucking it up.”

Barnes remembers the statements Rogers has made since their move to Manhattan. All the times he has said, “I fucked it up.”

“Confirm,” he says.

Rogers smiles.

“Peg had a theory about it,” he says. “She figured that with infantry, artillery, you don’t always see
whether you’ve actually killed someone. I mean, sometimes, sure. But a lot of the time, you have plausible deniability, right? But a sniper’s always gonna see. That’s what she thought, anyhow.”

It’s a reasonable supposition.

Rogers shakes his head as if it has suddenly doubled in weight.

“I never thought.”

The expression he makes is not a smile, though he bares his teeth.

“I never bothered,” Rogers says in a fierce tone, “to ask any of the men whether you’d been like that before. Before Azzano, I mean.”

Would the Bucky-person have told him, if asked.

The briefing sends out a small burst – just a brief moment in objective time, but one filled with panic and despair, scrabbling at torn, bloodstained clothing and finding underneath not the expected incapacitating wound but only a long, oozing line, barely worth a bandage. Healing too quickly, for no apparent reason.

The Bucky-person wouldn’t have said a word.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

What a mess. And that was more than 30 years before flying Sam was even born to help out.

“Bucky? You okay? I didn’t mean to upset you with –“

Barnes holds up his hand.

“Not upset,” he says. “Just remembering.”

He watches Rogers struggle with himself over whether to ask about the memory.

Too many words.

“Logical supposition on Carter’s part,” he says, forestalling the requirement to explain.

Rogers blinks and grins.

“Yeah, I thought so too,” he says.

And here’s an opportunity to turn the conversation away from the emotional travails of emotionally traumatized former assassins. He asks about Rogers’s visit to Carter while he was in DC, when Rogers had been so upset.

“Jesus, that seems like a month ago,” Rogers says.

CONFIRM

“Confirm.”

“Yeah. I went twice, actually, which I guess would be ridiculously stupid, but she was better the second time. She remembered seeing you, that time, and said to tell you hello.”
“That’s kind of her.”

“I never could figure out whether you two liked each other. Kinda seemed like you didn’t most of the time, but sometimes I’d catch you both looking at me with the same expression.”

This is another thing Barnes remembers: discovering that the Bucky-person did like Peggy Carter, if only reluctantly.

Doing pretty well in the memory department this evening, Barnes.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“He did,” Barnes says. “I did.”

Rogers makes a pretty good smile at that one.

“Let’s see your face,” Rogers says when the kitchen is clean and the adrenaline rush has gone, leaving behind exhaustion.

This will require standing close, and touching. Sub-optimal. But Rogers intends only help.

Bearing it will allow Rogers to fulfill his own protect mission.

“Okay.”

Barnes makes his expression blank and focuses on regular breathing while Rogers steps close and prods his cheekbone so gently that it only hurts a little.

“Pretty sure it's broken, Buck.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not too bad, though. Do you want to go to medical?”

He steps back, and Barnes takes advantage of the increased amount of oxygen.

Do I want to go to medical. Sure thing, champ. White coats and blue-gloved hands are my absolute favorite.

“No.”

“You sure? They have this thing that stimulates bone growth, through sound waves or something like. Oh. Shit, I’m sorry. Of course you don’t.”

“Okay,” Barnes says from 2 m away.

Then, in apology, “how’s your side.”

Rogers lifts his shirt to show a long slice, already closed up except for a small adhesive bandage at one end.

“It’s fine. How’s your leg?”
Barnes pulls down the sheep pants to show his own wound, similarly scabbed over.

“I gotta say, Buck, I’m real grateful to the women for the marked decrease in scrotum sightings around here.”

Barnes makes a mission note to steal back some of the underwear and to keep the sheep pants for a while.

The overnight period demonstrates both the advantages and shortcomings of the monitors. First, Barnes has to endure all the staring as he tosses in bed, trying to find a position to lie in that will allow his left shoulder to relax. His face hurts. The healing graze on his leg itches. His whole torso feels slightly shredded on the inside, and though he knows from experience that this will improve with sleeping, he has to fucking get to sleep first.

Rogers frowns at him the whole time over the monitor, until Barnes lies still and pretends to be comfortable. After a short period, this actually becomes truth.

He wakes at 0217 when Rogers bangs the door open.

This is mission assist – he had been dreaming about hitting the bank robber.

Specifically: about the moment just after Rogers had grabbed his wrist but before he returned to himself. If he had not returned to himself. If he had not reestablished consciousness.

Predicted outcome: total mission failure. He would have struck Rogers. The other Avengers would protect their colleague.

Between the Widow and Stark’s lasers, they could ensure that Rogers would be safe from Barnes forever.

He shivers.

“What do you need, Buck?” Rogers asks.

It’s a kind question.

What does he need.

Reassurance that his supposition is correct, and Rogers’s colleagues will in fact assist with the mission.

“Bucky?”

Right.

“I’m okay,” he says.

Rogers frowns heavily.

“I’m okay,” Barnes repeats.

Rogers returns to his room, but sleep doesn’t follow. Barnes lies in the dark, watching the monitor.
Making a decision.
Mission compliant: request assistance.

He broaches the topic while Rogers washes the breakfast dishes.

Rogers freezes, and his face turns deep crimson. He takes a long, slow breath, as if attempting to calm himself.

“That’s. Real surprising, Buck.”

“You think it’s a bad idea.”

“Well. I think you might be – um, mistaken about the situation. You might need to talk to Clint about this first.”

What does Barton have to do with it.

“I mean,” Rogers says, “he might not like you taking his girl out to dinner.”

What.

“I mean, it’s not like I’m surprised. You always did like redheads. I just thought. Well. It’s kind of sudden.”

There are so many things wrong with that statement.

CONFIRM

“You think I mean a date.”

Rogers puts the pan down in the bottom of the sink, very slowly. His face is still bright red.

“You don’t?” he asks the backsplash. “That’s good, I guess. I just, you know, wanted to make sure, in case you didn’t understand.”

“You think I want to date Romanoff.”

“I mean, you two are close. And she’s really beautiful.”

“Beautiful, confirm. But Steve. She is terrible.”

Rogers finally looks at him, his face twisted as if it can’t decide on which expression to wear.

“Bucky! I thought you liked her! Don’t pinch your face up at me, you spend a ton of time with her.”

Pinch up my face. You’re lucky I don’t break yours, pal. Again.

“Romanoff is critical mission assist,” he says. “Doesn’t stop her from being completely awful.”

Rogers stares at him. Then laughs.

“Okay, Bucky.”

“Okay what.”
“No, I get it. I see it clear as day now. It all makes perfect sense.”

“What does.”

“What you mean by ‘awful’. You like awful. That’s why you like me.”

WHAT

Rogers grins wide, makes his eyes real big.

“Or I guess you could tell me that I’m not awful.”

What a jerk.

CONFIRM

“I’d hate to lie to you like that, pal.”

“Yeah, Buck. That’s what I thought.”

He texts Romanoff.

‘You sure? That’s a big dining room, and they are not cheap.’

Is she kidding.

‘Gosh. How unfortunate that I neglected to do any research before choosing a destination,’ he texts back.

Romanoff sends back a picture of a cat face laughing.

‘Just for that, I’m wearing my red dress.’

Supposition: the red dress will be impressive and designed to distract. Barnes therefore dresses carefully, in black and grey, for contrast. He spends sufficient time on his hair to make it shiny and falling across his face in a flattering manner.

Rogers leans against the bathroom door frame and attempts to poke fun.

Sadly for Rogers, Barnes is not perturbed by any suggestion that he is vain. He has functioning eyes. The objective evidence in the mirror is clear. Even counting the discoloration owing to his broken cheekbone, he looks fucking good.

“I know it’s hard, pal,” he says when Rogers finally pauses for breath. “It’s gotta be so tough to look but not be allowed to touch.”

Rogers does a creditable impression of a fish gasping for air before he says,

“Jesus, you asshole,” and stomps away.

He does yell out “have a good time,” when Barnes leaves, so Barnes knows not to worry.

Several floors down, Barton answers the door.

“The red dress!” he says with a grin, “lucky guy. You think Steve wants in on my evening of frozen
pizza and stupid comedies?”

“You should ask.”

Then Romanoff appears, and the red dress is in fact impressive. She packs a lot of curvature into a small frame. And it looks like she was just as careful with her own hair.

“Прекрасная,” he says.

She grins.

“тот же,” she says, and steps out into the hallways to take his arm. “Let’s go eat some caviar.”

“Have fun kids, don’t stay out too late,” Barton yells after them.

They walk the short distance to the Russian Tea Room, despite Romanoff’s heels, which must be over 100 mm tall. The spring evening is enjoyably cool.

“Trying something new?” she asks, nodding at his left arm, which he holds at a consistent angle at his side, hand covered in a glove and curved, as if it were a static prosthesis.

Nod.

“Smart. Looks obnoxious, though.”

“Yes.”

Thanks to Building JARVIS’s assistance, they have secured a reservation detailed enough to get them a table in a quiet corner, where they proceed to eat caviar and blini costing an amount sufficient to pay rent on a small apartment for a month. Romanoff puts on a show, acting demure and quiet, with exquisite manners. Barnes finds it enjoyable to play the game, to make smiles and speak in Russian-accented English.

It’s good practice. He hasn’t done undercover work since before reset. It calms the mind to settle down into a fake personality, one without brain gaps and emotional problems. Restful.

Still. He can’t put off his errand forever. He waits until Romanoff has handed the vodka menu back to the server and they’re left alone again.

“I need to ask a favor,” he says.

Romanoff nods as if she’s unsurprised. Of course she’s not surprised. He has invited her to a ridiculously expensive restaurant, and they’re both wearing fancy clothes. She had to know something was up.

Bringing the topic up makes it suddenly awkward. The words feel locked up inside. Romanoff is patient. She doesn’t even stare at him. She butters her black bread thickly. Takes a bite. Knocks back some vodka, eats a pickle. Grins at him and fills his vodka glass.

“Doesn’t do me any good.”

“Who cares? It tastes good anyway.”

It does.

Her quiet acceptance makes her the only one of whom he will ask this. She knows, in a way he
would never wish on anyone. And she has two large scars that he gave her. She doesn’t even seem to hold them against him.

“I worry,” he says.

She waits. Anyone else would ask about his worry, would jump in to reassure.

“You saw. In November. With the programmer.”

She puts her glass down and drops her pretense of unconcern.

“Had to argue my way through it, not to follow that order.”

“You did well.”

“I know.”

She smiles at that.

“It’s just,” Barnes fumbles, searching for the correct vocabulary, “other people know other codes.”

She is like one of Barton’s arrows. All deadly attention, focused. On him.

“Guy in DC got me for thirty-four minutes before override. Other people tried. Stark’s real estate agent.”

“But they didn’t work. Those codes,” she says.

“No. But if one does? This me won’t even know. I won’t know.”

Her expression closes off into something cold.

“The other day,” he says. “When Rogers grabbed my arm. It was just a split second, but for that second, it was a close thing. I almost. Broke.”

She sits back in her chair, and her excellent posture dissolves.

Dammit. The point was not to make her look so sad.


It was not the intention to injure her.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “But you can’t let me hurt him. Anyone. You’re the only one who would do it.”

She shakes her head.

“You know that’s not true.”

“Stark would do it,” he says. “You’re the only person who would do it for me.”

Romanoff drinks the vodka in her glass, refills it, and drinks again.

“Sometimes,” she says, her hands flat on the table and her eyes on the glass, “I really hate being everyone’s last-ditch fallback murder plan.”
Reasonable.

“Not murder, Natashenka,” and she looks up at him, actually showing her surprise at the name, “a gift. The gift of helping me keep my promise.”

He fills their two glasses, lifts his, and waits until she does the same.

“To good-guy, nonlethal,” he says.

“To good-guy,” she says.

Well. Sure. That’s probably a more reasonable limit.

They clink glasses and drink. The creeping worry that has fretted him is gone. Romanoff is Steve’s – his own – last bastion of protection.

It’s a shit job, and it’s damn kind of her to take it on.

But he’s not surprised that her reaction to this pact is to drink an alarming amount of vodka. He is slightly surprised that she does so in his presence, instead of waiting to do this in her own apartment. She drinks until she reaches the point of reciting poetry at him. This is fine during the Pushkin and the Pasternak, but once she gets to the Akhmatova, the situation is critical: she will dismantle his kneecaps if he allows her to show emotion in public. And it’s a proven fact that no standard human can recite more than three Akhmatovas without openly weeping. He himself could probably only get through five.

Barnes pays the bill before she can order another round and walks back with her to the Tower at a pace so slow and careful that even the Olds could’ve kept up with them. She hangs onto his right arm for balance. Demonstrating her own sense of trust.

Barnes identifies that he is deeply moved. It makes the touching bearable.

Unfortunately, she is still drunk when they return. Fortunately, Barton is in, and Barnes feels no compunction about transferring custody.

“I do not even want to know,” Barton says.

“I love vodka forever,” Romanoff says.

Rogers is asleep on the sofa with a biography of a Mexican lady painter tented on his chest.

‘I hate you forever,’ the text from Romanoff reads at 0716 the next morning.

Barnes bakes her a batch of cookies. Seems only fair.
He is summoned to Hair Club in the afternoon. Barnes arrives at the coffee bar to find Hill still scowly in his direction. How this is possible, given the application of grilled cheeses, Barnes cannot fathom. Romanoff is slightly green, unmoving in her chair and curled around a large coffee.

"Oh my god, Barnes," Potts says. "I heard how you threw yourself at some guy to protect Steve. Are you okay? Have you been sleeping? Let me look at you. Why's your cheek purple, are you hurt? Can I hug you? I feel like I need to hug you."

Barnes parses this onslaught of language. Who told Potts about his actions.

Whoever it was seems to have left out the worst part.

He allows the hug. Potts is strong, and her hair smells of citrus.

It's okay.

The hug is okay.

Given the daylight hour, Katie is not on duty, but the mocha he obtains is made correctly anyhow. He sits with the women, and they speak of trivial things, while Hill's shoulders slowly descend from around her ears and Romanoff's coffee works to lessen the outcome of her vodka extravaganza. Barnes doesn't mention their dinner – it's a private thing between them – but he notes a sensation of enhanced calm when he looks at her. She is the last bastion of mission assist if everything goes wrong. Backup. He doesn't have to rely only on himself.

Potts reaches over and pats his knee, as she did at the first Hair Club meeting, when he had no idea what was going on.

"I'm just so impressed that you protected Steve like that," she says.

Reiterating that whoever spoke to her left out the part where he turned a guy's head to mush.

"That's what he does," Romanoff says.

CONFIRM

Don't tell me you're going to get all cozy with her now, mission.

"Too bad some of us suck at returning the favor," Hill says.

That’s what her problem is?

For fuck's sake.

Barnes picks up the small bowl of sugar lumps on their table and throws them at Hill one at a time. After the fourth one, she says,

"Okay! Okay, fine! You jerk!"
"Confirm," Barnes says, and makes his face into a smile.

Not a big one – his cheek’s still pretty sore.

"Hm," Potts says, but she refuses to elaborate.

Barnes discovers the cause of Potts’s musing 2 days later, when she asks him to her office and requests his assistance on a business trip.

It is easy to acquiesce in the moment, despite the prospect of a plane ride and increased stress. Potts demonstrates generosity and kindness. She has welcomed him and Rogers into her home. This is a chance to pay some of that back. It is compliant with Project #2: assist others with identifiable problems.

The minute he accepts, mission requirements unfold in his mind, taking up so much space that the memory of the bank robber is shoved to a cramped back corner of the mind.

Task list:

1. Tell Rogers

This goes more smoothly than anticipated. Rogers barely kicks up a fuss, makes the expected offer of accompaniment, and, once on board with the plan, throws himself into the preparatory fray.

2. Grow a beard.

Gross. Also: itchy.

3. Talk to Flying Sam.

This task is achieved in the most pleasant way imaginable. When Barnes informs Sam of the plan and his desire to achieve the trip without harming himself, Sam makes arrangements to fly to New York for the coming weekend.

“Rogers,” Barnes says after the television screen goes dark, “we gotta remember to throw that VA center some cash.”

“I’ll work on it while you’re gone, Buck,” Rogers says, and squeezes his shoulder in a way that indicates profound approval.

4. Practice with sunglasses.

It takes a full day of attempts before he can even place these on his face. They cause his pulse rate to elevate to uncomfortable levels. Identified: annoyance.

This is a stupid reaction, mission.

DENY

What.

Mission’s trying to channel Sam.

Good job, mission.
CONFIRM

Confirm.

5. Acquire materiel.

His suit fitting goes as well as can be expected, given that it involves a stranger putting hands on him. But no one has any injuries by the end, so it counts as a victory.

Choosing the clothing determines his weapons setup. It’s good. He goes to the armory and spends an afternoon testing out all the tiny pistols until he finds the four that feel easiest in his hands.

This is skill, to handle these miniature guns, to reload at speed. To fire accurately under time pressure. The body knows what to do. His mind directs the body, so that these skills are turned to positive use.

To protect Pepper, who has shown him kindness.

It is.

Oh.

It is similar to his request of Romanoff.

Pepper is trusting him to both protect her and protect civilians from her.

That is a lot of trust.

Pretty big responsibility.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Mission note: get back into the habit of carrying handkerchiefs.

Having acquired guns, holsters, and shoes, Barnes steels himself and goes to the lab floor to make necessary adjustments.

Stark’s dislike is a palpable feeling in the air.

But it is interesting to note that although Stark growls and glares in Barnes’s direction, he doesn’t exclude Barnes from dinners in the common area. He hasn’t sent Barnes back to Brooklyn. He doesn’t say no.

Curious.

It’s long, fiddly work, attaching knife sheaths to gun holsters and modifying his shoes. By the end of the afternoon, the thumb knife emerges from the tip of the right shoe with a satisfying little click. Already the strategizing part of his brain is imagining how to sweep with that leg, how to flick out with sharp little kicks that’ll drop an attacker, half with surprise and half with a brand-new tendon problem in their knee.

He makes a compartment in the heel of the left shoe, just because it draws the work out. The
workshop is quiet behind him, and Stark’s robot helper stands close by, a red light on its domed top gazing at him steadily. Identified: like.

He likes the robot helper. Its attention holds no sense of pressure or obligation, yet the speed with which it responds to his whispered requests for materials suggests that it is gratified to assist.

Good.

He likes working with his hands. It makes calm, much needed after recent days. These hands did violence –

PROTECT

Yes, mission.

Violence in the service of protection. But it was still ugly, and difficult. And the logical outcome of these preparations of weapons is more violence. For the moment, however, it is plain work. Simple skill of the hands to modify, strengthen. To make neat stitches, sewing the sheaths to the holsters. To rig the thumb knife inside the shoe skillfully, so that the mechanism is smooth and fast, while the shoe retains its shape.

Maybe Romanoff will give him some her little shocker things to put in the hollowed-out heel.

Maybe Stark will give him a panic button.

Either way, the day’s work makes enough quiet between his ears that he doesn’t even mind the increased upper back pain from hunching over all day. He leaves the lab to the sound of beeping and Banner’s laughter.

He hopes that he will get to see the little robot again.

Preliminary preparations are finished. There are 11 days remaining until he and Pepper leave for her meeting in France.

“Looks like you’re all set, Buck,” Rogers says, looking over Barnes’s handiwork and springing the toe-knife mechanism repeatedly. “Guess you’ll have plenty of time to talk through things with Sam.”

Confirm.

And to visit the Olds, to help keep him steady. To practice with the sunglasses.

To train with Steve.

But that’s the fun part.

Chapter End Notes

To make up for the sparseness of this chapter, a few extras:

1. The account Hydra was going to use to pay the real estate agent was one of the ones JARVIS took money from for Barnes. WOMP WOMP
2. Steve did not join Barton for frozen pizza and bad movies. After the mission and Barnes's reaction, he needed some quiet time.

3. Natasha is also the last-ditch, fall-back murder plan for Clint, Maria, and Nick. It's Nick that *really* gets to her.

4. Tyler and Dale wonder all the time what ever became of Asshat Dude. They retrieved Tyler's phone and took eight selfies with the Hydra agent, before they called they police. They were incensed to discover that the police needed to ask them so many questions that they missed the first three songs of the Wandering Dragons from Jupiter concert at the Hophouse Brewery and therefore missed being among the first 200 people, who got special beer glasses. But they were delighted to get their Coachella pictures back.
Reinforcements and muscle memory

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place during the events of chapter 7 of Team-Building Exercises
(http://archiveofourown.org/works/3456710/chapters/7822196)

Flying Sam arrives in time to grab sushi for lunch.

“I’ll make you soup,” Mr. Hayashi says, scowling, “but smart people know that’s for winter.”

“I like this guy,” flying Sam says.

They skip the soup, but discover that seaweed comes in salad form, which has kind of a weird texture but is otherwise enjoyable.

“So,” flying Sam says as they watch Mr. Hayashi construct a fifth round of rolls and nigiri, “you’ve known Barnes for a while, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” Mr. Hayashi says. “He’s been coming in here since last winter. Used to crawl in frowning at everybody and talking to his soup.”

Talking to my soup. What the hell.

Mr. Hayashi taps Barnes on the back of the hand.

“Then you went and got some friends and fattened yourself up. Much better.”

CONFIRM

“Much better,” Barnes repeats, and makes a smile.

He looks over, and Rogers is looking like he might wander into handkerchief territory if the conversation continues along this line.

Flying Sam is talented at idle conversation. When it’s just Barnes and Rogers, they spend much of their meals in silence. Flying Sam asks questions in a tone that indicates curiosity. They learn many details about Mr. Hayashi’s life and family.

These are questions Barnes would have liked to ask. But he does not have the same skill set as flying Sam.

It is yet another gift flying Sam has given him, to know that Kazue has a brother. That Takao, the grandson, is Kazue’s nephew. That Mr. Hayashi’s family in Japan were linen weavers for five generations.

“Well,” flying Sam says as they leave, “that absolutely lived up to its reputation.”

Identified: pleasure.

The afternoon is warm enough that the three of them sit on the small balcony to talk. Additional
benefit: this makes an opportunity to keep practicing with Rogers’s sunglasses.

“So tell me about this thing with Pepper.”

Barnes describes the plan. Sam laughs a great deal when Barnes explains that Potts asked him because he’s the scariest-looking person she knows.

Why does he laugh.

“She’s totally right. You are a creepy badass motherfucker, Barnes.”

“Confirm.”

Even without knowing the reason for amusement, it is pleasant to sit in the sun while Rogers and flying Sam laugh.

Rogers ruins it – of course – by bringing up the bank robbers.

DENY

No, I know, mission. Gotta give flying Sam all relevant background information. It just sucks.

CONFIRM

Yeah.

The expression on flying Sam’s face as Rogers describes the dissociation event is very nearly alarming.

“And you took him with you?”

“I thought he’d be safe! He and Maria were just supposed to be doing support. If I’d thought for a second it would go the way it did!”

Barnes shudders.

“What is, it, Barnes?” flying Sam asks.

“If I hadn’t been there,” Barnes says. “Ninety-six percent probability that the guy with the alien rifle would’ve gotten a second shot off.”

Subjective body temperature: frozen solid.

“Survival probability of a direct hit, under twenty percent.”

“Bucky.”

Shrug.

It’s true.

“Still sucks, though,” flying Sam says.

CONFIRM

Confirm.
“I would’ve been okay, Buck. You should never have been there.”

Incorrect.

CONFIRM

“Okay,” flying Sam says, raising his hands, “that is so far off topic I might need a map to get back on track. Barnes, what the hell are you thinking, going on this trip with Pepper so soon after that?”

The sting of this question is magnified by the pointed expression on Rogers’s face.

Lovely.

“Project two,” he says. “Demonstrate appreciation to mission assists by providing help with personal needs. Additionally, this distracts from current upset by providing defined tasks.”

Rogers and flying Sam open their mouths, close them, open them again.

“Okay,” flying Sam says after this satisfying pause. “You couldn’t think of something maybe slightly less challenging until you get your legs back under you?”

“Security is what she needs.”

Rogers frowns but does not speak.

Flying Sam stares out at the city for several minutes, then lets out a deep breath.

“What are you thinking you’re gonna do to get ready? Besides basking in the warm glow of my presence, I mean.”

Barnes lists the plan’s components: training to ensure that bodily responses are automatic, punctuated with calming activities, such as trips to Brooklyn and to the Carp, laying in baking supplies. A twenty-four hour period prior to departure of only things on the good list.

“Dude. That is actually a great plan,” flying Sam says. “You’re working the system. That’s good.”

Affirmation is pleasing.

“You think it’ll be enough?”

Assessing.

“Hope so.”

Flying Sam nods.

“Okay. I think it’s great, Barnes. And you know you can call me if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

“You hanging in okay in the meantime?”

Nod.

“Sleeping mostly okay?”

Nod.
And, because flying Sam doesn’t know to ask, Barnes adds,

“Steve too.”

Flying Sam grins slowly and shifts in his chair to look at Rogers.

“Mostly okay, huh Steve?”

Rogers rolls his eyes.

“I’m fine. Bucky’s a worrywart.”

That’s a hell of a way to describe the protection detail, champ.

CONFIRM

“I’m fine! Jesus, a little nightmare now and again is perfectly normal.”

“Mm hmm,” flying Sam says.

“Argh, Bucky.”

The briefing loves that statement. It plays the two words back at him in a variety of tones suggesting that Rogers has said them to him regularly since childhood.

Cute.

“I can see you’re real apologetic, Buck.”

Shrug.

“Y’all are better than TV,” flying Sam says.

This signals the end of story time. Barnes identifies: surprise. He had anticipated requiring a great deal more analysis and adjustment to his plan.

It leaves a hole in the weekend that gets filled with Avengers shenanigans.

There is a black metal box on the deck outside the common area, near the large water feature. Banner makes a fire in it.

Why is no one else watching this process.

Banner has interesting peripherals: a large metal mug into which he inserts small black squares, then ignites them. After a brief time, he spreads these into the metal box and lays chunks of wood on top, then closes the lid and goes away.

Is this science.

Barnes would ask Rogers or flying Sam, but they’re too busy. Flying Sam is at the bar, putting together mixtures of alcohol in an attempt to find one so awful even Barton won’t drink it.

Losing game, flying Sam.

Banner returns, carrying a large platter.
“Barnes, drag that table over here, please,” Banner says.

It is acceptable to join in the science experiment. Barnes drags over the table. Banner sets the platter down and uncovers it, revealing a large stack of raw meats.

What the hell.

“You don’t know about grilling? You’re gonna love this,” Banner says.

Banner’s assessment: correct. The black metal box is a cooking device. Even better: being put to work chopping vegetables and mixing them with olive oil and spices (so they can go on the grill in a metal basket) prevents one from either (a) lurking in corners or (b) having to attempt idle conversation.

Banner keeps up a running conversation about appropriate cooking times and internal meat temperatures that is informative without requiring a response. This is kindness. It is also valuable information for future use.

“The hell are you over here doing, Bucky?” Rogers asks at one point.

“Sous-chef,” Banner says. “He’s very efficient.”

Rogers makes a pretty good smile.

“Let me guess: we’re gonna have to buy a grill now.”

“Confirm.”

Grilling was definitely invented with someone like Barnes in mind. He doesn’t even need a utensil to flip the meat.

Nice to have a wholly positive use for his metal arm.

“Can you sense temperature with that thing?” Banner asks, having instructed Barnes on how to lay the salmon fillets skin-side down on the cool side of the grill while the steaks rest.

“No.”

“Hmm. You could probably get Tony to make you something for that. Sensors in your fingertips, maybe.”

That could be useful. If Stark didn’t hate him.

“Unlikely.”

Banner squints over at Stark, who is currently holding Potts in his lap, making her scream and kick her legs while he does something to her neck with his mouth.

“You might be surprised, Barnes. Give it time.”

Whatever.

The meal is loud but pleasant. He and Rogers bring the long table outside. Potts produces little lanterns and candles. Hill has brought bread (a nice Italian-style loaf, with butter and roasted garlic to spread on it), and there is enough wine to pickle an entire human. Maybe two.
Flying Sam sits in the middle of the table, where everyone vies for his attention.

GOOD

Confirm.

Barnes sits at the end, as usual, with Rogers on one side and Barton, listing to starboard and barely awake, in the other. Banner walks over after several minutes to ensure that Barnes has pieces of both the steak and fish.

“You helped cook them, you have to try them both,” he says.

They are excellent. Skill set enhanced.

“Thanks for showing me how,” Barnes says.

“It was my absolute pleasure.”

“He’s a really nice man,” Rogers says after Banner has returned to his seat.

“Yes.”

“Just follow your plan, Barnes. You’ll do great. And call if you need me,” flying Sam says the next afternoon, on his way to Harlem before he heads back to DC. “And stop baking for my mama, or she might decide she likes you better.”

This is a distinct possibility. Flying Sam takes with him a box of lemon-blueberry muffins with crunchy sugar on top. Barnes had to make three batches. Rogers really likes them.

Training days are difficult. Not bad: just difficult. The first day, it’s just him and Rogers, dodging each other around the obstacle course while Barnes gets used to his weapons setup.

Afterward, he lies on the floor for 10 minutes.

The second day, Romanoff shows up, and she and Rogers come at him from complex angles. The cold thing that lives in the back of his head tries to wake up – it knows this kind of training. But Barnes shoves it back.

He lies on the floor after for 20 minutes, and they spend the afternoon in Brooklyn.

“You’re gonna do WHAT?” Ollie shouts at him.

“Dear heart, I think I agree with Ollie in this case,” Esther says.

“Well that’s a damn miracle.”

Nice of Ollie to try to lighten the moment.

Barnes looks at Lidia.

“It’s good of you to help your friend,” she says. “Let’s keep our eyes crossed that nothing exciting will happen.”
“Lidia, it’s fingers, not eyes,” Rogers says.

“Maybe in this country,” Lidia says.

But she winks at Barnes.

“Excitement follows these kids around like a bad penny,” Ollie grumbles.

Barnes wishes the mission would yell DENY at that one, but it doesn’t.

The third day, Barton brings his brand of projectile trouble into the mix. Barnes wears his shoes, and Romanoff wears a slinky black suit from Stark that will resist knives.

There’s a very tricky moment when he catches Rogers in the calf. The sight of Rogers’s blood causes a brief internal cascade of alarms and negative responses.

“That’s enough of that for the day,” Romanoff announces.

“For shit’s sake, Natasha, just give me a damn band-aid, the thing’s gonna seal up in a minute and a half.”

And the briefing butts into Barnes’s general upset with,

“Jesus Christ, Bucky, you act like I ain’t broken my nose three times already, get off me, you lug.”

Okay.

That puts things into perspective.

By the time he’s done breathing slowly and emerges from the corner, the injury to Steve’s leg is a small, scabbed-over line.

The expression on his face is a smirk.

“Told you.”

Romanoff smacks him on the arm.

Good job, Romanoff.

CONFIRM

That day requires 40 minutes on the floor.

But the training is good. It’s stressful, trying to balance effective practice with injury avoidance. The cold presence in the back of his head keeps trying to get interested in what’s going on. But greater than either of those is a sense of enjoyment. He works hard, pelting through the obstacle course, throwing knives and shooting blanks at mission-assists. All four of them get sweaty and tired every day. But they keep showing up. Even Hill comes down one morning, just to make the odds more uneven.

She’s tricky. Comes out from underneath one of the obstacles and gets Barnes around the ankles. He’s on the floor a full 20 seconds before he can get away.

It’s like she’s an octopus. Not nearly as strong as he is, but never in the same place for 2 seconds together. Pretty impressive.
It’s good. It wears him out sufficiently to allow sleep each night. After a training session is also the best time to practice with the sunglasses – he’s too tired to react too much.

The suit fitting goes well. The tailor is obviously well trained at his job. Barnes wears the holsters, and under the thick fabric, they’re unnoticeable.

The suit would look well with the blue shirt the women bought for him, or the red one. But he’ll wear a matte white one with a plain black tie, and look like a chump security jerk.

“It’ll hide you well, sir,” the tailor says.

Right.

The final day of training, he and Rogers drag themselves, Barton, and Romanoff to the Carp for a late lunch.

Romanoff sits at the table and makes dimples all over the place.

“What is this?” Mr. Hayashi says, “you know a girl?”

“You would not believe what I put up with,” Romanoff says.

Mr. Hayashi leans down close, and squints his eyes.

“I would believe it,” he says.

Romanoff laughs aloud. Pretty nice sound.

For such a tiny person, Romanoff sure can pack away the raw fish.

“Good job,” Barton whispers at him on their way out.

CONFIRM

Thirty-six hours before departure, the suit is hanging in his closet, the morning’s training is over, he has required only 15 minutes to lie on the floor, and he has achieved nutrient intake sufficient to prevent any weakness about the knees.

As arranged by Potts, Barnes presents himself at the salon.

He has seen the salon before – it’s next to the coffee bar – but he has only been inside it at night, when it was empty, back in the days of nighttime patrols. While open, it is brightly lit by fluorescent lights and is loud with the sounds of hairdryers and pop music.

“Hey,” the lanky young man with 2 facial piercings and a green stripe in his hair says, “I’m Jordan. Ms. Potts and Mr. Stark said you’d be coming.”

Stark.

What does Stark have to do with it.

With great annoyance, Barnes learns exactly what Stark had to do with it all. He supposes that many people would find the salon experience pleasant, with the hot towels and all the scalp rubbing. Barnes, as a twitchy person who has received excessive torture to the head area (among others), finds
the entire experience awful.

“Hey man, does your arm do that all the time?” Jordan asks.

Jordan is extremely lucky that said arm, currently shifting and whirring with a metallic buzz, is not embedded in his torso. It is only through strict mental focus that Barnes is able to keep the arm from doing more along the torso-embedding track than simply shifting and twitching.

“Dude, I promise I won’t cut you,” Jordan says.

Dude, Barnes thinks, I can’t promise I won’t cut you.

The electric razor buzzes at a frequency not unlike a device the briefing knows but does not wish to divulge. Physical reaction: sweating, flinching.

“I’m right here, Buck,” Rogers says from 1 m to the left of the chair.

Okay.

Okay, focus on Rogers.

CONFIRM

This is for Potts.

CONFIRM

Barnes waves his hand, and Rogers steps forward, so that he’s within sight even while Jordan works.

Steve hates being stared at. But these are exceptional circumstances. Barnes focuses on his face, uses it as an anchor, and is able to sit in the chair under the stupid, hot cape without losing control.

He therefore sees when the expression on Rogers’s face starts to go twitchy around the edges.

The fuck is Jordan doing to him.

There is blow-drying, followed by clipping, followed by some sort of weird scissors that feel as if they shred his hair somehow. There is no more hair hanging down around his neck. If he glances down, the brown strands in his lap are many centimeters long.

Rogers presses his lips together.

Then there is shaving, first with the buzzing electric razor, then warm foam and a straight razor. Jordan tries to lay the chair back for this, but Barnes remains sitting up.

“Okay, sir,” Jordan says, frowning.

But he contorts himself to shave Barnes’s face upright, then wipes with a warm towel.

Rogers is looking a little twitchy about the mouth.

“Okay, check it out,” Jordan says, and turns Barnes to the mirror.

WHAT

Confirm.
WHAT

Confirm.

No wonder Rogers’s face has been doing weird things.

Mission. I look like a goddamn idiot.

CONFIRM

As always, thank for your support.

“That’s. That’s real great, Buck,” Rogers says in a strangled voice.

“Mr. Stark was very specific,” Jordan says.

Doesn’t that just figure.

And of course there’s a dinner planned, so that everyone can laugh at him, with Rogers’s dumb haircut and Stark’s even dumber beard.

So stupid.

“I’m so sorry, Barnes,” Potts says, not even bothering to hide her laughter. “But you have to think nobody from Hydra would notice you like this.”

The one glimmer of light in this bullshit.

“You can stop worrying, babe, now I wouldn’t touch him with a ninety-foot pole,” Romanoff says.

What.

“Right? Me neither,” Barton says.

Barnes sits in his chair under the potted tree.

Gross.

Day -1, however, cannot be ruined by dumb-looking hair and beard. Barnes rises early, and Katie is far too kind to make any snippy comments about his looks. It is conceivable that she was warned somehow. Nonetheless, she hands over his mocha along with good wishes for the mission.

“I mean, you’re who I’d pick, if I needed backup,” she says.

“Thanks.”

Otherwise, Barnes sticks around the apartment. He bakes a loaf of bread and a couple dozen cookies, so Rogers won’t starve to death during the 76-hour absence. He finishes his book (Last Call) and makes meatloaf for dinner.

“You ready for this, Buck?”

Who knows? Who’s ever ready for anything?

“Hope so.”
“I can go with, if you want. Take me two minutes to pack a bag.”

Barnes shakes his head. Rogers is too visible. Too well known.

“Okay. Okay, but promise to call me, all right? Tell me the minute you have any trouble.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me, Buck.”

“I promise.”

This is obviously insufficient to quell Rogers’s worry. Barnes can remember his own such worry, when Rogers went on the hospital tour.

“I promise,” he repeats.

“I have faith,” Rogers says. “It’ll go great.”

Barnes doesn’t sleep much, but replaying that statement, while he lies in the dark watching Rogers sleep, brings comfort.
It was weird enough staying behind while Rogers went on his hospital tour. It’s twice as strange to travel himself, with not-Steve.

He has had a hard workout involving arrows somehow equipped with Romanoff’s shocker things, which (a) is terrible, and (b) sting so badly that Barnes is genuinely exhausted by the time they pile into the car for the airport.

Stark is wrapped around Potts, glaring at Barnes.

“Tony. Come on,” Rogers says.

Barnes doesn’t sweat it. It’s like being stared down by a squirrel.

“I think I’m allowed to hate my resources being used for a plan that I both disapprove of and am not invited to.”

“Of course you are,” Potts says. “I mean, it’s not going to make any difference, but you are absolutely allowed to hate it.”

Poor Stark. He won’t allow himself to glare at Potts, so Barnes takes the hit.

CONFIRM

Barnes sits up straighter.

Mission. We’re already on duty.

CONFIRM

Barnes bears the staring with perfect calm.

The jet is much larger than the one he and Rogers took to DC, but the sight of it still induces an increased heart rate.

In the background, Barnes can hear Stark fussing and Potts murmuring, while Rogers stands too
close to him, wearing one of his four standard worry expressions. Barnes can tell that Rogers is currently composed of more than 50% sheer desire to hug.

Sorry pal.

He grasps Steve’s wrist.

“Okay.” Steve says, making a tiny, miserable excuse for a smile. “It’ll be fine, right? You’ll lurk around behind Pepper scaring the shit out of a bunch of capitalists and have a great time.”

CORRECT

Barnes feels his face curl into a smile.

“Sure thing,” he says.

Have to get there first.

Set task: narrow focus as tightly as possible.

Potts is kind about it. They sit across from one another at a little table, and they go through her itinerary folder. She gives him dossiers on all the high-powered assfaces she has meetings scheduled with. Reading doesn't fully distract from the change in pressure and the noise, but it gives him an excuse to lay his hands on the table and look down until baseline functions return to normal.

When he looks up, there’s a large glass of water sitting in front of him.

Okay. Good. The circulated air is dry.

The flight attendants serve them a meal – salad, with seeds and dried fruits scattered through it.

Caloric load: insufficient.

On the other hand, all that crunching unstops his ears.

And the goat cheese on top isn't bad.

"Ugh, I hate doing stuff like this," Potts says, stretching her arms over her head. "I'm so grateful you're here, Barnes."

She makes a rueful smile.

"And I'm really sorry about your hair."

Ugh.

"Yeah," he says, "me too."

That wasn't calculated to make her laugh, but it's okay.

Not too long after they eat, the flight attendants make themselves busy at the seats farther back, twisting them around and lowering them until each makes a small bed.

Neat.

"I hope you can sleep, Barnes," Potts says, laying her hand on his arm briefly.
Seems unlikely.

"You too," he says.

But once he's lying down behind the screen and the lights have gone out, it's not so bad. He can hear Potts on the phone, presumably speaking to Stark.

That means he could call Rogers. But Rogers is worried, and Barnes can feel that the noise, the weird air, and the unfamiliarity have left no room for words in his mouth.

He sends a text instead.

'BUILDING. PLEASE REPORT ON ROGERS.'

'I hope your journey is progressing well, Sergeant,' the screen reads almost immediately. 'There is no rough weather reported between your current location and your destination, so there should be little to wake you.'

Then a new window opens, and it is the feed from Steve's bedroom monitor.

GOOD

No kidding, mission.

Rogers is sitting up in bed, reading *Pride & Prejudice* – the copy that was third down in the stack on the table next to Barnes's bed.

Rogers. You better not have been messing with my stuff.

DENY

Shut it, mission.

Hypothesis: Rogers does not enjoy the book. He frowns at it several times, once holds it out farther from his face and squints. But once he smiles abruptly, as if he finally got one of the jokes.

Don't be a dumbass, Rogers, that book is hilarious.

CONFIRM

It enhances calm to lie on the weird, narrow bed and watch Rogers read until he lays the book down, sighs heavily while staring at his monitor, then turns out the light and lies down. He lies on his side with his eyes open for a long time.

In the morning, there is time only for basic hygiene and a sad, demoralizing breakfast (oatmeal. Pepper. Come on.) before they land in Toulouse.

It's fine. It's vaguely familiar in a way Barnes suspects would make the city *not* fine if he were to go digging for memories.

Thankfully, he has duties to perform.

The hotel is tacky, but with security that meets the absolute rock bottom of acceptable, with a few adjustments.

Putting on the suit is a bit like putting on the tactical gear, except without the squeezing. He puts on a
different person. Like when he and Romanoff pretended at the Russian restaurant.

He's not Barnes, twitchy and brain-damaged. He's just some anonymous security jerk. A really, really good anonymous security jerk.

Taking this tack, it's almost fun. He sweats gallons inside his suit, but he can focus on the task of casing the room, shadowing Potts, and making scary facial expressions at handsy assholes without freaking out over the unfamiliar surroundings or close press of strangers.

Good job.

CONFIRM

Most of these smiling oppressors of the working class are harmless enough on a personal level. They'll obviously try to get away with whatever they can, but Pott's straightforward confidence (and terrifying outfit) and his own looming bulk keep almost all of them in line.

Almost.

“But surely you see that you are missing out on a robust profit center,” one man says in clear, breathy Moroccan French.

He keeps shifting back and forth on his feet and cutting his gaze to Barnes, as if he wishes to lean into Potts’s space past acceptability but fears having his face removed from his skull.

A reasonable fear.

“Madame. We are both business people, yes? Why would you cripple your enterprise in this fashion?”

“This won’t go anywhere,” Potts says in her finishing-school French. “Stark Industries is out of the weapons business for good.”

“Don’t be naïve, Madame. The world remains a dangerous place. Your Iron Man and his freak show friends cannot keep it safe. New York proved that.”

Potts is already stepping back, her rage clear on her face.

“Madame, listen, please! I have uncovered a technology laid aside by the Soviets. But I need your arc reactor —“

“Please,” she says.

Barnes steps forward and lifts the man under his armpits. As a jackass with an overfed bank account, he has his own (pitiful) security detail. As they rush forward, Barnes deposits his burden into the arms of the two smaller.

The largest of the three steps into Barnes’s personal space. He’s a gigantic fucker, over 2 m tall, broad enough to rival himself and Steve. The man stares down at Barnes, trusting in his size to intimidate.

How cute.

Barnes holds out his gloved left hand, as if to shake. The man grins and takes it. The classic low-key pissing contest for public spaces.
Unfortunately for this asshole, he has just grabbed a high-tech cybernetic device.

Barnes uses slowly but steadily increasing pressure. He credits the guy with decent pain tolerance. He doesn’t turn red and start to sweat until the metacarpal nearest his thumb cracks.

“Walk away,” Barnes whispers.

It’s more of a lurch, but at least it’s away.

Barnes turns, and for 3.7 seconds, he cannot locate Potts.

Three. Point. Seven.

It might as well be a month.

The cold presence at the back of his head rolls over, threatens to unfold and take over – i.e., burn the whole place to the ground.

Where the fuck is she.

If anything happens to her, Stark won’t even be his biggest problem. He’ll take care of that himself.

Is that?

Her hand, the dark cuff of her suit jacket, 12 m away and moving in front of a dark-haired white man in a charcoal suit.

CAREFUL

Right, mission. Stay on task. Keep it quiet.

He shoulders his way through the crowd, chasing that one dark suit in a crowd of dark suits, once catching of glimpse of Potts’s hair.

The man is guiding her quickly toward the side exit. Barnes increases his speed. He’s gaining on them, meter by meter.

If they reach the door, protocol be damned. He will run.

He will catch her. No matter what it takes.

They slow. Barnes winds through the crowd, a blur of male faces with conservative haircuts.

They slow further.

He will catch them.

They stop. The man shifts to the side, and Potts sits on a high stool. She is smiling. She nods once, then looks out into the crowd.


The man turns and hands her a champagne flute.

“-in the day, but thank you. Really, I am fine,” she’s saying as Barnes approaches.

He reaches them. She is here. She is safe, and within arm’s reach.
She smiles at him.

“Jones! Great job back there, that guy was absolutely scaring me.”

Nod.

She turns to the man standing by her.

“And thank you for pulling me away, Richard. That was helpful.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

The man takes her champagne flute away and puts it on the bar.

“I’m perfectly fine. Jones is extremely frightening, as you can see. I knew he would take care of me.”

CONFIRM

The mission is so pleased.

The man looks at him. Barnes clenches his jaw and attempts to exude maximum menace.

“I see that,” the man says.

He leans in and kisses Potts on the cheek.

“I’ll leave you in his capable hands, then. Great to see you, Pepper. Talk later?”

“Of course.”

“Jones,” Potts says in a crisp tone, “grab me one of those fruit plates, will you? There’s a waiter behind you.”

Easy enough.

Grab a fruit plate. Sure. Three steps to approach. Three breaths.

“Follow me,” Potts says, carrying a (sealed) water bottle.

They go behind a pillar, somewhat sheltered by drapery, and she kicks off her heels, trades him plate for bottle.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

What.

“Are you okay.”

“No way, I asked first, Barnes. I’ve known Richard since my early days as Tony’s assistant. He’s lovely. He was just trying to help, but I guess it scared the crap out of you to turn around and see me gone.”

CONFIRM

“Uh. Yes,” he says.

“I promise I’m fine,” she says. “You did really great. But I do need you to tell me whether you’re
“Status okay,” he says. “Calming down.”

She reaches out and rubs his arm.

“Good,” she says. “Good.”

After her snack, Potts works the room, charming the brains out of everyone. It’s impressive how she can stand stubbornly in front of a frowning banker or captain of industry, smiling but speaking firmly of corporate responsibility and profit-making opportunities, until they soften toward her.

Stark has put his company into excellent hands.

There’s only one other person who makes his hackles rise.

“Sweetheart, you can’t tell me Stark’s building superhero suits for himself and not planning to flood the market. Come on. It would be like shooting myself in the foot to even speak to you.”

Sweetheart.

KNEECAPS

Yeah, mission. Good idea.

Because he is watching closely, Barnes sees how Potts’s smile goes brittle at the edges.

“Tony’s out of the business these days, I’m afraid. He’s definitely doing some interesting stuff in robotics. I mean, you should see his lab -”

“What’s he got in his lab?” the man asks.

Rude.

Also. If this guy is getting anywhere near Stark’s workshop, Barnes is going to hide his robot friend in his bedroom closet.

“That’s beside the point. What I’m saying is that Stark Industries is doing some really interesting stuff. I’d think you would be interested in a partnership. Your networked AI experiments are impressive.”

The man leans in.

“The hell do you know about my network experiments?”

Barnes steps in close. The man glares, but he straightens.

“Mr. Wilkinson, your article is out on peer review. You have to know something that interesting is making the rounds.”

“Stark stole my article?”

ELBOWS

Agreed, that is an excellent additional target, mission.
“Excuse me,” Potts says. “I didn’t realize this was the first time you’ve ever submitted an article to a peer-reviewed journal. I just assumed, given how interesting your testing was, that you have significant scientific experience. Let me explain how peer review works.”

She pauses and smiles.

It’s an excellent smile. Makes Barnes think of all the knives he currently has about his person.

“This conversation is over,” Asshole Robot Man says.

“Good,” Potts says.

Barnes watches the man stomp away, the deep heaviness of his hurt little feelings obviously settling into his feet.

“Pepper,” he says, “that was great.”

CONFIRM

“Oh my gosh! I hate being a jerk to someone like that, but for heaven’s sake. Sweetheart. I could’ve kicked him.”

CONFIRM

“Me too.”

She grins.

“You see? This is why I asked you along.”

The rest of the afternoon goes without incident. Potts talks, and charms, and drinks two more bottles of water behind the pillar. As the day goes on, more and more creepy old dudes smile at her sideways and ask what she plans to “wear to dinner.”

The way they ask, one suspects it’s less a dinner than an orgy.

“Oh,” she says with a twinkle, “I have SO much to do, I hope I can make it tonight!”

“Don’t disappoint me,” most of them say, each clearly thinking he is the cleverest person ever to live.

“I’m so not going to that dinner,” Potts mutters at him. “Ugh, it’s a drunken nightmare.”

Mission: hypothesis that Potts would go to the dinner if she had standard protection detail.

CONFIRM

Yeah, I think so too.

But he’ll take it.

The evening is good. He and Potts spend it quietly in their hotel room, and it gives him the space to find calm again. To text with Rogers and update his status with flying Sam.

This is enough to lull them both into a sense of security that just makes it seem even more unfair the next day when everything goes to shit.
In the middle of the screaming and chaos, Barnes goes to a place inside his mind like the warehouse back in Queens, like Philadelphia: there is a thing that needs to be done, and he does it. It’s not like the cold thing in his head, more like a blank practicality. There is a bomb, and his job is to protect Pepper, so he does it.

Everyone falls apart around him, so Barnes keeps it together long enough for him and Potts to get airborne, and for Potts to fall asleep.

Then the whole thing erupts in the middle of his chest – the travel, the press of people, the danger. The moment when he couldn’t see Pepper, and the moment when the bomb went off. The screams of the injured, and pulling burned bodies out of the wreckage. The way the flight attendants flinched away from the sight of him with no shirt on.

He wants to be home.

Pepper is safe, mostly unharmed, and they are headed back to New York. That’s good. That’s mission success, despite weird aggressive dudes and young men wearing bombs.

It’s mission success. Without even having had to kill anyone.

Potts sighs in her sleep and shifts so that her head leans more snugly against his right arm.

She’s safe.

They’re both safe.

He just really, really wants to be home.

Barnes finds a little sleep, finally, and wakes to learn that they aren’t far out from landing. His quiet hysterics in the dark and sleep sitting up with Potts resting against his arm have left him feeling as if his internal reserves are at about 6%.

Nothing else had better fucking happen, or I am going to lose it, mission.

CONFIRM

Nice to know you’re with me.

CONFIRM

Thankfully, the only thing that happens is a smooth landing, and when Potts looks out the window, she gives a soft cry.

Stark and Steve are standing by a car on the tarmac, waiting.

Identified: strong emotion.

Keep it together, Barnes.

TRY

Confirm.

He carries Potts off the plane and sets her down in front of Stark. He turns to Steve, who is clenching
and unclenching his fists.

Under the circumstances, Barnes chooses that this is an appropriate time for hugging.

“Dammit, Steve, you little jerk,” the briefing plays in a tone of great fondness.

ROGERS

Yeah.

For just a second, Barnes puts his head down so his forehead rests on Steve’s neck. When he breathes, that warm smell is the scent of home. Like he said at Christmas, and then spent some time forgetting thanks to all the hoopla. That’s home, there. Here.

For just a second, Barnes stands and lets go and lets Steve take some of his weight. He takes a little rest.

They ride back to the tower, and it’s good to sit close together in the car. Barnes definitely feels at least 30 degrees off-kilter, so it’s good to have Rogers’s bulk to hold him upright. All of this is familiar – Rogers, Potts, even Stark and the familiar bland interior of the car.

Stark keeps looking at him with a thoughtful frown.

“Babe,” Stark says at one point, “why don’t you just go hot and heal your feet?”

And Potts weeps all over again.

“I hate it, Tony, I don’t want to, I don’t like it,” she says between sobs.

Asshole.

He and Stark glare at each other for the rest of the car ride.

But to emerge from the car into Building JARVIS is comfort. Barnes feels further tension drop out of him. Even better to get off the elevator at their floor. Better still to find Romanoff on their sofa, grumpy with worry, bitching at him.

Best of all to shave off that stupid goatee and take off the stupid Stark Industries t-shirt.

With all the product out of his hair and his face clean-shaven, the person looking at him in the bathroom mirror is more familiar to the briefing than to himself.

“Oh,” Rogers says when Barnes turns.

Apparently there are still some expressions that Barnes hasn’t learned to decipher.

“Is this okay.”

And a smile breaks out across Steve’s face that is definitely sunrise-adjacent.

A little more tension drops away.

GOOD

Confirm.
“Yeah, Bucky, of course,” Steve says. “You just – look like you used to. It’s. It’s good to see.”
Note: he said ‘look like you used to.’ Not any variety of ‘look like yourself.’

Mission. We’re both learning.

CONFIRM

It’s good to be home.

CONFIRM CONFIRM CONFIRM

“Well don’t get used to it, pal, I’m growing my hair right back out,” he says.

“Of course, how else are you gonna hide that hideous face of yours?” Rogers says.

GOOD JOB

Yeah.

They go to the common area and find themselves the last to arrive. Even Potts is there, sitting on one of the sofas with her bandaged feet up on a cushion, wet hair in a pile atop her head, a mimosa in one hand, and a plate on her lap.

“Hey, Barnes!”

Assessing: this phrase is shouted by everyone except Stark and Romanoff.

What is this.

“Hey, man,” Colonel Rhodes says, shaking Barnes’s hand with enthusiasm, “thanks for taking care of our girl. Good job. Really good job. You want a mimosa?”

Barnes nods only because surprise has taken over all his higher brain function. Where did Colonel Rhodes even come from?

“Drink up, buddy, things’ll make better sense afterward,” Barton says, patting his arm.

Romanoff rolls her eyes behind Barton’s shoulder.

Barton and Romanoff herd him and Rogers to another sofa. They sit.

“Barnes, your face is back!” Potts says with a slight slur. “I’m so glad, that goatee was horrible.”

“Hey!” Stark says.

“Oh, I love yours, Tony. Yours makes you look Machiavellian. Barnes’s made him look like he injected steroids straight into his brain.”

What.

“I love you so much,” Stark says.

CONFIRM
Yeah. She is pretty terrific.

Hill marches over and plants herself in front of the two of them, wearing her rage-equals-worry face.

It’s okay, Hill. Potts is back where it’s safe.

“Banner’s got eggs, pancakes, bacon, sausage, biscuits, and fruit,” she says. “You sit, I’m bringing plates. What do you want?”

The hell kind of question is that.

“Whatever you bring, we’re gonna eat,” Rogers says.

CORRECT

Confirm.

Romanoff plops down on the sofa next to him.

“Jesus, now you look about fourteen years old,” she says.

Whatever.

“I know it’s hard,” he says. “Whose hair are you going to braid now.”

“Mine!” Potts squeaks.

Her champagne flute is empty. Stark takes it from her hand and goes to the kitchen. She has her nose wrinkled up in a way that is extremely fetching.

“I can’t even tease her, she’s too cute,” Romanoff says.

“Confirm,” Barnes says.

“Shut up you guys,” Potts says. “I love you too.”

Hill returns with plates laden with food that she hands down to him and Steve. Moderate-sized servings of everything.

Excellent.

“Hold on, I’ll get syrup,” she says.

It is pleasant. Hill continues to bring food to them, and everyone is solicitous of Potts and her bandaged, slippered feet.

It’s good to eat Banner’s excellent breakfast, knowing that what lies ahead is a day spent in his own home, a nap, and safety.

“Hey,” Banner says once everyone is seated with food, “here’s to Pepper being home.”

Good toast.

CONFIRM

“And here’s to Barnes bringing her back safe,” he says.
“Yeah!” Barton says.

And they toast him. Rogers. Rogers’s friends. Potts, with tears in her eyes. Even Stark.

It is.

It’s good to be home.
Barnes discovers that the aftermath of two missions – even successful ones – is bone-deep exhaustion. He has gone from one stressful moment to the next without stopping.

Time to recoup.

Not that he’s given any choice in the matter. Post-brunch, he yawns in the elevator back down to their floor.

“You should hit the hay, Buck,” Rogers says.

CONFIIIIRRR

Even the mission is tired.

When he wakes, the sky outside is dark, and the inside of his mouth tastes like something died in there. He is lying in the same position as when he lay down, and his muscles ache.

Identified: intense hunger.

EAT

Okay.

“Bucky!” Rogers says when he enters the living room.

ROGERS

What comes out of his mouth, thankfully, is merely a grunt.

“Let’s get some food into you,” Rogers says.

He is smart enough to not attempt ruining grilled cheeses. Instead, he hands Barnes 3 of the remaining cookies and sets about heating up several slices of pizza.

This takes the edge off sufficiently for Barnes to lean forward and rest his face on the countertop. It’s nice. Cool. Maybe he can sleep here.

“Bucky,” Rogers says in a laugh, “come on. Glass of water and back to bed.”

Okay.

At 0340, when he wakes again, the monitor shows that Rogers is sensibly adhering to his own rest schedule.
There is, however, a plate on the kitchen island covered with a dishtowel. The plate has 4 sandwiches on it.

Nice.

Barnes is back in bed by 0400. That particular bout of sleep is interrupted by replays of explosions.

Terrific.

He gives up at 0550.

Home coffee is so much better than airplane coffee, even when it’s a fancy private jet.

To: barnes14@stark.net
From: skylord78@mailbox.com
Subject: Checking in
Hey, man:
I saw the thing in Toulouse on the news. Steve let me know you and Pepper are okay, but I wanted to check in myself to see how you’re doing. Please write back when you can.
Sam

To: barnes14@stark.net
From: skylord78@mailbox.com
Subject: Re: Checking in
Barnes:
Hate to pester you, man, just a little bit worried. Let me know how you are.
S.

To: barnes14@stark.net
From: skylord78@mailbox.com
Subject: Re: Re: Checking in
Dude. Not sure how early is too early to text.

Shit. Flying Sam is worried.
From: barnes14@stark.net

Subject: Re: Re: Checking in

Flying Sam –

Please do not be alarmed. I required a great deal of sleep upon return. Supposition: stress response caused both physical and emotional fatigue.

All is well.

The explosion sucked. Pepper was a champ about it. Guess it’s too much to ask that missions go off without incident.

Standard time of rising is 0600. Okay to text any time after that.

Barnes

To: barnes14@stark.net

From: skylord78@mailbox.com

Subject: THANK YOU

Thanks for getting back to me, man. Glad to hear you’re doing okay. You’ve got a metabolism like Steve’s, right? You’ll probably be eating six meals and taking seven naps for a while.

Can I ask that you keep checking in with me for a couple days? You’ve been doing so great, dude, but bombs going off while you were still dealing with the whole bank robber thing … sounds like a recipe for trouble. You got any kind of plan to make sure you don’t get into a bad place?

Sam

This is kindness. The briefing and the mission concur with flying Sam’s assessment of his metabolic needs.

As to the rest of it: yes. The past several weeks have been difficult, and a plan is needed to regain equilibrium and optimal function.

There will be another mission or disaster. There is always another disaster coming. If he is careful about taking sufficient time to gather himself, he will be better prepared to cope with it.

His stomach growls.

Right.

Baseline: care for the body.

By the time Rogers rises, Barnes has already eaten his way through the first batch of pancakes and is making another.

Supposition: Rogers was awakened by the smell of bacon coming from the oven.
“Damn, Bucky, I was already glad to see you. You didn’t have to bring out the big guns.”

Sure thing, pal.

“Thought it’d go well with the second batch of pancakes.”

“Second?”

Rogers laughs loudly.

“Oh man,” he says, sitting at the island with his coffee, “post-adventure appetite. Bet you were tempted to shove the bacon in your face raw.”

CONFIRM

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. Well I’m glad you didn’t. I get half now.”

“Forty percent. I cooked.”

“Forty-five percent. I’m washing dishes.”

Barnes’s face smiles on its own.

“Done.”

After breakfast: bath. He adds more hot water twice, gets through the first fifth of Declare (about as accurate about the Cold War as anything else he’s read), and drinks three mugs of coffee helpfully brought – with increasingly pointed commentary about the wrinkly nature of his skin – by Rogers.

“If you’d wanted a lobster boil, pal, all you had to do was ask.”

Rogers is clearly ill-versed in the techniques of self-care.

After bath: nap.

---

To: skylord78@mailbox.com

From: barnes14@stark.net

Subject: Re: THANK YOU

Flying Sam –

I will check in.

Establishing protocols for rebuilding reserves. Unsure what form these will take, so starting with the obvious, i.e., carbohydrates, bacon, sleep.

Do you have advice.

Barnes
To: barnes14@stark.net

From: skylord78@mailbox.com

Subject: Re: THANK YOU

That’s an excellent start, Barnes. You got this.

I know you and Steve both have a hard time sleeping every once in a while. Sometimes it helps to get in a good workout, to make sure your brain’s too tired to give you troubles. A lot of my folks in group like getting outside for some fresh air, too.

Steve tells me you were totally the hero of the day, making sure Pepper was okay and helping pull people out of the building. I’m really proud of you, man.

S.

To: skylord78@mailbox.com

From: barnes14@stark.net

Subject: Re: THANK YOU

Thank you Sam. That is meaningful.

Barnes

The advice is as worthwhile as the encouragement, if less inspiring of a handkerchief moment. He and Rogers go to the gym and chase one another across the climbing wall until Barnes’s shoulders ache only in their usual way, the overlying strain of increased stress having released.

After dinner, Barnes pulls out the sketchbook Rogers made him for Christmas and asks about one of the drawings: Rogers, knock-kneed and tiny, standing with fists raised in front of a much taller, much uglier child.

It’s good to hear childhood stories after a calm day. His mind and body are tired but relaxed. It’s not quite enough to make a night of uninterrupted sleep, but things don’t go too badly.

In the morning, Barnes stands on the balcony to drink his coffee, even though the reddish morning sun is glaring straight into his eyes.

Too bad Rogers’s sunglasses are buried under the dining room of that hotel in Toulouse.

For several seconds, he is back there, dust in his mouth and the smell of burning flesh in his nostrils, his flesh hand wrapped around the wrist of a very obviously dead person.

“You doing okay, Buck?” Rogers asks.

Barnes shakes it off. Or, at least, shakes it into the background.

“Just taking the air.”
“Jesus, there’s a phrase no one’s probably said since about the time we both went on ice,” Rogers says.

But he steps out with his own mug.

“Pretty nice out here, though. Summer’s really heating up.”

Confirm.

“Query,” Barnes says, “how to manage going out of the tower when it’s too hot for long sleeves.”

Rogers flinches.

“Yeah, Buck, that’s a real problem.”

“Confirm.”

“We’ll figure something out.”

Sure.

Still, their small balcony is not the only option for getting fresh air without exposing the masses of New York City to his left arm. Also, he is curious about Potts’s self-care regimen.

And it’s only a small risk to send a text.

‘Hair Club meeting, terrace, lunch’

Assessing.

He adds a question mark.

Responses arrive less than 1 minute after sending: ‘yes,’ repeated 3 times.

‘I’ll order something in, see you guys at noon,’ Potts writes.

Identified: gratification.

“Leaving me already, Buck?” Rogers says upon being informed.

He lays his hand on his ridiculous chest and makes his face sorrowful.

“Shut up, asshole.”

Rogers laughs.

What a pain in the ass.

Potts is still hobbling around in slippers, but her demeanor is extremely cheerful. She totters over to Barnes and hugs him for longer than is comfortable, but he makes himself bear it. She doesn’t intend harm. He knows.

“How are you, Barnes? Sleeping okay?”

Nod.
“God, I don’t think I got out of bed for the rest of the day after brunch.”

“Me neither.”

Potts has a nice smile.

It is good to sit with the women under an umbrella on the terrace and eat large salads topped with chicken breast.

It’s perplexing that Potts eats so very many salads. At least this time he can go back to his apartment afterward and top off the calorie counter.

They speak extensively of sunscreen and the various merits of world beaches.

“What’s that look on your face, Barnes?” Hill asks.

“Attempting to identify visits to a beach.”

“Any luck?” Romanoff asks in a gentle tone.

Assessing.

“Maybe. Coney Island, maybe. A long time ago.”

“Well my god, if you come up with stories from the old days, please tell us! Steve’s so tight-lipped about it all, we’re dying to know,” Potts says.

“Okay,” he says.

He will tell them. (a) If he remembers, and (b) if the memories aren’t too embarrassing.

But it remains a good afternoon. A good idea. Reassuring, to see that Potts is healing quickly, even without application of her volcano heat thing.

The setback comes the next day, after a full night of disordered sleep. Explosions are mixed in with mush-headed bank robbers and older HYDRA stuff. He has static in his head, and words are stopped up inside his mouth. He requires a larger personal perimeter again.

He and Rogers had previously planned a trip to Brooklyn. Barnes decides: it’s all right. He can be twitchy and silent in front of the Olds. They will understand.

“You promise me you’re all right, Jimmy?” Esther says, a cool hand on each cheek.

Nod.

“You promise?”

Assessing.

Current status is not optimal. The mind is overwrought and the body tired. But he has been here before. He can trust that this will be temporary. Logical progression: he has experienced multiple challenges to his equilibrium, and now he is building reserves back up.

“I promise,” he says.
“Of course he promises!” Lidia says. “Jimmy knows what he’s about. Give him that cat, Esther, and stop fretting him.”

Barnes and Esther smile at one another. But he definitely does not refuse the opportunity to be walked on by cat Eleanor.

“Son, I thought my heart was gonna jump out of my chest when I saw the news,” Ollie says. “I found a little bit of religion when Steve called and said you were okay.”

“Thank you, Ollie.”

It helps, to sit on Esther and Lidia’s sofa eating semi-decent sharp cheddar on saltines and drinking sherry while cat Eleanor makes small holes in his thighs and once swipes a piece of cheese straight off the cracker.

“Eleanor! You spoiled brat!” Esther says.

“Mrrr,” cat Eleanor says.

“I do wonder how she could possibly have gotten that way,” Lidia says, and sips at her sherry in a pointed manner.

Barnes cannot blame cat Eleanor. Good cheese is no joke. He eats the cracker plain, to demonstrate solidarity, and cat Eleanor purrs her approval.

To: skylord78@mailbox.com
From: barnes14@stark.net
Subject: Checking in

Flying Sam –

Today continues difficult, as yesterday and the day before. Sleep remains disrupted. Have read three books in the past 96 hours.

Speaking is not desired. Rogers appears to accept this okay.

It’s not so bad.

Sam. Did you know that some people put peanut butter onto waffles. Observed this on the Cooking Channel. Plan to experiment.

Barnes

To: barnes14@stark.net
From: skylord78@mailbox.com
Subject: Re: Checking in

You’re doing just fine, Barnes. But waffles need syrup, not peanut butter.
To: skylord78@mailbox.com

From: barnes14@stark.net

Subject: Waffles, peanut butter

You are wrong.
Late-night walks and reciprocity

Chapter Notes

Wishing piles of joy to those of you celebrating, and comfort to you for whom this time of year is hard.

Did he spend summers in cryo.

Barnes rummages – lightly – for memories of heat. He finds a few, but they are all associated with discomfort:

- fires (lots and lots of fires)
- a handler saying 'don't move, soldier, I order you not to move,' and cigarettes, and circular burns on his right arm and chest
- thirst, glare, headache, the smell of sweating bodies, and a rifle barrel so hot that he left a strip of himself stuck to it when the job was done

Summer at building JARVIS is not like these. Someone keeps setting breakfast foods outside the common area and having building JARVIS send text alerts. Once or twice per week there is grilling, and Barnes finds success at nudging Banner out of the way and taking over 35% of the time. He learns different ways of cooking over open flames. Interesting.

The various residents speak to him during these gatherings, but Barnes sees how carefully most of them watch, and step away when he stutters or his responses become monosyllabic.

This is kindness.

Mostly.

"You are literally, actually killing me here, Zoolander," Stark says, "traipsing around in my own house, flaunting that thing in my face."

"Tony," Rogers says.

"I want it," Stark says, drawing out all the vowels to an ear-grating length.

"Gimme the arm."

"Tony."

"Give it."

"Come on, Stark, you can't -"

"Gimme gimme gimme."

"Tony," Potts says, swooping in from the right, "shut up or I'll takey takey takey the scotch away."

Stark clutches his glass to his chest.
"You wouldn't."

"I would, and you know it."

"You're lucky I put up with you," Stark tells her. "It's because you're so adorable."

"And I'm the one who knows all the passwords to the bank accounts."

"And you know all the passwords to the bank accounts."

"And you'd be completely lost without me."

"And that."

"And I'm the one who puts up with you."

"On counsel’s advice, I invoke my right under the Fifth Amendment not to answer, on the grounds that I may incriminate myself."

They're a real laugh riot, those two.

Mostly, it's good. He and Rogers can travel to Brooklyn in a car, exposing his arm to view only for the 4.8 s it takes to move from the vehicle to inside the Olds' building. They can get a cardboard box each week of seasonal items from the Greenmarket. They can get their walking in at 0245, when anyone might mistake the surface of his left arm for a trick of the light.

They can do that, but they only actually do so twice. Kind of boring, wandering in circles when all the shops are closed and the only people on the streets are tired, impaired, or villainous.

For one thing, it messes with the ability to obtain sufficient rest. For another, he has enhanced night vision and sees several activities in dark alleys involving (a) needles and/or (b) extensive levels of manual and oral touching that make him wish to detach his own skin and relocate it, possibly to the bottom of the ocean.

And just because wandering around in the middle of the night is one of the world's top ten stupidest ideas, the second time, they stumble into an assault.

Or, more correctly, two super soldiers with extra sensitive ears hear shouting, one of them takes off running (guess who), and the other is forced to follow by dint of being an overprotective dope (confirm).

Skidding behind Rogers into the alley, Barnes sees the assailters look up at Rogers's shout. One of them throws an actual punch, despite being half a meter shorter than Mr. Foolhardiness and Justice, but he's too drunk to do more than flail aggressively for 20 s before he blinks, registers Rogers's size, then vomits extensively and flees.

His compatriot stares Rogers up and down and runs off with considerably less drama.

The assaultee staggers to his feet and shouts,

"You fucking motherfuckers stay the fuck out of my face."

He brushes away Rogers's hand with a, "fuck you, asshole," and staggers in the opposite direction.

"You're welcome," Rogers says.
"I had him on the ropes," the briefing supplies, along with a sensation of despairing alarm.

Rogers is covered in vomit from the shins down.

So that's awesome.

Katie is extremely kind about the way he has to sit at the table shoved into the back corner of the coffee bar and not speak, even when Rogers goes upstairs to change into less aromatic clothing. She sets his cup down in front of him and retreats back behind the bar.

Both of her hands are full when she comes back to give Rogers his drink. She sets a stack of 5 snickerdoodles in front of Barnes and 3 oatmeal raisin across the table.

"Sorry, Steve," she says. "Barnes looks like he needs emergency rations."

CONFIRM

Confirm.

"Hell," Rogers says after half a cookie. "The way I keep pulling you into shit situations lately, I probably deserve raisins."

MAYBE

Ha.

"Confirm," Barnes says.

But he lets Rogers have half a snickerdoodle.

It's okay to stick around the tower. He receives a new box of books every couple of weeks, and he knows where everything is. Safe spaces.

Not that he doesn't notice when Rogers gets a little bored. Workouts grow noticeably longer. The general atmosphere of the apartment is breezy with dramatic sighs.

Rogers spends more time than is strictly comfortable with Hill and Stark, combing through interview records from the bank robbers and the website of the anarchist group that sent the young man with the bomb to Toulouse.

"I know there's a pattern, I just can't see it yet," Rogers says.

The pattern's always the same, champ: assholes want money or they want power, and they don't care who they run over to get it.

Rogers frowns at him.

"You want to come with me tomorrow? Maybe take a look at some intel?"

No.

TRY

For sh**'s sake, mission, remember the last time we tried this.
Sigh.

"Okay."

It's boring. Boring, however, is highly preferable to traumatic. But Stark and Rogers have competing goals. They argue for long hours over the appropriate amount of action to take.

Give them long enough, and they fucking change sides. At 1035, Rogers makes a passionate speech in favor of infinite missions every other damn day until the world is purged of evildoers while Stark pleads the case of letting civilian law enforcement do their damn jobs and Hill attempts to shake off her starry eyes before she runs off to catch herself a villain just to make Captain Convincing happy.

Identified: mild irritation and discomfort to take Stark's side.

But by 1315, Stark has gone to large-scale action by the full Avengers contingent, and Rogers is flapping his hands about property damage and civilian safety.

Mostly the intel comes down to:

- someone's getting their hands on alien artifacts
- someone, maybe the same and maybe not, is trying to create financial uncertainty among the world's power brokers.

"I should add, sir," building JARVIS cuts in, "that the number of attempts to get past my security measures has increased by an order of five since Ms. Potts's return from France."

"You're just telling me this now?"

"I did not wish to alarm you, sir. The attacks are clever, but I am in no danger of being breached. However, these particular individuals are persistent, and their attempts continue. I deemed it time to inform you."

"Let me see," Stark says.

The numbers and symbols scrolling by are too complex for Barnes's moderate computer manipulation skills.

Stark swears creatively.

"Recognize this calling card, buddy?"

"Not so far, sir."

"Keep an eye on it."

"Of course."

So no wonder Rogers is so grumpy. He's waiting for a mission to come together. Insufficient data. Rogers hates that.

CONFIRM
Confirm.

Rogers paces the apartment.

"Query," Barnes says over dinner that night. "Were you always so fucking jumpy?"

Rogers's face goes through surprise and annoyance, then settles on amusement.

"Yeah," he says. "I've never been good at settling down. I hate to not be busy. Jesus, the only time I –"

He stops and stares out into the distance.

Barnes waits.

Rogers tilts his head to the side and frowns.

"The only time you what."

"Maybe because I spent so much time sick when I was young," Rogers says.

Barnes continues to wait. He watches Rogers think his way around in a circle. When Rogers's expression smooths, and he's about to make a dumb joke and change the subject, Barnes puts his fork down and clasps his hands together in a deliberately slow motion intending sarcasm.

He makes his eyes wide, then blinks slowly.

"How are you so much of an asshole without even speaking?" Rogers grumbles.

"Talent and training."

Rogers looks upward for assistance. He won't find any. Unlike in the movies, air ducts inside building JARVIS – as with most buildings – are too small to allow human intrusion.

"Just remembering a couple of things," he says after a sigh. "The only times I can think of when I was completely still. First was right after you. When I thought you were dead. After the train. It was like I couldn't move. Like I was a block of stone."

He makes a face that's definitely not a smile.

"A block of ice. For two days."

Oh boy, got 2 whole days of mourning, huh.

Rogers glares.

"Don't stare at me like that, Bucky. The next thing I did was go on a three-month rampage across Europe, killing every HYDRA soldier I could get my hands on."

Okay, that's better.

Rogers shakes his head.

"God, I don't even. I was. Those were bad days, Buck."

It is not a pretty mental picture – Rogers compromised by rage.
"What was the second," Barnes asks to draw Rogers back out from unpleasant memories.

"Oh. Just after I woke up from the ice."

Rogers blinks.

"Which seemed like the next day, you know? You died, I killed a third of HYDRA single-handedly, and then woke up – here. They gave me a little apartment in the Bronx, and. I dunno. For those first few months, it was like I was still trying to thaw on the inside."

CONFIRM

Huh, good point, mission.

CONFIRM

"You were sad," Barnes says.

"Well, yeah, I guess so."

He guesses so.

"Rogers."

"What? Okay! I guess I was pretty off-kilter at first."

AT FIRST

Mission. How the hell did we get so attached to this dumbass.

ROGERS

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Buck," the briefing supplies in child-Rogers voice.

Yeah, okay, you two. I know, I'm not planning on going anywhere.

"Rogers. Pretty sure missing half a century and waking up to everyone you know being elderly or dead results in an emotional response more dramatic than 'off-kilter'."

"Sure thing, Sam," Rogers says.

"There's no call for flattery."

"Shut up."

Rogers shakes his head.

"I've never been very good at introspection."

Gee, ain't that a shocking statement from a guy who threw himself into an untested medical device for the sole purpose of being allowed into peril.

" Helps to have some brain cells instead of muscle between your ears if you want to do any thinking," he says.

Rogers rolls his eyes.
"What did I ever do without your support, Bucky?"

"Fall to pieces, obviously."

"Obviously."

Rogers has an easier set to his expression all evening after this conversation, but he's back to pacing the next damn day.

It is not conducive to internal calm.

Additionally damaging to mental equilibrium: the screen of his phone lighting up with the message, 'UPCOMING EVENT: Captain Rogers – birthday – 4 July'

What.

Damn it.

So Rogers can spend all the time he likes moping in Stark's general direction for the time being: Barnes has thinking to do.

He remembers his own birthday, in March. No one else knew about it. Steve made a day just for the two of them.

Is that what Steve wants.

Assessment: Rogers made a day that bridged the old life and the new while respecting his own need for managing stimulation levels.

What does Rogers want.

Well. Barnes is not going to arrange celebratory activities that involve traveling the world to punch bad guys in the fucking mouth.

For one thing, doing so would preclude consumption of cake.

The briefing gives him a recent memory: the letter Rogers wrote to him before contact.

Good one.

'I keep hoping they'll adopt me,' the letter says, in reference to the Olds.

Rogers wants belonging. To feel that he has a place for himself, as Steve, not Captain America.

Right.

He sends several texts.

'I'm in,' flying Sam responds.

'Of course,' Lidia writes.

'That's a terrific idea,' Potts sends, along with a little picture of a smiling dog face.
It's not difficult to keep preparations secret from Rogers. Barnes identifies: gratitude as he notices how Rogers works to allow him space. Rogers never leans over to read texts on his phone, for example.

That is trust.

It’s good.

It allows Barnes time to go to the coffee bar and make a few arrangements.

Barnes prepares a set of responses to Rogers mentioning the upcoming date. Barnes notes several times when Rogers turns various shades of red and inhales as if he wishes to speak, but then he gives it up.

Weirdo.

There is a small, nagging sensation of regret in the back of Barnes’s mind on the birthday itself. To manipulate Rogers into correct movements and reactions, Barnes behaves as if he is having a regression day. He maintains silence and avoids looking Rogers in the eye even more than usual. He keeps 1 m distance between them at all times.

Around 1130, Rogers nods to himself, and his posture sags. He watches Barnes closely, with a sad expression on his face.

Sorry, pal.

CONFIRM

At 1500, Barnes says,

“Olds.”

Rogers jolts into action.

“You want to go to Brooklyn, Buck?”

Nod.

“Let’s do that. I’ll call Esther.”

Whatever Esther says on the phone maintains secrecy. Good job, Esther.

“She said we can come right over. That okay? You want to leave right now?”

Every minute we delay is another minute we risk Lidia giving Stark a really terrible idea, champ.

“Yes.”

Identified: pleasure when they open the door to Esther and Lidia’s apartment and the assembled crowd shouts, then sings while flying Sam walks forward bearing a cake that looks like a moderate fire hazard.

A non-enhanced human would never have been able to blow out that many candles in one breath.
“Jesus,” Rogers says after re-oxygenating, “you know that technically I’m only twenty-nine, right?”

“Nice try, old man,” flying Sam says.

Rogers’s posture improved at the initial shout, and the smile on his face has a moderate amount of sunrise about it. He hugs everyone, including Stark.

“Esther,” he says, “you made that for me?”

“Of course, I did! I’m not about to give a national icon a store-bought cake in my own house! Steven! I’m offended you even asked me. That’s blackberry jam between the layers.”

“It’s perfect,” Rogers says.

It really is. While everyone is talking, Barnes takes his plate of cake and finds cat Eleanor hiding in the bathtub. Her ears are upright – a good sign – and she leans up on the side for a scratch.

The cake is chocolate with a hint of coffee to it, and the layer of blackberry jam is thick, with a tang suggesting that it contains alcohol.

“Hypothesis: Lidia made the jam,” he says.

“Niyow,” cat Eleanor says, which he takes for agreement.

“If you want a second piece of cake, you’d better hurry,” Romanoff says from the bathroom doorway several minutes later.

She steps into give cat Eleanor appropriate attentions.

“He’s thrilled, Barnes. Good job.”

She rests her hand briefly on his knee.

“But it’s time to come hang out for a bit, don’t you think?”

CONFIRM

“Confirm,” he says, and she grins.

The cake, although large, has been mostly consumed. Barnes is glad for the opportunity to claim a second piece.

“Thank you, Buck,” Rogers murmurs in an undertone as he hands over the second piece of cake.

All of the attendees demonstrate excellent behavior and have brought gifts. They are, by and large, surprisingly thoughtful: a ‘family membership’ to the Met from Potts and Stark, a set of well-balanced knives from Barton, a selection of artisanal charcuterie from the Olds.

Identified: envy.

Barnes hands over his own box. Rogers holds it in the palm of his hand.

“I guess it’s not summer pajamas,” he says.

“Please be summer pajamas, please be summer pajamas,” Hill says.

Gross.
Rogers opens the box and looks at the small dots sitting on top of a square of white fuzzy material.

“What the?” he says.

Romanoff laughs long and loudly, in a tone Barnes has never heard before.

“Bucky. Are these. Listening devices?”

“Confirm. Previously placed on your clothing.”

Romanoff laughs so hard that she slides to the floor; Barton joins her.

“He what?” Stark says.

Rogers covers his face with his hand.

Classic.

“Well, Buck,” he says, “I guess I’m glad you trust me enough not to need to listen in twenty-four seven,” he says.

“Confirm,” Barnes says. “They’re of no use anymore. Given that we live in the same apartment.”

Hill and flying Sam join the laughers on the floor. Lidia is bending over, as if she would as well if her hips allowed it.

“Jesus Christ, Bucky,” Rogers says.

Identified: satisfaction.

They spend an enjoyable evening at the Olds’, until such time that cat Eleanor comes out and deigns to say hello. She winds around flying Sam’s feet and Barton’s. She lets the members of Hair Club scratch her head, whereas she and Stark stare at one another warily. Banner she allows to pick her up and place her against his shoulder.

Interesting.

They stay long enough to require an evening meal. The overall vote is for pizza. Stark not only pays for it, but does so without making an ass of himself.

“Oh, Jimmy,” Esther says, taking his arm, “isn’t this nice? We’ve had so much fun planning, and it’s a pleasure to meet your other friends.”

Friends.

Some of them, confirm.

It’s good to watch Rogers, surrounded by smiling people, smiling himself. It’s a good plan. Everyone flirts shamelessly with the Olds – Potts is sitting next to Ollie on the sofa, encouraging him to speak
of his life. Romanoff is in a corner with Lidia, presumably making plans for world domination. Esther is sitting at the breakfast bar, swinging her feet and laughing while flying Sam and Stark try to outdo one another in the joke department.

ESTHER

Yes, mission. It’s terrific.

When they leave, they ride in a car with flying Sam, who smiles back and forth at them both.

“Fun party, Steve?” he asks.

“It was so great,” Rogers says, his entire being radiating a hug vibration that will sadly be denied.

“It really was fun,” flying Sam says. “That cake was amazing.”

“I know!” Rogers says.

“Esther is an excellent baker.”

“Bucky,” Rogers says.

“Barnes,” flying Sam says.

“What.”

“Thank you, Buck,” Steve says in a soft tone.

Flying Sam nods.

It's even better when they enter the apartment to find his actual gift, set up by Katie in their absence. Oh. She put a large blue bow on top of the easel and set up a canvas as if ready for use.

GOOD JOB

Confirm. Katie is a mission-assist.

She has added to the setup a thick book of reproductions of famous paintings from Italy with an envelope sticking out of the top.

Excellent.

“Bucky,” Steve says, standing 1.5 m away from the easel and looking over the pile of painting tools set up by the balcony window.

Flying Sam pats Barnes hard on the back.

“How’d you get all this in here?” Rogers asks.

“Had it sent to the coffee bar. Katie set it up.”

“I never had stuff this nice before,” he says, picking up one of the brushes and rubbing the bristles with his thumb.
“High quality materials assist with outcome.”

Flying Sam laughs.

“Bucky,” Rogers says, rolling his eyes. “You jerk. I’m trying to say thank you.”

Seems like there might be actual words for that, pal.

“Happy birthday, Steve.”

He hasn’t been much for hugging lately, but this is an appropriate moment. And anyway, it doesn’t last too long. Rogers has to get back to opening all the little boxes of paints and showing them all to Sam.
Heat-related levity

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your patience and continued kind notes, everyone. These are busy, worrying times in the US, and I'm not finding it easy to get into my writing space. I'll try not to keep you waiting so long for the next chapter.

Care for yourselves, mission-assists.

The weeks following Rogers’s birthday take a turn for the ridiculous. How does that even happen.

Correction: the beginning of it is clear. Barton starts it.

The weather turns from warm to hot, and half the residents stop wearing shoes. Pretty much everyone takes to wearing short trousers – or, in the women’s case, the occasional small dress that provides zero protection from either bullets/abrasions or ultraviolet radiation.

It's a lot of feet.

And for a super-powered knucklehead with thighs like telephone poles, Rogers has pretty knobby knees.

"Chicken legs," the briefing supplies.

No longer accurate, except in the kneecap region.

Barnes goes into Rogers’s bedroom drawers and selects a pair of grey short trousers that aren’t too horrible with a black t-shirt.

It’s weird. The wooden floor is cool and smooth against his bare feet, but his unprotected lower legs cause low-level discomfort for a couple of days.

“Hey, my shorts look great on you, Bucky,” Rogers says.

His tone suggests sarcasm.

Aw.

“Thanks.”

Rogers rolls his eyes from sea to shining sea.

In the interest of showing up Captain Beleaguered, Barnes consults with Hair Club and makes several purchases of heat-appropriate clothing for himself and Rogers.

“Are you sure,” he says.

“Absolutely,” Romanoff says. “That’s what people wear, running in the summer.”

He looks at Pepper, who nods and smiles.
Okay.

He himself will soon be in possession of dedicated climbing shoes and stretchy trousers that will cover just past his own (less-knobby) knees. Excellent.

Before the clothing even has a chance to arrive, Barton shows up in the common area, wearing a pair of shorts that look as if they were made out of long trousers with a very dull implement (possibly teeth) and a t-shirt with artwork too faded to discern.

He holds a small cup in his hand out of which he eats with a miniature pink spoon.

Upon questioning, Barton makes a convulsive, full-body movement.

“What do you mean, what am I eating?”

Barnes stares.

Barton stares.

“Steve!” Barton shouts. “What the hell are you doing to this guy?”

Rogers raises his enormous mug out of out of the depths of the Blick’s Art Catalog.

“What?”


“He? What? I’m sorry, I’m missing something here.”

“Steve,” Barton says slowly, as if speaking to a child, “it appears that Barnes does not know what ice cream is.”

Well, clearly it involves ice and dairy products.

“Is it like a frappucino,” Barnes says.

“Oh my god,” Rogers says.

“Oh my GOD,” Barton says. “Steve, what is wrong with you?”

“Why is this my fault?” Rogers says.

“Steve! Aside from killing-related activities, how many things about modern living has Barnes just spontaneously known on his own?”

Hey.

“Uh,” Rogers says, forehead bunched up, “grilled cheese?”

“Esther taught me about that.”

“Steve!” Barton waves his spoon around some more and paces in a circle. “I can’t believe this. What else is missing? I mean, have you left out the entire category of spoon-based desserts?”

Come to think of it, yes.
“You’ve got your ice cream, your frozen yogurt, your sorbet, and your gelato. And then there’s the whole non-frozen category, your crème brûlée and your puddings…”

DENY

“No pudding,” Barnes says.

Barton stops his recitation, spoon still held high.

“What?” he says.

“No pudding,” Barnes repeats. “Mission distraction.”

“The hell does that mean?” Rogers asks.

Unclear. Barnes has no conscious memory of pudding consumption. But the knowledge is clear.

“No pudding,” he says.

“Okay, weirdo, but still,” Barton says. “We have to rectify this ice cream situation.”

“JARVIS, they have ice cream in the cafeteria, right?” Rogers asks.

Barton sets his little cup on his palm and stretches his arms to full length, staring upward with a solemn expression. Rogers makes a face.

“Of course, Captain,” Building JARVIS chimes in, “forty-two flavors. To, and I quote, ‘show those jerks at Baskin-Robbins who’s boss,’ although I believe it is also in honor of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy series, which were particular favorites of Mr. Stark in his youth.”

“Can I get a copy of that book,”

and

“Can we get some of each flavor,”

Barnes and Barton say simultaneously.

“Affirmative to both requests, gentlemen,” Building JARVIS says.

“This is going on the good list for sure,” Rogers says.

The good list is getting pretty long. Rogers ought to make his own damn list and stop adding things like ‘friends returned from the dead’ and ‘hugging’ to the one posted on the refrigerator.

“I’m getting Nat,” Barton says, and word apparently goes out, because various Tower inhabitants trickle in.

It appears that ice cream consumption is an important activity. About which no one saw fit to inform him. It’s amazing the vital topics people leave out of everyday conversation. The Civil Rights Movement, for example. Joe McCarthy. Fucking people going to the fucking moon and playing fucking golf, which if he’d known about earlier he could’ve watched on YouTube about a thousand times already, instead of just finding it out by happenstance months after even hearing about the moon thing in the first place.

Future people have not one goddamn idea how good they have it.
And the fact that he is often the recipient of ‘what is the matter with you, are you off your rocker’ facial expression when he doesn’t know these things just makes it worse.

Twenty minutes later, a worker arrives with two insulated bags. Everyone’s crowding around staring at Barnes, which is really enhancing the whole experience, you bet.

Things improve, however, when the tasting begins. Ice cream is. Surprising.

“Look at that face!”

But it’s Pepper who says it, so he knows it’s kindly meant.

It is like a frappucino – especially the flavors called ‘coffee’ and ‘cinnamon mocha’ – cold and sweet. Rogers tries to gum up the process by getting regular spoons from the kitchen, but the cafeteria worker provided two dozen small pink spoons, so it’s all right.

Barton and Romanoff make a ceremony out of it: Barton announces each flavor as he removes the container from the bag, Romanoff writes each flavor down, then waits with the pen hovering over the page until he gives his assessment.

His assessments generally cause argument.

“You can’t like vanilla,” Stark says. “Vanilla is boring. That’s why we call boring things vanilla.”

“It’s the foundation flavor!” Barton says. “A good vanilla is the baseline against which all other flavors should be measured.”

Agreed. Vanilla extract is used extensively in baking. It has a pleasant flavor and aroma. And Esther taught him how to make his own, using a vanilla bean and a small purloined bit of Romanoff’s vodka.

“Hold on,” Hill says, “sometimes they have sweet cream flavor.”

She rummages through the bags and pulls out a container.

“I’ve never tried that,” Banner says. “Isn’t it just milk-flavored?”

“Gross,” Stark says.

“Tony. You know this is from your own cafeteria, right?” Hill says.

Question unclear.

“Ah,” Stark says after a minute. “So what you’re saying is that it might be milk flavored, but it’s the flavor of the best damn milk available.”

“One presumes,” Hill says in a dry tone.

Good flavor, regardless.

There are moments of agreement: that mint—chocolate chip is superior, for example, despite its lurid green color. That rum raisin, bubblegum, and ‘birthday cake sprinkle’ should not inflicted on anyone.

“I’d like to remove my tongue now, please,” Romanoff says after the birthday cake one, which appears to contain no actual cake but an unhappy mixture of artificial flavorings, dyed blue and stirred together with flavorless little candy pieces that get stuck in the teeth.
There are loud arguments about the merits of peppermint crunch (good), banana (not good), and green tea (weird but okay) flavors. The dividing line on cookie dough is firm, with Rogers, Barton, Hill, and Pepper on the wrong side of it.

“Unhygienic,” Barnes says.

“At last the sleeper agent and I have something in common,” Stark says.

Sleeper agent.

Barnes briefly considers the application of unhygienic ice cream flavors to Stark’s face.

Overall, however, the afternoon is extremely enjoyable. Increased dessert inventory. And it is entertaining to watch the residents reach over one another and divide up the containers so they can finish off their favorites.

They let Barnes pick first. That’s pretty nice. And it means he gets the mint chocolate chip.

This adventure warrants a call to the Olds.

“I had ice cream,” he tells them.

Their response is – mild.

“Forty-two flavors,” he says.

The Olds frown.

“Mint—chocolate chip was the best one.”

“Hang on,” Ollie says, “are you trying to tell us that you just had ice cream for the first time?”

“Here we go again,” Rogers mutters.

“Confirm.”

“What?” Esther says.

“Steve. Son,” Ollie says, “what are you doing to our boy? Do you not appreciate that it’s our job to show him all the good things? You can’t go leaving out something like ice cream.”

It’s their job to what.

“It’s not like I kept him away from it on purpose!” Rogers says.

“We covered cookies and bagels,” Ollie says.

“And novels,” Lidia says.

“Grilled cheese and proper salad dressing,” Esther says.

All of that is true. And it inspires the Olds to speak of other things they enjoy, especially from their childhoods – similar to Rogers’s and his own, so Rogers gets to speak of positive childhood things as well. Barnes takes notes about ‘the nice, soft kind’ of peppermint, violet gum, hot dogs from the baseball stadium, and a sandwich called ‘gyro’ that sounds to be critically important.

When they ring off, Rogers spends several hours with a sketchbook on the balcony, roasting himself
in the late-afternoon sun.

Barnes takes him out a glass of water after an hour. Hot sun is dehydrating.

“Are you all right.”

“Yeah, Buck, of course. Talking about the old days always makes me itch to draw. I think I’m making my way toward a painting.”

He spends time every day on the stool in front of the empty birthday canvas, staring and frowning.

“Finally.”

“Shut up, asshole.”

“Sure thing.”

The box of summer clothing arrives, and Rogers eyes the new running outfit with suspicion.

Warranted.

"How are these size large?" he says.

The tags must be wrong.

Rogers tries on the sleeveless shirt, the shorts that are about the size of boxer briefs.

"I look like an asshole."

"You always look like an asshole, pal."

Barnes successfully ducks the throw pillow.

So that's why they're called that.

"This has got to be Maria's idea," Rogers says.

Barnes examines the enormous expanse of exposed patriotic musculature. He can imagine Hill doing the same. With extensive commentary.

"Pepper said it was standard."

"Yeah, I'm not buying it, Buck. This is too much like the goddamn hot pants I wore on the spangle circuit."

He scratches his ass.

Real attractive Rogers.

"On the other hand," he says.

For shit’s sake.

“I hate to let a lady down.”
He sends a text to the women thanking them for his new workout gear, of course, because he is terrible, and wears the stuff down to the gym.

There’s so much bouncing. And then, once Hair Club arrives, so much commentary.

“So stylish, Rogers,” Romanoff says.

“So exposed,” Hill says.

“So busy running,” Rogers says.

The conversation is terrible. Barnes’s new climbing shoes, however, provide excellent gripping action on the climbing wall. So he can get up high and as far away from these assholes as possible.

It’s a smart plan, given the way Rogers removes his shirt at the end of his run, rolls it up, and flicks sweat at Hill and Romanoff. They scream and retreat at a high rate of speed.

“You’re a jerk, Steve Rogers!” Romanoff yells from the elevator.

“I’m never wearing these clothes again!” Rogers yells.

“The worst!” Hill shouts as the doors close.

This levity bleeds over into the next few days. Barnes identifies a new feeling: a lifting sensation, as if his metal arm suddenly weighed less – or hurt less – although neither is objectively possible. It’s just that amusing things keep occurring, and everyone around him seems to feel a similar lightness. They all spend a great deal of time on the terrace outside the common area.

“It’s past time we found out what your poison is,” Banner says one afternoon. “Inside, have a seat at the bar.”

What.

Banner.

Barnes looks around, but no one else seems concerned that Banner’s mad-scientist self is showing.

“Deny,” he says. “No medical experimentation.”

“What?” Banner says, and distress breaks out across his face. “Barnes.”

“Don’t be a dickhead, Barnes,” Romanoff says from behind his right shoulder, and he absolutely knew she was there, that movement is from a sudden itch on his back, “he just wants to find out what drink you like best.”

Then why the hell would he reference poison.

“It’s a phrase, Barnes. ‘Choose your poison.’ It’s from way back in the day, Bruce probably thought you’d know it.”

“I really kind of did, sorry Barnes.”
So that too is enjoyable, sitting at Stark’s fancy bar, watching Banner move with a grace that belies his usual shy bluster as he mixes and shakes, pouring concoctions into a variety of attractive glassware.

Tom Collins comes in a tall, skinny glass and tastes of citrus with an aftertaste like being electroshocked and curb-stomped at the same time.

“Okay. Not a fan of gin,” Banner says.

“Gimme,” Barton says.

Pimm’s cup comes in a different tall glass, wider than the first. It has a different citrus flavor, better, but is fizzy.

“I don’t like carbonation.”

“Gotcha,” Banner says.

“Your weird opinion is my gain,” Romanoff says, and drinks the Pimm’s cup through a straw while she kicks her feet.

Manhattan comes in a squat tumbler – the kind Stark drinks his smoke-flavored Scotch from.


“That’s the vermouth,” Banner says.

The varieties of alcoholic mixtures and glassware are seemingly endless. He has a fruit-flavored thing in a tiny stemmed glass with a round bowl, a salt-and-punishment flavored thing with olives in a tiny stemmed glass with a conical bowl, a coconut catastrophe in a fluted, stemmed glass, and a margarita.

The margarita is good. One can have it with salt, or without salt. Both are tasty.

“Tequila,” Barton says in a worshipful tone.

The next evening, Banner shepherds Barnes through a tour of wines, all of which he finds highly enjoyable to drink. He has made small forays into this business, but Banner has strong opinions about food pairings, most of which come down to ‘drink what you like.’

“Thank you,” Barnes says when Stark calls for everyone to join up for dinner.

“My pleasure,” Banner says. “I like bartending, but these yahoos mostly chug the stuff straight out of the bottle. It was fun to play.”

A kindness. A kindness that increases his feeling of being less beholden to gravity.

They sit around the table, most of them loud and laughing, and eat Stark’s grilled fish and Pepper’s tub full of salad, some excellent bread. The sunlight turns everything orange, there’s a pleasant breeze, and Barnes identifies: contentment. He eyes the sky every 15 minutes for incoming danger, but there is no imperative to watch his own back, or to stare at his compatriots for signs of betrayal.

COMFORTABLE

Confirm. Comfortable.
So comfortable that even Stark cannot set him off balance, when Barnes reaches over to grab the bottle of Chardonnay and refill first Pepper’s glass, then his own.

“You don’t, I dunno, want to maybe drink something a little more manly?” Stark asks.

It is not enough to unsettle him.

Also, drinks are not gendered. Stark should know this, if he’s such a genius.

“Why the hell do I need to prove my masculinity.”

“What?”

“You tell him, Buck,” Rogers says to the general laughter.

Everyone seems so amused.

“I could kill everyone on the terrace with the possible exceptions of green-thing Hulk and Hill. Not gonna feel insecure because some nosy parker doesn’t approve of my drink.”

Stark splutters briefly.

“I’ve got armor, you couldn’t —“

Barnes raises his left hand and wiggles his fingers. Stark shuts his mouth with a snap.

“Oh,” he says.


Rogers makes an appropriate, disgusting sound effect. Thanks, pal.

Everyone laughs.

Gratifying.

“Okay, but Hill? Seriously?” Barton asks when the general giggles have died down.

Are these people blind.

“Apex predators always recognize one another,” Hill says, reaching across the table with a fist for bumping.

“Confirm.”

“You’re a teeny tiny person.”

“Yes, Clint. A teeny tiny person who has worked for years with superheroes despite not having any powers and who was trained by Nick Fury. Who has happened to read both the personnel and psych evals of every person here. I don’t need powers or a weapon to take you down. I could do it with eight well-chosen words. For example, the first of your eight words is Blackpool.”


Hill is great.

“Oh, please,” Stark says. “You’re got nothing on me.”
Hill rises from her chair and walks around to stand behind Stark’s chair, where she speaks briefly into his ear. His expression suggests that he might vomit. Barnes edges his plate away from that direction.

“How could you know that?” Stark whispers in a gravelly voice.

Hill retakes her seat.

“I really admire that woman,” Barnes says.

“She’s just your type,” Rogers says.

“Terrifying.”

“Yes.”

Poor Stark. It’s like that for days. Everyone has his scent now, and he’s the butt of every possible joke they can think of – which, for a pack of highly trained troublemakers, is a lot. By the time they all end up naked in what turns out to be a large, open-air swimming pool, causing Stark’s brain to short-circuit in a highly amusing fashion, Barnes almost feels sorry for the guy.
Experiments and apologies

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your continuing patience, mission-assists! And thanks for your many kind comments on the last chapter.

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The ice cream incident brings out a desire for experimentation among tower residents. A meeting of Hair Club is given over to sundry activities involving string and needles, which makes the briefing shiver, as if it’s working hard to retrieve a file.

“What do you keep wincing for, Barnes?” Romanoff asks.

Unknown.

But there is clearly something from far in the past.

He verifies with the women that it is within protocols, then calls Steve.

Rogers arrives at Stark and Potts’s floor and stares around with bemusement at the salads and bottles of nail polish.

Barnes holds up the knitting, and Rogers’s eyebrows leap high. He grins.

“Gimme that,” he says, “you were always a terrible knitter.”

Rogers holds the needles in his hands as if they’re comfortable, and his fingers move swiftly and smoothly.

Romanoff grins.

“Whaaaat?” Potts says.

Hill makes a sound of disgust and throws her lumpy mess to the floor with the crochet hook still stuck in it.

Rogers sits on the floor. He looks up at Potts and winks, his fingers still moving.

“Where’d you learn that?” she asks. “In the war?”

“Nah, when I was a kid. Busy ma and sick me. Plus, socks were always a welcome addition.”

He finishes a row and turns it.

“I always liked knitting. Keeps my hands busy, makes something useful.”

“Wow!” Hill says. “I mean! Wow!”

“That line of talk is a good way to guarantee no socks,” Rogers says, directing a fake glower at her.
Hill kicks her mess of hook and knots at him, but he dodges it.

The briefing finally finds what it was looking for and shows Barnes a succession of ever-larger knitted footwear. Then, in close-up a heel with a round piece of wood inside it, a needle moving back and forth, weaving over a hole.

“Mending,” he says.

Rogers sets the knitting down in his lap.

“Yeah, Buck,” he says in the soft tone indicating superior Barnesian behavior. “Mending was always your job. You were really good at that kind of detail work. You could sew in a patch so finely that nobody could see it unless they knew where to look.”

Mending.

That sounds like a useful skill.

“Oh gosh, it could almost be some kind of metaphor,” Romanoff says in her brattiest voice. Which is exceedingly bratty.

“If I break your arm and reset it, what kind of metaphor is that,” Barnes says.

She sticks her tongue out at him.

Other experiments are equally enjoyable. One is a taste test of barbecue varieties from around the world, which puts everyone into a protein coma. Objectively, each version is delicious in its own right and cannot be ranked, no matter how many times Barton shouts ‘Memphis!’

Stark dredges up a show from his childhood in which everyone wears workout clothes and the small robot has a speech impediment.

“Oh, man,” Rogers says, grinning. “Buck Rogers was around in our day! I can’t believe it was still popular!”

“Hey, From Russia with Love, it could almost be a show about you and Cap getting maaaaaaaarried,” Stark says.

Barnes would like to know who the first person was who ever told Stark he was funny. And then go back in time to stop them.

“Jeez, Tony,” Rogers says.

Barton has both hands pressed hard against his own mouth, and Hill is hiding her face by laying it on top of her knees. Rogers is bright red, and his expression is pained.

It’s Barnes’s job to yank Steve’s chain. And he’s better at it.

“Far as I can see, there are two basic problems with that plan, champ,” he says.

“Nope. Two dudes are totally allowed to get married now. I only ask that you make me best man. A, I’ll be paying for the whole thing, and B, I am in fact clearly the best man around.”

Oh good, he finally needs to breathe.

“One, pretty sure marriage requires a level of touching that would put me in a coma. Two, if I’m
working this hard on my identity, I’m for damn sure not changing my name.”

The low-level background giggling stops with an abrupt series of squeaks.

“You tell him, Buck,” Steve says.

Stark is actually speechless for 4 seconds straight.

“Every joke,” Stark says slowly. “You have to ruin every single one of my jokes with some kind of comment that makes me feel like an asshole for making it.”

Can’t handle a little truth, don’t go digging in snowbanks. Them’s where the bodies are buried.

“God, I really hate you sometimes,” Stark says.

Which means: Barnes wins.

“I guess Sam might call that emotional manipulation,” Rogers says after Stark has stomped off on his little toy feet.

“What would you call it.”

“I’d call it thank god for being able to watch the rest of the show.”

CONFIRM

Yeah.

The show is not good, and for unknown reasons (possibly involving either perversity or a streak of masochism), Barnes’s saying so inspires the rest of them to subject themselves to a show about a man who can change into animals, another man in a loincloth who can speak to animals, a movie about a man in a top hat who sings about talking to animals, and another movie about a talking pig who behaves like a dog. This last one, although ridiculous, is at least finally entertaining.

That is a long day. It seems there are vast amounts of objectively terrible entertainments that remain beloved for reasons of nostalgia.

Banner, for example, knows every word of every song in the movie about the man in the top hat.

“Oh, my gran loved that movie,” he says at the end.

The air of experimentation creates an aura of calm and relaxation around the tower. Even after a general ban on naked swimming is handed down from Stark via text (‘swimsuits or I’m draining the damn thing permanently’) the days feel long and languid. Esther introduces him to ice cream sandwiches, which are made of low-quality ice cream and even lower quality cake slices that unexpectedly combine to make a delicious product. He and Banner perfect a recipe for tandoori-inspired chicken on the grill and move on to bulgogi.

Rogers stays put, without even twitching that much. He works with Stark, monitoring the continued suspicious activity. He sits in front of his easel and goes so far as to make a few half-assed swipes on it with a pencil.

He says ‘want to spar?’ to Barnes approximately twice every 3 days.

Coming from a baseline of relaxation, Barnes finds sparring enjoyable – even the close contact does not agitate him until he’s exhausted, and he learns to recognize the signs: colors paling out, tunnel
vision, a chill despite increased respiration and sweat.

The first time this clicks together in his brain, he steps away from Rogers, and without meaning to, he says,

“Stop.”

It takes Rogers 0.8 s to stop his forward momentum.

Pretty good reflexes.

“Okay, Buck?” Rogers says from outside arm’s reach.

Assessing.

“Overwhelmed,” he says, “not safe.”

Rogers steps back another pace.

“We can stop, Bucky, it’s okay,” he says.

Upstairs, Barnes continues his assessment, first letting the shower send his chill away and then, over the process of pesto yeast loaf, butterscotch crunch cookies, and plum crumble, continuing to ponder.

It makes time to think. While his hands are kneading, the body is busy. The kitchen smells of vanilla and herbs. Rogers is drawing in the reading forest.

(This is not its intended purpose, even if he is correct that the light is superior.)

Barnes interrogates the briefing, which cooperates. It gives him Asset-memory in a thin, slow (manageable) stream. Identified: the same pale colors, the same heightened noise and clenched feeling in the chest.

Despite the many crimes he committed, it is admirable that the Asset was able to focus and work so efficiently while in a state of near-constant terror.

Of course, the alternative would’ve been even worse torture.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Thanks, briefing.

CONFIRM

“Jeez, pal,” the briefing throws at them. “It ain’t worth getting worked up for.”

Rogers emerges from the reading forest just as the cookies come out of the oven, because there are a few things about which even he shows a faint glimmer of intelligence.

“How are you doing, Bucky?”

Barnes slides the plate of cookies across the counter.

“Status calm. Just needed a little breathing room,” he says.
Rogers does that thing where he can’t figure out whether to nod or shake his head, so does both.

“Yeah, no, sure, Buck. We don’t have to spar, it’s fine, we – “

Barnes shoves a cookie into Rogers’s flapping gob.

“Sparring is fine,” he says. “Enjoyable. I just have a limit.”

Rogers nods.

Like several other of his limits, this one can be stretched. They work together for a number of days, testing the border at which Barnes tips into his fear space.

Rogers is the one who hits on an important factor. On day 8, when the colors pale out, Rogers says, “Yeah, so I’ve decided that bowing out is like forfeiting, so I automatically win.”

What.

CONFIRM

Color comes rushing back, the grinding sound in his head goes quiet, and his left arm clanks.

“The hell you say.”

They go another 23 minutes.

Rogers’s smug expression ensures a cancellation of the day’s planned baking.

Doesn’t it just fucking figure that sass keeps him in his own head?

Unfair.

CONFIRM

‘Steve seems proud of himself,’ flying Sam texts later. ‘Tempted to smother him in his sleep yet?’

His response to the ‘CONFIRM’ test is 7 laughing faces.

Not that he’ll announce it to Rogers ever, but the shit talking is good. Barnes can let his body do what it was trained for while his brain’s busy thinking up rude commentary, and together he and Rogers fight with a smooth brutality that leaves them both lying on the floor making sweat puddles. Rogers is hard to beat.

Identified: fun.

CONFIRM

Romanoff wanders through one day, presumably just to show off how she fills out her workout gear, given the tidy state of her hair, and sits in Barnes’s spot atop the climbing wall to watch.

“Beautiful,” she says afterward.
Barnes doesn’t mind the scrapes, strains, and bruises that result from this work: they’re easily ignorable hurts, and the serum ensures that none of them last long. But once Rogers brings the shield into play, his left arm takes more damage than it is in his power to repair.

Barnes ignores it for as long as he can, until he’s a hazard to all surrounding doorknobs and dishware.

Dammit.

Stark is not his biggest fan.

It increases his heart rate to ride the elevator down to Stark’s lab floor. But Stark’s face just begs for satire, and yanking his chain makes it easier to request assistance, makes it acceptable to sit on a stool next to tools without breaking down.

It goes well. His small robot friend returns, and it is a positive development to learn that the robot friend is named Bite Size. It holds onto him while Stark scans his arm and shoulder, an action that causes a strange reaction in Stark: anger and cursing, then a surprising length of silence after while he sits nose-deep in Barnes’s upper arm.

They trade quips for a bit while Stark works. He has Barnes wiggle the metal fingers and watches the mechanics. Makes a small adjustment. Makes a large breath.

“Do you remember?” he asks in a quiet voice – a tone Barnes has never head before – still staring at the arm’s components. “My parents, I mean.”

Ah. It’s time for this conversation.

Well. Couldn’t put it off forever.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

“I can remember it, if the details would be useful to you,” he says.

He feels the briefing make that memory ready and hold it in the background.

Stark stays silent for a long time.

What is needed.

“You have shown me generosity, Tony Stark,” he says. “I regret that I caused you so much pain. I would undo it, if I could.”

Stark rises abruptly and walks in a circle around the lab, straightening random tools. His expression suggests upset.

Reasonable emotional reaction.

Barnes will wait for a response. Stark is a ridiculous asshole, but Barnes owes him many debts.

“How’d you get from the Soviets to HYDRA,” Stark asks after 6.5 minutes.
That is not the expected question.

Assessing.

Memory: retrieved.

“I was purchased. The Soviet government dissolved its official HYDRA ties in nineteen sixty-two.”


Well.

“Confirm. From there I was moved around Europe until nineteen eighty-three, when I was brought to the United States under handler Alexander Pierce.”

Stark’s face turns several colors.

“Pierce? But – “

He wanders the lab and shifts more equipment.

“Pierce was the one. My parents,” Stark says 4 minutes later.

Just that, briefing.

The briefing succeeds at transferring only this snippet of information.

“Confirm.”

Stark spends several minutes dismantling a wire-filled box in a violent manner, with associated cursing. Bite-Size moves in front of Barnes’s shins.

Cute.

He reaches down to pat it with his flesh hand, and Bite-Size beeps.

“Sorry,” Stark says when the box has been reduced to fragments.

As if he should be the one to apologize.

“Me too,” Barnes says.

Stark looks at him, his expression angry, but his eyes looking pretty precarious on the fluid volume front.

He’s probably a disposable tissue kind of guy, too.

Stark sweeps up the mess he made. By the time he’s done 12.5 minutes later, his expression is calmer.

“Pierce,” he says.

“Yes.”

“Did they ever tell you why?” Stark asks. “When they sent you out?”

“Rarely.”
Stark nods and sweeps a clean bit of floor. He then straightens and leans on the broom.

“‘I saw your files,’” he says.

For fuck’s sake, who hasn’t by this point.

“‘Yes.’”

Stark tilts his head to the right.

“‘That day we went through the data files. When you broke my very expensive, state-of-three-times-better-than-the-art screen. That banker asshole wasn’t in the files Romanoff released.’”

“‘No.’”

“‘What you said. About him. He did that to you?’”

Bite-Size must have comprehensive sensors. It wraps one arm around Barnes’s lower legs just as his pulse and respiration increase.

Helpful. A focus point.

“‘Confirm.’”

“‘That wasn’t in the file,’” Stark says.

“‘No.’”

Stark puts the broom away and places his hands in his pockets, staring at the wall.

“‘There was a lot of stuff like that? That wasn’t in the file.’”

“‘Confirm.’”

Stark nods. He comes back to the bench, makes a sour face at Bite-Size, and sits to resume work on Barnes’s arm.

“‘What brought you back?’” he asks softly.

ROGERS

Confirm.


Stark laughs, although it is not a happy sound.

“‘Of course you did,’” he says. “‘That guy brings out everybody’s nobility and inner goodness, blah. Blah. Blah.’”

Stark speaks as if Rogers won all the prizes at his birthday party.

“‘Yeah,’” Barnes says. “‘He’s really an asshole that way.’”

Stark looks up, then laughs loud and long.

It’s a good sound.

He proves this by not only fixing Barnes’s arm with a minimum of either lecture or mad scientist ideas, but he also teaches Barnes how to juggle.

Assessment of juggling: positive. (1) Stark assures him that it is an excellent assessment method for fine-motor skills; (2) many objects can be juggled, the more dangerous, the funnier; and (3) Rogers doesn’t know how.

Points to Barnes.
The delicate art of Rogers management

The day after Barnes’s arm repair and juggling lesson, someone knocks on their door at 0930.

“Visitor for Sergeant Barnes,” building JARVIS says.

Curious.

His visitor is Potts, looking shiny and ferocious in her work outfit, but with tears in her eyes.

Before he can ask about the source of her distress, she says,

“Oh, Barnes,”

and puts her arms around him.

WHAT

Confirm.

SMELLS GOOD

Confirm, mission.

She pulls back and dabs at her cheeks with her thumbs.

“Tony got a really good night’s sleep last night,” she says, and pats him on the chest.

“Whatver it was you said to him, thank you.”

What is the correct response.

Potts pats his chest one more time.

“I’m glad,” Barnes says.

She smiles. Potts has a very pretty smile.

“Me too.”

Nice way to start off the day, even with Rogers swanning about afterward, as if he were the one who had an emotional breakthrough with their landlord.

Then he ruins it for himself.

Poor Steve. If only his famed strategic ability extended to the words that come out of his own damn mouth.

They’re staring at intel again: himself, Rogers, Stark, Building JARVIS. Creeping ever closer to finding the string to pull to unravel whoever’s trying to get into Building’s systems.

“Ugh, this is taking forever,” Stark says. “I know I’m the only one in the room who has to worry
about impending mortality, but damn.”

“The hell does that mean?” Rogers says.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Stark stares at Rogers.

“You kidding, Rogers? The magic of my father’s hard work and slightly lower than my genius. The serum. I had JARVIS run a whole simulation and everything. Did they not tell you anything back in the day?”

“What are you talking about, Tony,” Rogers growls.

“JARVIS, make us smarter, buddy,” Stark says.

“According to my simulations, based on known healing rates, metabolic data, and cellular regeneration levels, barring accidental or violent death, I estimate your lifespan to be at least one hundred and fifty years, Captain,” building JARVIS says.

That is. A long time.

“What?” Rogers says, “what?”

Tone and expression indicative of severe distress.

“Rogers. What is it.”

“A hundred and fifty years?”

“That’s what the miracle of modern artificial intelligence said, Rogers,” Stark says. “Must be nice. I could get so much done with that kind of time.”

Rogers’s face is so pale that his veins show. Why is it so upsetting.

“So you’re telling me that. You saying if I got married. If I ever had children, I’d be guaranteed to outlive all of them? To watch them all grow old and die?”

WHAT

Confirm, what.

Even Stark wears an expression of confusion.

“Whoa, slow down there, Muscles McGee. What are you talking about?”

“I gotta go,” Rogers says, and flees from the room at a rate fast enough that Barnes makes it to the elevator in time only because (he suspects) Building holds the doors for him.

“Rogers.”

“A hundred and fifty,” Rogers mutters.

“Rogers,” Barnes says in a louder than usual tone.
Rogers looks up.

“You want to get married?”

“I don’t know, Bucky. Yes? Isn’t that what people do? I mean, I guess not me, obviously, unless I want to sign up for a whole new load of heartbreak.”

Barnes stands still, even as the elevator opens on their floor. There is too much information here for short-term processing. A further 120 years is indeed a very long future to anticipate. Barring violence.

Violence is much more likely.

Barnes shakes his head and follows Rogers into the apartment. Rogers’s upset is beyond Barnes’s understanding. He paces the living room while Barnes watches.

On one hand: if the mission is Rogers’s happiness, and Rogers wishes to get married and have children, then mission protocol dictates assisting Rogers with achieving that goal.

On the other hand: where would Barnes fit into such a setup. Where would Barnes live. Surely not alone in the tower, with Stark and Potts upstairs canoodling on the sofa.

Oh boy.

Surely no intelligent woman would let a cyborg ex-brainwashed assassin around children. And what use would Steve have for Barnes, if he had a wife.

Mission. This is a tough one.

CONFIRM

“I gotta run,” Rogers says. “I need – I have to move.”

And then, when Barnes moves to go change into running clothes,

“I want to be alone, Buck. Just. Just let me be alone for a minute.”

Dammit.

Understandable.

CONFIRM

Barnes turns on the oven instead.

They never do talk about it. Rogers clamps tight as a bad oyster, and Barnes can’t decide on a sufficient opening.

How does one ask whether there’s a time limit on devotion.

How does one inquire as to the hypothetical emotional responses of a hypothetical woman at some undetermined point in the future.

It’s stupid.
Barnes practices mentally – the idea that Rogers might some day walk into the apartment with stars in his eyes and a woman’s name on his lips. It’s not difficult. Barnes has the large amount of data regarding Peggy Carter.

The Bucky-person wasn’t smart about it. He curled up behind liquor, jokes, and suffering.

Screw that nonsense. Barnes will do better. He will practice scenarios in his mind to make it okay. He’ll devise a workable strategy. Rogers is not going to get rid of him that easily.

He watches Rogers mope around for 5 days straight.

Yeah.

Barnes is definitely not going anywhere. Somebody has to keep this jerk in line.

First up: nutrition. Even a gloomy Rogers will happily sit down to do damage to breakfast foods or a pile of charcuterie and cheese.

Next: application of Olds therapy. Barnes sends a warning text to Lidia, so by the time he and Rogers arrive, the Olds are not far off from standing in the hallway shouting ‘Steve Steve Steve’ while holding chore lists.

Good job, Olds.

CONFIRM

Two unclogged drains, one battened-down air conditioner, and one rearrangement of Lidia’s bedroom furniture later, Rogers has laid aside his aura of doom. Barnes, meanwhile, sharpens both sets of kitchen knives and uses them to butterfly some pork chops for stuffing with wild rice and dried apricots.

Over dinner, Rogers is actually smart enough to bring up his troubles. All three of the Olds put their forks down. Barnes and cat Eleanor agree that this is an appropriate time to sneak a bite of pork chop to her under the table.

“A hundred and fifty!” Ollie says.

“What a thing to imagine,” Esther says.

“I might get close to reading all my books,” Lidia says.

That makes Rogers laugh. Good.

“Yeah,” Rogers says, “I’m having a pretty hard time coming to terms with the idea.”

The Olds nod. Cat Eleanor makes 4 small holes in Barnes’s right calf. The signal is received, and Barnes hands down more pork.

“Is it harder than sleeping and waking up to a new world?” Esther asks.

That is a question Barnes would’ve asked, if Rogers hasn’t been wearing silence like a costume the past few days.

Rogers chews on the question and his dinner for a bit.

“No,” he says. “You’re right about that. I guess it’s just – when I was a kid I figured it would be a
miracle if I made it to thirty. During the war I never thought much past the next five minutes. And now I’m gonna outlive everyone I know?”

The mission doesn’t even finish going HEY because of the way that Ollie and Esther look at Lidia. Because of the way that Lidia suddenly looks small and tired. Like a little old lady. Like a person who might not actually live forever.

Identified: dislike.

CONFIRM

Confirm.

Rogers is good, though. He reaches out to hold Lidia’s hand with his warm, steadying grip.

“T’m sorry,” he says, “what did I say?”

She shakes her head, and the tip of her nose reddens.

“I can tell you from experience that you can survive it, even when you lose everyone,” she says, and dabs at the end of her nose with a napkin.

Even cat Eleanor respects the moment while Lidia stares at the middle of the table and blinks rapidly.

“I’m sorry,” Rogers repeats when Lidia’s expression has cleared and her nose has returned to its normal color.

She shakes their clasped hands.

“They’re memories long past, Steven.”

She grins, and there is the Lidia back that they know best.

“Someday I’ll indulge in an unseemly amount of sherry before dinner and tell you about my family. But it’s true, you know. You do find a way to go on, if going on is in your nature. And then you find new people. Not to replace. But new people just the same.”

Esther sniffs hard, and Ollie pats Lidia on the arm. She smiles at them both – a soft smile, without any of her usual mischief in it.

Rogers nods, somewhat damply.

“Besides,” Ollie says, “isn’t Jimmy in the same boat?”

Finally someone notices.

CONFIRM

“Well yeah,” Rogers says, “but that’s different. Bucky’s.”

He stops.

He shakes his head.

“I’ve been an idiot,” he says after a pause. “I’m sorry, Buck.”
He looks so woeful that Barnes can’t help it: he laughs.

His laughter, being a rare creature, has the immediate effect of making the whole table laugh with him.

Nice.

Olds therapy is universally effective.

There’s a bit of hugging that follows this conversation, but nothing too bad – mostly just Rogers slinging his arm around Barnes’s neck in the hallway back to their car and apologizing again from a too-close distance.

“I’m aware that you’re slow on the uptake,” Barnes says, and Rogers shoves him away with a laugh.

Rogers appears to set questions of longevity aside after this. They go back to sparring, and he continues to fill up a notebook with potential sketches for his painting.

The guy acts like there’s only one blank canvas in all of creation.

Barnes continues to practice scenarios in his mind, for what might happen if Rogers’s romantic life rose from its current torpid state. Like scoping out exits, contingency plans confer security. It’s a useful way to spend hours when he can’t sleep and he can’t turn on a light because the monitor will wake up Steve. One can imagine contingency plans for all sorts of situations that way.

Identified: enjoyable.

Stark finally finds the source of all the computer troubles. He calls them to his workshop, and even Potts is there.

Curious.

“Check out this asshole,” Stark says, bringing up the files on his fancy hologram thing.

It’s the creepy weapons guy from Morocco who so badly startled Potts in France, babbling about the arc reactor.

“What a jackass,” Potts says.

CONFIRM

“Yes,” Barnes says.

“Well, he’s a jackass with doodly squat for research now,” Stark says, and hits a button on the computer.

Barnes assumes that the Moroccan guy’s computers don’t actually shred into small pieces like the holograms, but it’s a nice effect.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for your patience, everyone. *pink floaty hearts*
Perhaps Rogers would argue that the longevity issue has been dealt with and can be swept under a large rug composed of duty and muscle mass.

Too bad.

Barnes calls flying Sam.

“A hundred and fifty years,” flying Sam says, in a tone suggestive of extreme annoyance.

“Confirm.”

Sam pauses for a long time.

“Man, does anybody ever bother to ask the dude whether all this is worth it?”

“Unknown.”

But then, if it isn’t, what would Rogers do about it. What would Barnes. After all the shit they’ve been through, might as well keep sticking it out.

“Barnes. Does that mean you too?”

“Confirm.”

“Well. I’m glad y’all at least will have each other.”

There is a 98.3% likelihood that that is the sole factor that will make their enhanced lifespans bearable, fifty or so years in the future. But it must be difficult to hear for standard humans. Certainly flying Sam’s tone of voice is unhappy.

Barnes provides levity by recounting the dinner with the Olds, emphasizing the part about the chores. Stress signals in flying Sam’s voice decrease.

“Good job, Barnes.”
He wasn’t seeking affirmation, but it’s good to receive nonetheless.

It’s good to speak with flying Sam. He learns that Sam likes parasailing in the summer. Sam is enthusiastic in describing this activity. Sounds fun, except Barnes calculates that the arm makes him far too heavy to achieve lift with nothing but a large kite and a boat.

“What have y’all been doing?”

Barnes tells him about the cookouts and the sparring. He notes that they have had a Sam-free lifestyle for longer than is optimal. Flying Sam laughs.

“Yeah, I know. I’ll come up to visit soon.”

That is good to anticipate. Overall, summer is enjoyable. He has learned a great deal about grilling, ice cream, and alcohol. The heat brings out an overall air of lassitude among tower residents – the common area and pool terrace generally have at least one person lounging around, even on weekday afternoons.

With the Moroccan arms dealer’s operation taken down, Rogers gets a bit stir-crazy. Barton does everyone a favor and takes him to a baseball game, from which Rogers returns with a sunburn and several hours' worth of complaint about the inadequacy of the New York Mets.

Barnes read 1.25 books in the interim and thus feels secure in his position as the one who makes better life choices.

They’re good days.

They don’t last.

Of course.

Flying Sam does arrive for a visit. He leaves his new Stark wings back in DC, but Stark has a backup set in the lab – of course. Barnes identifies: pleasure at watching Sam loop through the air above building JARVIS, shouting cheerful curses into their earpieces. Rogers's grin only enhances the enjoyment.

Visitors always mean a crowd for dinner. They're down Stark and Pepper (‘date night’), but everyone else shows up, meaning that Barnes and Banner attend a pile of meat products next to the grill that’s more than elbow-high. Banner prefers a cooking process low on chitchat. This allows for both internal calm and eavesdropping.

GOOD

Confirm.

The eavesdropping is good. Hill, Barton, and Romanoff are waging a campaign to try to fluster flying Sam by way of flirting.

This is a high-level task, carrying with it the risk of becoming off-balance themselves. Flying Sam has exceptional flirting skills himself. Rogers can barely stand it and keeps covering his face with one hand.

A face that huge really requires two hands, pal.
Dinner is a high-volume experience, owing in part to an average wine intake of 1.25 bottles per person. Barnes makes a mental note to enquire whether Stark has developed some sort of liver-protecting supplement. Odds are favorable.

The ethanol soaking their brains results in a furthering of the flirt campaign after dinner. While Rogers and Banner argue over which movie to watch, Barton gets down on the floor to roll around in a split.

As if they can’t all do splits around this joint. They’re all fucking superheroes.

“Man, I hope you’re not trying to impress anybody right now,” flying Sam says. “Pretty sure everybody around here can do that.”

“No, me,” Banner says. “But I can lift a car with one hand, so.”

“Show off,” Barton says.

Despite the fact that the movie has started by this point, they embark on a loud, distracting conversation about the relative joint looseness of everyone in the room. Barnes’s attempt to make them shut the hell up by lifting his right leg up to his ear is unsuccessful.

“How the hell do you even do that in pants that tight, Bucky?” Rogers squeaks.

“It’s called spandex, pal.”

That backfires into laughter so loud that Barnes misses all the banter at the beginning of the sword fight.

So wrong.

There follows a truly disturbing account of Romanoff’s double-jointedness on the part of Barton and flying Sam. Romanoff demonstrates several of these things, as if double-jointed acrobatics are acceptable movie-watching behavior. During this display, Barnes misses why the large aquatic creatures scream and most of why the pirate throws himself down a hill after the girl. Additionally, he learns things about Romanoff’s body that he neither needs nor wishes to be aware of.

“Oh yeah, I can do that too,” Hill says at one point.

Why.

Despite the unpleasantness of this conversation, and the fact that Barnes is going to have to watch *The Princess Bride* again, it is still not a welcome distraction when building JARVIS reports being attacked.

"Please excuse the interruption, but I appear to be under attack."

The lights suddenly change to full brightness.
They move.

Barnes still has the duffel shoved in the back corner of his closet, where he once spent a great many unpleasant hours. There’s a new tactical vest, which appeared one day as if by magic, though he knows it came via Rogers’s guilt. Barnes has oiled it several times, when cleaning his guns and sharpening his knives.

There is a corner of his brain that dreads the squeezing and weight of the tactical vest. But building JARVIS is in trouble, and building JARVIS is mission-assist. He puts it on.

He sets aside the cold sweat and the instability in his gut. He loads up on guns.

“Okay, Buck?” Rogers asks in the living room.

Rogers has loaded up with. The shield.

Barnes tries to hand over a gun, which is denied with a frown and a head shake.

For shit’s sake.

The elevator contains the contingent of movie-watchers, floor by floor, with the addition of weapons: Barton with a bow, Hill with a nearly acceptable complement of firearms, flying Sam with two revolvers and his backup wings, Banner looking nauseated, and Romanoff looking just the same as usual.

“Incoming,” Stark says over the intercom in the elevator on their way down.

Note: it had better be incoming solo.

They discover on the lobby floor that it is not. Stark has arrived from date night with Pepper in tow.

What a dickweed.

Banner evidently agrees, given how he pops immediately into a person much larger and greener than usual.

Green-thing Hulk growls.

“Confirm,” Barnes says.

Green-thing Hulk looks at him, assessing, and nods. Barnes holds out one fist for a bump; gets it.

Rogers laughs.

“Barnes, your hair,” Pepper says, as if the lobby weren’t swarming with small robots, and as if she shouldn’t be safely across the city at any place other than this.

Barnes lets her take the sparkly butterfly-shaped clip from her hair and use it to pin his bangs back.

Mission-assist.

“Thanks,” he says.

“Go get ‘em,” she says.

“Only if you get out of the way.”
She crinkles her nose at him, but climbs obediently into an elevator. Barnes trusts that building JARVIS will whisk her to a bulletproof space.

“Approximately two hundred small robots are attempting to breach my outer walls,” building JARVIS says. “Over five hundred are in the lobby, along with four humans. There is extensive weaponry. Please use caution.”

Right. Caution. Barnes catches flying Sam’s eye – they’ll spread out, use the walls of the elevator banks as cover while they –

Or, alternatively, Steven Goddamn Rogers will take off running into the fray.

Barnes’s body does what it has always done, no matter who was driving – it takes off after Rogers.

Assessment: the small robots range from shin height to thigh height. Many are equipped with what look like laser or plasma cutting tools. The Stark Industries civilians populating the lobby – security guards and various other employees – are largely crowded against the security desk.

“Hulk, Maria,” Romanoff says.

Green-thing Hulk clears a path, with Hill, Romanoff, and Barton following in his wake, toward the civilians. Good. That group will preserve civilian life and move them to safety.

Stark and flying Sam take advantage of being airborne, though the four bad-guy humans make this difficult, given their automatic weapons.

Assessment: what a pain in the ass.

Right. Zigzag formation. Figure out what the hell these dumb robots have as a weakness.

Barnes shoots at several experimentally. They’re tough little things. Three bullets in the center unit brings some of them to a halt. As does splitting them in half with the edge of a vibranium shield. Looks pretty fun.

Anyhow, the four bad guys are grouped together, three heavily armed, while the one in back messes with a large tablet – probably a control device.

Target acquired.

It’s not easy to get over there. There are so many little robots, and their torches tear up the floor in a manner making it clear that they will similarly cut through flesh. Flying Sam calls his name, and bullets crunch through several units in front of him.

Sam is trying to clear him a path.

MISSION ASSIST

Confirm.

It doesn’t help much. For each robot that goes down, three more replace it.

Focus.

Subjective time slows.

Barnes hears green-thing Hulk roar in the background. The shield knocks away one of the humans’
weapons, but the guy replaces it with another in short order.

Barnes runs out of ammo. He throws each pistol at a robot and draws new ones.

A new human body runs in from the right. Barnes swings, aims, and checks himself so hard that he stumbles, given how close he was to shooting Hill.

Dammit, that just makes all this more tricky. Neither she nor Rogers has any body armor.

And she ought to consider maybe wearing an orange vest.

Set task: take out those damn guys with guns.

Barnes angles himself so his left arm can provide a little protection and moves. The sound of bullets ping off Roger’s shield is comforting – Rogers is heading in Hill’s direction. That’s good.

An unfamiliar male voice shouts, “now!”

There’s a burst of gunfire. Flying Sam curses and drops to the floor, his right wing smoking.

“Sam!” Rogers yells.

The robots are changing formation, moving more purposefully, toward the lobby behind Barnes, training their cutters ahead of them. Barnes has to hop, awkward, around the beams cutting up the floor.

“Dammit,” Barton yells behind him, and green-thing Hulk roars again.

“On it,” Stark yells.

Rogers throws the shield and rolls toward Hill. One of the gunmen goes down. Rogers rises, one arm hooked around Hill, and he throws her at flying Sam as he catches the shield and goes to follow.

Another burst of gunfire, and Rogers goes down.

No.

PROTECT

Rogers.

ROGERS PROTECT ROGERS

“Steve!” Sam and Hill yell at the same time.

The robots swarm.

Barnes moves.

“The control panel,” Rogers yells.

ROGERS

Confirm.

“Bucky, you have to stop the robots,” Rogers says. “They’re all over. Don’t worry about me. Go!”
We’ve got him, Barnes,” flying Sam yells.

Which is ridiculous, given the way he’s listing to the right and grimacing as Hill hauls him to his feet.

“Go, Bucky!” Rogers yells.

ROGERS

Barnes looks back over his shoulder. Barton and Romanoff continue to try to cover the civilians running for the elevators. Green-thing Hulk is being swarmed by robots, yelling the whole time, while Stark tries to shoot them off him.

The floor of the lobby is uneven from damage. Flying Sam and Hill are lurching toward Steve, who’s laying on robots left and right with the shield from his spot on the floor. His right arm is bloody and his face pale.

“Bucky!” Steve bellows, his voice ringing, “go now!”

His command voice catches deep in Barnes’s brain. Barnes moves.

Rogers is down. Flying Sam is impaired. Green-thing Hulk is distressed.

“Crap!” Barton shouts.

Barnes chooses lethality.

He moves.

Head shot.

He moves.

Knee-cap, center mass.

He moves.

A bullet grazes his left thigh.

Distance to control panel 2.6 m.

Center mass, head shot.

“Shit,” the man holding the control panel says. “Dug.”

Or, as it turns out, more probably ‘Doug,’ given that the person on the ground grunts and lifts a sawed-off shotgun in bloodied hands, then fires at Barnes from close range.

Barnes fires back, and the man flops back, done with his living.

“No,” the man with the control panel says, his hand moving frantically. Barnes sees the robots turn in his peripheral vision, heading toward him.

Lethality: denied. Stark will want to know what’s going on.

Kneecap, kneecap, arm. The man falls and screams for a while.

“Bucky?” Steve shouts behind him.
Shouting is a good sign.

Barnes turns, and there’s that first hit of pain.

The robots are still.

Rogers is sitting up, pale but looking pissed off.

Good.

That’s good.

ROGERS

Confirm.

He’s okay.

He’ll be okay.

That’s good.

So Barnes sits down, because Steve is okay, and also his legs don’t work anymore.

“Bucky!”

“Nat, Barnes is down!” Barton yells.

Shut up, Barton, it’s fine. Just need to sit still for a minute.

“Goddammit, Barnes,” Stark says, landing in front of him.

Yeah.

Yeah, the flavor of blood is pretty gross.

This might be worse than initially assumed. The edges of the room are rapidly looking pretty dark.

“Bucky,” Steve says from a long way away.

How did he get so far.

“Bucky, no.”

Sorry Steve.
Chapter Notes

I couldn't let you guys dangle on that cliffhanger for TOO long. That would just be mean.

Barnes notes: surprise. He wakes up. Everything feels weird and awful, and when he opens his eyes, the light’s too bright, and he’s on one of the floors he had hoped never to visit, but he wakes up.

Shit, where is –

“Bucky.”

Exerting extraordinary effort, Barnes turns his head ten degrees, and there’s Steve.

Okay. Okay, that’s good. He can rest some more.

This process repeats twice more: Barnes finds himself aware of sound and able, with effort, to open his eyes. Each time he gets a blurry glimpse of Steve, which is enough to allow him to fall back into the dark.

The fourth time, opening his eyes feels less like lifting weights. He can feel cold air in his nose, can feel how dry everything feels, how heavy and numb. His mouth tastes like something died in it.

“What,” Barnes tries to say, but nothing comes out other than a rasp.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve says. ”Nice to see you awake. You want an ice chip?”

Not really, but if that’s the only choice. Nodding turns out to be beyond present capabilities. Barnes blinks.

Rogers puts an ice chip in his mouth. Barnes tries to reach for it, but neither arm moves, and the attempt hurts like a son of a bitch. Cold adrenalin whips through him, but glancing down shows no restraints. He wiggles the fingers of his right hand experimentally, and they twitch.

No restraints.

Okay.

Regardless, the inability to move causes a distress that Barnes can see far in the distance, even if he can’t immediately grasp it. His shoulders and back ache. His abdomen is distended. Turning his head slightly takes the kind of effort formerly used to punch cars out of the way.

He sucks the ice chip, which tastes as good as any of Katie’s mochas. He studies Rogers, who looks like shit. Dark circles under his eyes indicate severe lack of sleep. He has a goddamn beard. Who knew he could even grow one. It’s about four shades darker than his hair. Looks stupid.

Is this lack of self-care from his gunshot wound.

Barnes tries again to lift his arms so he can pat Rogers down. Either his pain tolerance has greatly
decreased or he has a significant medical problem.

“Stop it, Buck.”

Oh wow, Rogers is mad.

Barnes stops.

Rogers puts another ice chip in Barnes’s mouth and takes his shirt off. He turns so Barnes can see that the bandage on his right shoulder does not have a match on the back. He peels the bandage away: the wound is an ugly, puckered circle, but the edges look healthy. Healing clean.

“Okay?” Rogers says.

Blink.

“Jesus, Bucky. You almost died.”

Rogers’s voice sounds about as rough as his appearance.

Maybe this would not be the best time to pop out with ‘wouldn’t be the first time,’ or ‘that’s me, cutting out before the end of every job.’

He sucks his ice chip instead and keeps quiet. He’s pretty tired, anyhow.

Rogers gives him more ice.

“I’m gonna go get the doc, now that you’re awake,” Rogers says after the fifth ice chip. “Be right back.”

Doc was apparently already on the way, given her immediate appearance at the door, and one of the many tubes surrounding Barnes must contain a sedative, because he only panics a little at the white coat.

“I’m right here, Buck,” Rogers says.

Barnes wishes to be like cat Eleanor. He wants to push his face up against Steve and hide.

Must be a heavy-duty sedative.

The doc tries real hard. For one thing, she’s a woman, and he never had a female handler. For another, she’s good about information:

“I’m going to put my hand on your shoulder,”

and

“This light is to test your pupil response.”

and

"This button is to give you a little extra pain relief," which she pushes twice.

For a third, she calls him James, which is hilarious. As in,

“You’re pretty doped up now, James, so I’m going to talk to the Captain about your condition, okay?”
Sure thing, lady. *James.*

It’s so funny. And he’s wearing a dopey cotton gown with strings all over it and snowflakes. Hysterical.

“You laughing, Buck?” Steve ways when he comes back into the room.

Nod.

What’s that frown for, pal.

“What’s funny?”

“James.”

“It’s funny that she called you James?”

Nod.

“Okay, Buck. I guess she wasn’t kidding about you being doped up.”

Nod.

“Feeling okay otherwise? Want more ice?”

Nod.

“Arm’s cranked over,” Barnes says around his ice chip.

Steve pulls Barnes’s right arm out straight and resettles it down by his leg. This hurts a little. But for someone so big, Steve’s hands are really gentle.

His internal chronometer is off, but there’s what feels like a long period of this kind of stuff. He sleeps, then wakes again. Rogers gives him more ice chips, and he passes out as soon as his mouth’s less dry, until finally he wakes up enough that the light in his brain is back on.

Barnes’s brain feels huge, like someone opened a window and a brisk wind blew all the junk out. Kind of cold and empty, but in a good way. He can see stuff that was sitting in the corners.

Mission briefing hasn’t been cleaning up after itself. Look at all this crap it left laying around. Like watching a movie inside his own head. Pretty nice.

Barnes takes the proffered ice and lays his head back, closes his eyes to look at the brain junk better. All this old stuff banging around in his mind. Some of it’s even happy stuff.

Barnes feels a weight on the bed by his leg. He’s still watching his brain-movie, so he gropes around with his fingers to see what it is: Steve’s head. Aw, Stevie. Barnes pushes his button and clenches through the stabbing pain enough to lift his hand a little and lay it on the back of Steve’s neck like the old Bucky is doing in the brain movie, when Steve was the one in a bed.

And Steve was tiny. Hilarious.

Tiny brain-movie Steve is so mad. He wants to get out of bed. He wants to go to work and earn money to pay his half of the rent. He wants, wants, wants, that little guy. He’s a wee stick of dynamite, burning up his teeny little body.
Tiny brain-movie Steve coughs up blood, which is not hilarious.

“I bit my cheek, Bucky, that’s all it is.”

Tiny brain-movie Steve lies.

It is an excellent brain-movie, both entertaining and informative. Who knew there were so many interesting things just hanging around in the dusty corners of a brain. Don’t even need a download: there they are, pictures ready to look at.

The neck under his hand shakes. He rubs his fingers across the neck.

“Don’t get all ruffled, Stevie, everything’s okay,” he says.

The neck under his hand shakes a lot.

Barnes opens his eyes, and Steve is having some sort of emotional crisis into the blanket.

Barnes is sad to learn that an adrenalin spike will clear narcotics right out of a super-soldier’s system. All the nice/happy/relaxed feelings blow away, leaving the super-fun usual of his staticky brain, with additional physical problems.

Ow.

“Steve,” he says, “come on. Hey, pal.”

“They practically cut you in half, Bucky,” he says to the bed, in a voice so raw that Barnes’s heart rate monitor briefly beeps at a higher rate.

“And here I still am.”

“That’s not –“

“It’s what matters, right?”

He moves his fingers again across Steve’s neck while Steve presses his face to Barnes's kneecap. Barnes can feel him working hard to stop shaking. Stuffing his own crap back down where the sun don't shine. Oh boy.

“Steve. I’m still here.”

“You don’t call me by my first name very often nowadays.”

Vocal characteristics: soft, higher pitched than usual. Highly emotional still. Aw, buddy.

“Steve. Pal. Sorry I scared you.”

Poor guy. Barnes can see the conversation he’s going to have to have with the mission once these drugs wear off. They both forgot for a minute that protecting the self is part of protecting the mission, and look where it got them: about a hundred new scars and Steve clinging to his leg for dear life.

Leg-hugging’s got to be pretty low on the hugging satisfaction scale.

“When’s the last time you slept?”

He can feel Steve’s frown through the thin cotton blanket.
“Been sleeping here.”

So not really sleeping at all, then. Barnes looks around as much as he can, and there’s a recliner off to the right with a blanket folded over the head rest. The chair looks expensive, but hardly comfortable. Barnes looks around for one of building JARVIS’s eyes. There’s one up in a corner of the ceiling.

‘Get Romanoff,’ he mouths, and the red light blinks: one long, one short, one long, one short. C for ‘confirm.’ Cute.

“When’s the last time you ate?”

“People’ve been bringing me food.”

Stubborn.

“When’s the last time you had a shower?”

This makes Steve sit up, all glare and frown.

“You telling me I stink, Buck?”

“I’m telling you to stand down,” Barnes says in what he hopes is a gentle tone.

Kind of hard to self-modulate when everything’s so loopy. But loopy’s better than the panic he can see growing in the distance, the longer he’s in this bed surrounded by machines, with tubes coming out of him.

“Crisis is over,” he says. “You can take a minute to breathe.’

Steve makes fists in the blanket again, stares back down at Barnes’s knee. Packing it all away again.

You listen to me, mission. We can’t let him do that. We need to remember.

Poor old mission comes back with a sound like “uuuuuuuh-errrm.”

Anyway, they’ll try. And put this excellent painkiller to use while they have it.

Barnes reaches up – awkward and stiff and, far in the background, really painful – and lays the backs of his fingers against Steve’s cheek. Steve goes stiff, then blinks three times, and some of the tension drops out of him.

We really need to try harder with the hugging, mission.

Barnes strokes Steve’s cheek a few times, beard hair crinkly beneath his fingers. He watches Steve blink tears away. Steve looks so tired.

“Gonna keep the new look?” he asks as he drops his hand.

“I don’t know. How does it look?”

“You already have the plaid shirts. Might as well go full lumberjack.”

There’s a pathetic little smile. Good job, Barnes.

“It’d look stupid with the uniform.”
Ugh. Barnes is tired too. Much too tired to joke about fighting.

“Let’s hope you don’t have to wear it again any time soon.”

Steve huffs.

“Confirm, Buck.”

Romanoff has probably been standing just outside for several minutes, waiting for this opening to make her dramatic entrance. She swans in, looking shiny and perfect.

“Oh look,” he says, “here’s bratty Natty.”

She purses her lips. Steve’s eyes go wide, and he actually laughs a little.

“Jesus, Bucky! How many times have you pushed that painkiller button?”

Twice.

“A lot.”

“It’s like you think I won’t remember that forever,” she says.

But she smooths his hair out of his eyes. Then – because she is a superior person – she digs a hair tie out of her pocket and puts his bangs back out of his eyes for him.

“No more scaring the crap out of us, Barnes,” she says.

“I’ll do my best.”

She kisses his cheek. It feels. Nice.

“I mean it, мой друг.”

“Not друг,” he says.

“No?”

“Mission-assist.”

That makes her smile, and Steve too. They are close to him. They have their hands on him. And with the drugs keeping panic out, that is. Really nice.

For five breaths, Barnes lets himself feel it. These two people who care for him – either one of whom he’d jump in front of a gun for (q.e.d.) – close. Safe.

People who have just walked back from the brink of death are allowed to say mushy things, right? Seems like an appropriate moment for emotional vulnerability.

cuh. er.

Confirm.

“I love you guys,” he says.

Steve has another moment with Barnes’s kneecap. But look at Romanoff’s smile.
“When did you get dimples?”

“I only bring them out for special occasions,” she says.

She kisses his cheek again.

“Well done, Barnes. And,” she says, straightening and raising her voice. “Steve’s not going to say it because it doesn’t jibe with his aesthetic of tortured masculinity, but we love you too.”


Romanoff does not even try to keep her laughter on the inside. It’s a reasonable response.

“Steve,” he says, “that was terrible.”

“Bucky! Come on, I –“

“Romanoff, take this guy away and make him eat a meal and take a shower, will you? Nope, Rogers, big emotional moment’s over. You missed your chance.”

She drags him out of the room while he protests. It’s hilarious.

Just after they’ve cleared the door, Steve pokes his head back around the frame, wearing his stubborn expression, and hisses,

“Fine. I love you too, you asshole.”

Good job, Steve.

And it’s not as if it’s a surprise.
With Steve successfully foisted off to perform self-care under Romanoff’s beady eye, time for a little self-care of his own.

“Building, will you send in the doc?”

The ceiling camera blinks its ‘confirm’ sign.

Barnes pushes his button and sighs when everything goes squishy again. He’s leaning back against his pillows and can even smile at the doc when she comes in, despite her wearing her coat.

“What do you need, James?”

“Tubes,” he says. “I can feel myself freaking out in the background. If you’re gonna keep me IVed and catheterized, I’m gonna be pushing this button every ten minutes just to keep from wrecking the place.”

She frowns.

“That’s too much, James. But let’s see how you look.”

“Coat,” he says when she steps forward.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your coat freaks me out too.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Of course.”

Under her coat, the doc wears a pale pink sweater that is in no way objectionable and looks nice against her shiny black hair.

She looks at monitors and waves a fancy-looking tablet thing over his torso, stares at it.

“Are you sober enough to listen, James?”

Nod.

“We kept you out for almost a week, in case your healing factor had things closing up the wrong way and you needed more surgery. But it looks like everything’s working the way it should. All your internal organs are swollen and unhappy from their adventures, but there’s no sign of infection or blockage at this point. That’s good.”

“Okay.”

“You still need the IV, for fluids and your pain management. There’s nothing I can do about that. You’ll need it for at least a few more days.”

Barnes tries to practice looking at the little plastic thing on the back of his hand, covered in a transparent covering, with the tube coming out of it.

Six seconds elapse before he feels himself sweat with the desire to press the button at least twice.
Not sustainable.

“Can you move it?”

“You don’t like it in your hand?”

“Don’t like to see it.”

The doc purses her lips and gazes at him, then nods.

“How about your lower leg?” she says. “It’ll be obnoxious when you walk around, but otherwise hidden when you’re in bed.”

Stark has excellent medical staff.

“Thanks doc.”

“My pleasure, James. Now. I’ll take the oxygen cannula out, but I want JARVIS to monitor your saturation levels. Anything under ninety, and you put it back on, understood?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“And here’s my conundrum with the catheter. The only reason you need it is that you’re too weak to get to the bathroom on your own. Your legs aren’t injured, but your core muscles are shredded, and your shoulders are out of commission at the moment too. We don’t have anyone strong enough to carry you. So unless you can talk Iron Man and Captain America into rotating pee duty, you’re stuck.”

“Doctor,” Building JARVIS says through the tablet, “Sir has two robotic laboratory assistants capable of bearing weight in excess of Sergeant Barnes’s current level.”

Best mission-assist ever.

The doc smiles. She has a nice, wide smile.

“Well! There you go. If Mr. Stark agrees, problem solved.”

Barnes suspects that Stark is not given much choice in the matter: a positive answer comes within minutes.

“All right then – let’s get you sorted,” the doc says.

She reaches over and pushes the button eight times.

Barnes goes to a high mountaintop where everything is very cold and very quiet, like he might be about to ski down through untouched snow. Skiing is cool. It makes a good sound, all crunchy and whooshy. Stark probably has a ski lodge somewhere. With a big-ass fireplace that you can burn a whole tree in. Steve should go there, now that he looks like a lumberjack. He can carry logs back and forth all day and regain his manly feeling, since he told Barnes that he loooooooves him. What a dork. Of course Steve loves him. He’s very loveable, aside from the whole murdering assassin thing. What’s not to love? He’s funny, he bakes, and he has excellent hair. Good job, Barnes, mission success at living a human life, I’m so proud of you. You deserve a cookie. Hey. Who will smuggle a cookie into the infirmary for us? Barton. Obviously. If these yahoos know anything about anything, they won’t let Barton within a mile of his bed.

“James,” the doc says.
Barnes opens his eyes. The doc and two nurses are grinning at him. Why.

“James, we’re all done.”

Well look at that. He can’t see where the tube’s hooked into his leg, the pressure from the O2 cannula is gone, and while the parts of his body that he doesn’t want anybody to touch ever are sore, no one’s messing with them, and the large-bore tubes are gone. Nice.

“Thanks, doc.”

“Oh believe me, our pleasure. Let’s watch out for that painkiller use now, shall we? Don’t let yourself hurt, but you don’t want to do too much flying.”

One of the nurses snickers. Weird.

“Sure thing.”

Stark arrives with the robot – and Bite-Size, who careens into the room at a high rate of speed. By the volume and rapidity of its beeping, Barnes assumes that Bite-Size is cursing him out.

“Sorry, buddy.”

Bite-Size’s arms don’t reach high enough, so it stands by the bed, waving.

“Now look,” Stark says. “Try not to make this one fall in love with you too, willya? It’s kind of critical to the suit-building process.”

“I’ll try,” Barnes says, then winks at the robot.

The robot turns its hands over. Bite-Size curses at him again. Stark groans.

“You are a horrible person, Barnes. You’re lucky that you’re helpless right now.”

“And that Pepper likes me.”

“Friend, you do not even know.”

Then he stops and frowns at the floor, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Look, Barnes. I know Steve made the right decision, but I hope you’re okay with the shoulder thing.”

What.


There goes that adrenalin, burning out all the nice painkillers again.

“Told me what, Stark.”

“Yeah, I’m just gonna step back here toward the door a little bit, don’t mind me,” Stark says, looking shifty enough that Barnes gives real thought to jumping out of bed.

Except that wiggling his toes appears to be pretty much all he can manage at the moment, dammit.

“Uh. You were a real mess, buddy. Even with that vest, a shotgun blast at that range should’ve put you in pieces. The surgery was – I mean, it was hours, and that was even with all my state-of-the-art-
ten-years-from-now equipment.”

“Okay.”

His menacing growl’s intact, anyhow.

“And I figured, since otherwise you weren’t ever gonna be okay with all that shit going on in your left shoulder, and they had you open anyway. I mean. I had the new plates machined about a day after we talked about it,” Stark babbles.

This makes approximately zero sense.

“What are you talking about.”

“The braces for your left arm.”

The. What?

“You were stable enough at that point, the docs said it was okay. Steve too. I had the pieces machined already. Way smaller screws. You won’t get those tears every time you use your arm. Ought to be less back pain, too. Probably took a good ten, twelve pounds out of you just from the old plates. These are better. They’ll wear better, too.”

Barnes takes several minutes to process.

“You replaced the braces for my arm.”

“Yeah. Steve said it was okay if it’d help. He didn’t seem to know that using your arm tore you up all the time. I figured he’s about as close to medical power of attorney as you’d get.”

Well. That’s correct.

Less weight, less internal damage during arm use. It is not something Barnes ever bothered to try to imagine, being an impossibility. Now that it’s been done, he can’t imagine it owing to the narcotic cloud in his brain.

Hypothetically, it is an improvement.

“Okay,” he says.

Is it okay.

Unable to assess currently. But there is the likelihood of okayness in the future.

Anyway, in the meantime, he can’t move. Later on, if he needs to, he can make his displeasure known.

“Oh, really okay, or okay I’m stuck in a hospital bed on the good drugs?” Stark asks.

The guy’s too smart for anybody’s good.

“The latter,” Barnes says.

“Fair enough,” Stark says, but he grins, then moves out of the way for the doc.

The large robot – Hamburger Helper, what kind of name even is that – takes a few tries to
understand that its role is to assist Barnes with getting upright and moving under (some of) his own power, not simply lifting him from the bed and hauling him around.

Bite-Size curses at Hamburger Helper, which whistles mournfully.

“This is better than a Chaplin movie,” Stark says at one point.

“Mr. Stark, I recognize that you’re my boss, but please don’t cause further injury to my patient, even if it’s emotional,” the doc says.

This is at the point when Barnes’s right half is supported by the robot and his left half is dangling in the air. It probably does look hilarious. It feels very much not.

But they figure out a method that involves cranking up the angle of the bed and Hamburger Helper lifting Barnes to his feet, then taking most of Barnes’s weight by one arm low around his pelvis. Works okay. Barnes can take little shuffling steps. Bite-Size takes charge of the IV stand with one arm and puts the other around Barnes’s calf, making little encouraging noises.

Barnes makes a slow turn about the room.

“Wonderful,” the doc says. “Now go out to the nurses’ station and back. You can do that once more today and three times tomorrow.”

Great. He thought he was getting to control his bodily functions, and here he is, tricked into rehab.

“That’s gonna take forever,” he says.

“Probably so,” the doc says.

Stark actually. Takes his hand. The metal one.

“Hey. It’s good to see you up and around. I’m glad you’re still with us, buddy,” he says.

Unexpected.

And pleasant.

“Thanks, Stark. And thanks for the robot.”

“Sure thing. Just don’t flirt with it!”

It takes Barnes and the two robots 46 minutes to shuffle the 3.5 m to the nurses’ station and back, while a nurse hovers in the background, exhorting him to move more slowly. By the time he’s back in bed with the blanket tucked around him (a dual-robot effort), every bit of him aches. He’s too tired even to push the button, so Hamburger Helper does it for him.
The affinity for late-night emotional chats among space princes

There aren’t any windows, and his internal chronography is messed up by drugs and blood loss, so Barnes has no idea what day it is, much less what time of day, when he wakes in the room with no windows. But Bite-Size beeps and races to the side of the bed when he wakes.

“Where’s Steve?”

“Agent Romanoff was able to persuade him to try a nap,” building JARVIS says through the alarm speaker by his head. “He has been asleep for just under thirteen hours.”

Oh good.

“I hope he didn’t set an alarm.”

“I turned it off, Sergeant.”

Well done, building. Barnes might not see Steve for a day. But the guy needs it.

Bite-Size’s arm waving in the hallway has summoned a nurse, who brings excitement with her: apple juice and chicken broth. Not nearly enough apple juice and chicken broth, but it’s better than ice chips. As an added bonus, he can consume them under his own power, thanks to a small table in front of his face and a couple of straws.

Hamburger Helper stirs itself from its place in the corner, and Barnes takes his little walk (36 minutes this time), and the next time he wakes, it must be the middle of the night, because all the lights are turned low, even in the hallways.

And Thor is sitting in the recliner.

Thanks to the magic of the pain drip, Barnes’s startle is only internal.

Yikes.

con. fir.

“When did you come in?”

“Not long ago,” Thor says. “And I cannot stay long, for Jane and I are in the midst of some delicate work that may bring benefit to both our realms. But when Natasha wrote to say you had awakened, I wished to see you with my own eyes.”

That’s. Nice.

Aside from the curious information that Romanoff and Thor correspond.

“Thanks.”

Thor frowns at the air around Barnes.

“Our energies are good. Weakened, but clear of any sign of infection or other troubles. You should heal cleanly, friend Barnes, though of course the progress will be slower than you like.”

“That’s the worst part.”
Thor grins.

“Indeed. No man of action enjoys taking to his bed unless it is for – action.”

Barnes snorts. Nice to be joked at, instead of treated like an eggshell.

“But also,” Thor says, “after hearing of your rush into danger, there is something I would like to say to you.”

He lays his giant hand on Barnes’s forearm. Whatever he’s going to say is serious. Barnes watches him brace for it, and feels his own pulse rate increase, hears the monitor’s beep speed up.

“I had a brother. Loki,” Thor says.

A story. Okay.

Barnes leans his head back against the pillow to focus his energy on listening.

“He was of another race, the Jotuns. Frost giants. Though neither of us knew it until we were grown.”

By the expression on Thor’s face, it’s gonna be a sad story.

“He was never like me,” Thor says. “He was quiet and learned. Gifted in magic. Never an enthusiastic fighter, despite his skill.”

Thor smiles. This does not lessen the sadness on his face.

“Even you would’ve been impressed by his ability with knives.”

Unlikely, but all right.

“I teased him a great deal, when we were boys. He never seemed – comfortable. Loki. His talents and desire were his own but they were not those of most Asgardian boys. I never meant to hurt him. I merely wanted him with me. He was my brother, and I wanted him by my side. I was used to getting what I wanted. And I could never bear the silence of the library for long, nor have I much talent for magic.”

Thor shakes his head.

“There were many things I did wrong. Many ways in which I lacked wisdom. But I cannot take full blame for it. Loki never felt comfortable, but we loved him. My parents and I. Our friends. We loved him, but he never believed it.”

Thor leans in close – not so close as to intimidate, but enough that Barnes gives all his attention.

“He felt alone, and it turned him hard and cruel. It made him capable of terrible wickedness. He died for it. So did my mother. Because he could not let himself believe that he had a place in our family. That we could accept the man he was. That we loved him.

Barnes. Do not let yourself be fooled as my brother was. Do not do yourself the dishonor of refusing your place here. This place – the tower and those in it, and your other friends in this city – we are your family, not only Steven. Our pattern would have a hole in it, if you were not here.”

Barnes can’t respond to this, given the lump in his throat.
“Do you understand, my friend?”

Nod.

Thor stands.

“Good. The next time you find danger, I hope you will remember then as well. Now I must away to Jane, who sends you her best wishes. Rest now, Barnes, and may you recover as swiftly as may be.”

Thor walks out into the hallway so quickly and quietly that it’s almost as if he disappears.

WOW

Mission. You got that right.

It keeps Barnes awake for long enough that the night nurse and Bite-Size both fuss at him, and the nurse presses his pain-relief button to prove her point.

But it is necessary to think over this conversation. It is a gift from an unexpected source, this story of misunderstanding and unhappiness.

Had he been in danger of making himself bitter and small, like Thor’s brother? Preliminary assessment: unlikely. But Barnes recalls the recent conversations about lifespan, and Rogers’s hypothetical future love affairs. Can emotions surprise one, like loud noises and sudden movements. Can they cause panic and fear.

Barnes remembers telling Steve and flying Sam about his time with Hydra, how Steve had breathed quickly several times. Remembers Steve and Thor sparring, and Steve’s hoarse cry. Remembers Steve – remembers himself – jumping awake from nightmare. Remembers sitting in his closet, miserable and convinced of impending rejection.

It will be good to remember this, and be vigilant. He has considered his own affection for many people, and been gratified many times: by Katie’s pleasure when he goes for early coffee, by Banner waving him over to the grill, Hill’s magical ability to expose evildoers to legal authorities, and Esther’s hugs.

He would not have considered himself to be on Thor’s list of mission-assists.

But when a thousand-year-old giant guy from another planet, and oh who by the way can make his own lightning, tells you to do a better job keeping yourself safe, it’s a good idea to listen.

CONFIRM

“Part of the pattern.”

Nice.
Word must go out that they’re all still stuck with him for the foreseeable future, because Barnes gets a parade of visitors.

Steve returns in the morning still wearing roadkill on his lower face but without that pinched look about his eyes. He tries to apologize for having basic physical needs for things like sleep, until Barnes says,

“Bite Size, punch this asshole in the kneecap, will you?”

And Bite Size actually does it.

Rogers is stunned into silence. It’s so beautiful.

He gets his revenge, however, when the nurse brings in a tray of slightly more solid foods. Barnes remains without arm function, so he’s trapped when Rogers holds the second (and subsequent) spoonful of horrifying neon-orange gelatin in front of his face until Barnes consumes it.

Terrible.

“What is this shit.”

“It’s Jell-o, and it’s what we give to idiots to punish them for acting like reckless assholes and encouraging the corruption of innocent robots.”

Well. He’s certainly feeling better.

confirm

“Can’t I have more broth?”

“You don’t deserve more broth. You deserve Jell-o.”

Rogers is a vindictive bastard.

He is rescued by Pepper, who strides into the room and immediately classes up the joint. She takes one look at the breakfast tray and says,

“Are they trying to drive you out of here faster or make you want to starve yourself to death?”

Barnes recalls the times when he has observed Barton attempting to convince Romanoff not to threaten him with immediate death. He attempts to copy Barton’s expression by widening his eyes and poking his bottom lip out slightly. Rogers blinks at him.

“Steve said Jell-o is my punishment.”

“Unfortunately for Steve, I own this building, and I am a lot nicer.”

Barnes smiles at Rogers, who glares.
“And I brought you a bathrobe. Hospital gowns are terrible.”

She unwarps the package in her arms and lays the bathrobe over his legs. It’s extremely fluffy. And black.

“Wow, Pepper. That’s really nice. Thank you.”

“God, Barnes. What am I gonna do, pretend you’re fine? Pretend this is all fine? We’ve all been worried out of our minds. It’s just a bathrobe. It’s practically nothing.”

This is like Thor all over again, isn’t it, Mission.

It’s a lot.

“It’s not nothing, Pepper. Thanks.”

“You get out of here soon, okay?”

“Promise.”

“Well, hell,” Steve says when she’s gone. “Now I’d feel bad to make you eat more Jell-o.”

It’s tricky to get the bathrobe on without working shoulders or the ability to hold up one’s own body weight. Steve is distressed by the process of getting out of bed with robotic help. He tries to hide it, but Barnes can see. He can feel it in the deliberate, excessive gentleness of Steve’s hands as he pulls the robe up Barnes’s dangling arms and belts it tight.

“Stop pawing my bathrobe, Rogers. You can’t have it.”

There’s that sarcastic eyebrow. Good job, pal.

“Oh yeah? You finally get your own damn pajamas and I’m supposed to keep my hands off them?”

“Life’s real unfair, Rogers.”

“Yeah. I see that.”

While he’s up, Barnes figures he might get in a rehab lap. Rogers frets the whole way to the nurses’ station and back, trying to help out despite having arms almost a full meter too high to provide assistance.

“Rogers. We’ve got this,” Barnes says. Repeatedly.

“They have a system worked out, Captain.”

Nice of the nurses to back him up.

Even nicer that he gets pudding instead of gelatin with his lunch.

“What’s so funny, Buck?”

“That’s the first thing I ate. When the mission changed. Chocolate pudding in the hospital.”
“Why were you in the hospital?”

How have they not had this conversation.

“You were in the hospital, dumbass.”

“You came to the hospital while I was out.”

“Of course I did.”

“And you ate pudding.”

“Threw it against the wall.”

“You don’t have to eat it.”

“Well, I figure maybe I could give it another try.”

Turns out he’s been wrong this whole time. Pudding is amazing.

In the afternoon, they make a video call to flying Sam, who apologizes about seven different times for daring to go back to DC once it became clear that Barnes would not be escaping to the afterlife.

“I’m real glad to see your face, Barnes.”

“I’m real glad to be seen.”

This makes flying Sam smile wide. Barnes decides: flying Sam’s smile goes on the good list.

It’s funny, who comes to visit whenever they feel like it versus who waits until they can see him alone. Hill strolls in to tell Barnes that he’s a wimp and, when Steve protests, she tells him that he’s a terrible nurse. She also makes about 40 negative comments about Rogers’s beard, which means she loves it. Building JARVIS saves him from death by boredom by informing him of the existence of audiobooks, solidifying its position as critical mission-assist. Barnes and Rogers spend many enjoyable minutes bickering over the qualities that make a book narrator’s voice desirable, and many enjoyable hours sitting next to one another, listening, looking at one another when there’s a good joke or a surprise. Rogers sketches lazily in his notebook during these hours, or sometimes sits with his head back and eyes closed as if he’s asleep.

Conjecture: this is the most rest Rogers has gotten since the enforced bed rest of his youth.

good

Confirm, mission.

Romanoff spends almost as much time with him as Steve does. She also has the highest rate of success (second place: Pepper) at getting Steve to take a break and go sleep in his own bed.

Stark and Pepper wander in and out at regular intervals. Stark brings tools a couple of times, and tinkers with the metal arm until Barnes is able to at least use it from the elbow down while his shoulders continue to heal. It’s a relief to be able to feed himself again. Once they bring Col. Rhodes with them. He has little to say, but his expression is less fierce when he looks at Barnes, and his
handshake seems sincere.

Banner stops by a few times, always with Stark and usually with very little to say, until Stark pulls him through the doorway by one elbow on an evening when Rogers is on a Romanoff-enforced break.

“Bruce has a comment,” Stark says, and leaves.

That seems kind of rude.

“Have a seat,” he says, but Banner shakes his head.

His expression makes him look like he wants to be pretty much anywhere else.

“Better spit it out, or Stark’ll just make you come back,” Barnes says.

“It sounds stupid.”

One thing that’s really nice about all these painkillers and the low blood pressure is that Barnes has gotten a break from feeling like the most awkward person in the room. Pretty nice. Makes it easy to smile.

“I live with Steve, pal. Whatever dumb thing you say, I guarantee I’ve heard worse.”

That at least makes the guy stop wringing his hands.

“He know you talk about him like that?”

“I talk to him like that.”

Banner laughs a little.

“I don’t know if it’s even important, Barnes. But Tony wanted me to tell you, so.”

He rubs his hair so that it curls into the stratosphere.

“It took me over an hour to come back, after. You went down. The other guy was. Really upset.”

What.

“About me?”

“Yeah. He’s around, in the background, you know. Like yours.”

Nod.

“So anyway. I guess he – likes you.”

“Thanks, Banner.”

“Well, you know. We’re just glad you’re gonna be okay. The both of us.”

Barnes is starting to wonder if they’re all in cahoots.

We’re going to feel real weird about all these at some point, aren’t we mission.
Barton takes a long time to visit. It’s weird, and Barnes identifies: worry. Has he done something to piss Barton off. Healing is really boring: there are many times when Barnes would welcome Barton’s hyperactive jokes.

But when he does come, it’s strange. Barton stomps into the room bearing a plastic shopping bag and wearing a scowl.

“I went to the Carp,” he growls.

Why is he so angry.

“Thought you’d like some soup. Told Mr. Hayashi you’d been hurt.”

He reaches into the bag and sets four containers down on the bed tray, each with a thump. Four large containers.

“And this is the result. Mr. Hayashi and his daughter. She sent you dumplings,” Barton says, pulling out a foam container. “He made you a card, it’s got some Shinto prayer on it for healing or something.”

He slaps the card on the tray. Barton is furious.

“You don’t get to,” he says, then presses his lips together so hard they go white, eyes closed, and exhales firmly.

“You don’t just run out into danger. We’re a team. We don’t. Just don’t do it anymore. Got it?”

How much would Thor laugh, to hear Barton say the same thing but about a hundred times more pissed off. Barnes nods.

“Enjoy your damn soup.”

Maybe that’s meant to be sarcastic, but Barnes for sure isn’t going to pass up gift soup. The night nurse helps out with the whole lifting-and-serving thing, and it turns out that there’s enough soup and dumplings for one patient and one nurse to make a terrific meal.

But wow, does all this rigmarole make a guy think real hard. The person who dragged Steve out of the Potomac had about as much sense of self as a tree stump, and his brain would’ve shorted out at the thought that they would ever end up living in this place with a bunch of half-broken yahoos who actually care about him.

It’s not just luck that got him here, though that’s a lot of it. Not just luck that has made him into a person of value for himself, not just for what he can do.

It’s hard to think back to those early days of the mission. His brain didn’t work so great, not being used to independent thought, so a lot of the memories are gappy, with fuzz around the edges.

But there’s one common thread.

Hey mission.

yes
I wouldn’t be here without you, pal. You and your ‘protect’ never steer me wrong.

Maybe that feeling in him is the painkiller. But Barnes prefers to believe that it’s the mission being happy.

All of this thinking even makes him smarter, which he uses for Steve’s benefit, making him mission-compliant. Excellent all around.

Doesn’t start out so excellent, what with waking up a second time to find Rogers being all weepy into the blanket again.

But first he scares Barnes half to death. He says to the bed, in a voice so raw that Barnes’s heart monitor briefly beeps at a higher rate.

"How many times do I have to lose you, Buck?"

Yeah, I know, mission.

“Steve.”

Rogers’s shoulders twitch with surprise that Barnes is awake, but he doesn’t raise his head. He keeps his face buried.

“I can’t take it.”

Rogers’s fists are balled up in the blankets. If he rips them, will the doc let Barnes have new ones.

Barnes places his hand on Rogers’s neck, rubs his thumb in a little circle. In the wide-open space of his mind, that’s familiar. It’s ‘breathe, buddy.’ It’s ‘calm down.’

“Nothing’s ever easy, Buck. Not one damn thing has been easy since they thawed me out. All I do is fight. The world got so awful. Practically everyone I know died. I’m the same, and they’re. Dead, Bucky. They’re dead, and SHIELD was HYDRA, and you’re. You’re broken. I think I’m broken. And I don’t know what to do anymore, except that I’m so tired of fighting. I can’t take any more – loss,” Steve says, again in that broken voice.

But,

“I wouldn’t have anything left” is in a bare whisper.

I’m trying, mission.

Steve shakes, and clenches his hands, and just barely avoids ripping the blanket. Barnes watches him struggle to stop shaking.

“You’re wrong,” Barnes says.

Steve lifts his head so swiftly that Barnes’s hand falls away, and the look Steve shoots him is so angry that even through the blood loss and the returning haze of painkillers from his drip, Barnes can feel the Asset perk up in the background, violence to meet violence.
Down, boy.
The Asset retreats.

“I guess that’s the look Sam would give you if he’d heard you just now,” Barnes says.

smart

Thanks, mission.

Steve blinks.

“Or Romanoff. Thor.”

What a mighty frown you have there, pal.

“Ollie, Lydia, Esther.”

“Now you’re just fighting dirty.”

“Carter. Even on a bad day.”

Rogers sighs.

“Fine, you win.”

Shutters go down in his eyes.

Well, crap.

Barnes walks his fingers across the blanket to rest against Rogers’s hand. He remembers the tone the women have used with him sometimes, when they wanted him to resist running away. He does okay enough: the briefing helps his throat remember how to pitch his voice gently. Affection, he thinks, when he says,

“It’s not a fight, Steve. You always made people love you. Always failed to see it, too. But you haven’t been really alone in a long time, pal.”

Barnes remembers moments of breaking: cold ones, violent ones, ones that made him sit on his closet floor. By contrast, Rogers just melts. It’s like his bones lose all capacity to hold him up, so that he collapses with his face pressed against Barnes’s hip, shaking.

Lifting his hand a second time is a tiny bit easier (if no less painful), but he rests it on Steve’s back for the entire length of time it takes for the trembling to stop.

“Sam’ll be so proud of you,” Barnes says when he can count to ten without anything shaking under his hand.

Steve snorts.

“Shut up.”

He doesn’t lift his head, but he turns it to look up at Barnes. The briefing stretches wide at the sensation of looking down at Steve’s face.

“Couldn’t tell you too many details,” Barnes says, “but I’m pretty sure the Howlers didn’t follow you
around Europe into ridiculous danger on a whim.”

Rogers just blinks wetly at him, nods once.

“And how many times had you met Sam before he was ready to commit treason with you?”

Rogers tries to turn his head away and rise up. Barnes lets his arm hang heavy. A pretty subtle hint, but Rogers gets it.

“It’s hard to admit, when you’re the size of a large hill and may or may not have the blood of hundreds on your hands.”

He wiggles his arm a little.

“That when people bake you cookies, or do your hair. Or make a home for you. Break into government buildings. Help you save the world. That they mean it.”

Barnes tilts his chin down as far as he can, to look Steve full in the face.

“But Steve. We owe it to them to trust that they do.”

Tight hugs while healing from major gunshot wounds are extremely painful, but sometimes they’re just fucking necessary.

When the lump in Barnes’s throat has receded sufficiently to allow speech, he says,

“Of course, those of us who appreciated you before you swelled up are a rarified club.”

Rogers laughs softly and lets him go, but he doesn’t lean back far.

“What’s happened to you, Buck? That’s more words and more information than you usually give out in a week. Is this the drugs talking?”

Maybe Barnes will tell him all about it some day. When he’s less tired.

“Nah,” he says. “Just had a few enlightening conversations recently is all.”

Rogers sits with him until he falls asleep again. When he arrives the next day, it’s without his mangy chin coating, which Barnes takes as a good sign.

All in all, a pretty eventful 16 days. By the end of it, he can hold lightweight objects and move a little on his own, although he still requires assistance getting up and down. The doc has had him walking laps half the damn day, with Hamburger Helper and Bite-Size for assistance, the latter mostly via shocking Rogers in the kneecap whenever he tries to gum up the works.

Barnes can see that it’s going to be a long, obnoxious process to get back to standard levels of fitness and dexterity. While he still had the drip to help, he dug around in the old brain a little, and this is a far cry from going into the tank and coming out later at full effectiveness, a blank slate. More painful, on one hand. On the other hand, the food and the company are far superior. And the Asset never got audiobooks. Something leaked out of him with all that blood: some lingering sense of distrust, maybe. Like Thor said. He can see the space he fits into, finally.

And then they kick him out of medical.

“Good day, Buck?”
“Yeah.”

The doc and the nurses hug him when he leaves, as if he’s not going to be back for checkups and rehab for the next million years. Hamburger Helper prods Steve out of the way and walks with him all the way to the elevator.

“Thanks, pal. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

The robot whistles at him.

“See you soon, okay?” to Bite-Size.

“Bucky, I will never get over this thing with you and robots,” Rogers laughs.

“It’s the arm. They love the arm.”

“If you say so.”

“It’s a marvel of modern machinery, Steve.”

Their apartment looks amazing, after the infirmary. The windows, that view, and all the familiar stuff that makes things feel safe and normal. Barnes knocks into Steve, just to say how glad he is to be home.

Steve has set up the sofa with a bunch of pillows and a blanket; the coffee table’s pulled close and piled high with books, snacks, and – because Steve Rogers is a god damn American treasure – a paper cup from the coffee bar.

Barnes is exhausted from all his travels, so the setup looks like Camp Heaven.

Rogers settles him in, and it’s so much more comfortable than the hospital bed. He’s in regular clothing, and the air is warm, without that acrid smell of cleaning fluid and plastic. It’s all so nice that he falls asleep before he can even start in on the coffee.

He realizes this when he wakes because of the clatter at the doorway, but he doesn’t have time to work up any annoyance at it, because Steve has brought him the Olds.

Chapter End Notes

I see a few of y'all doubting that I'll see your comments: I see you. I am SO FAR BEHIND at responding that I'm scared of my inbox, y'all, but I read and treasure every comment, even if it's only an exclamation point. Every single one is a gift in my eyes.
Maybe it’s his continued impaired functionality. Maybe it’s the disorientation that immediately follows an unexpected awakening.

Does he care? No.

Either way, when Barnes stirs and sees three wrinkled faces coming through the door, the briefing takes over his internal controls for what feels like the first time. It’s disorienting, to know that he is objectively a large adult human but to feel so small.

So small, but also so glad. His fingers twitch on the blanket in lieu of raising his arms to them.

“Oh, Jimmy,” Esther says.

She hustles to him at a higher rate of speed than her usual shuffle: in under a minute, she’s sitting on the coffee table, her thumbs cool on his cheeks as they wipe the wetness away.

“Don’t cry, dear heart,” she says. “You’re all right now. You’re all right. Didn’t you give us a scare?”

Assessment: correct. From the docs to the tower residents, he does appear to have given everyone a scare.

With Esther sitting in front of him, and Ollie’s face crumpled with concern over her right shoulder, Lidia to one side, and the briefing throwing a dozen images at him of being young, being small, being comforted by a woman with dark hair and soft hands –

Barnes feels it too.

The way it scared himself, to wake to injured and helpless. To know that he almost let himself be snuffed out, just as things were getting really good.

It’s not the briefing that runs the next tape of images through his mind, but himself – Barnes – the ice cream experiment, grilling with Banner, Pepper looking up at him with upset and relief. Romanoff smiling at Mr. Hayashi. Hill unable to contain her smile over a box of cookies. Barton falling off a barstool, even Stark, pretending not to look at him as he fills Barnes’s wineglass.

It makes a tightness in the chest, as if there’s not enough air.

And –

His eyes don’t even want to look at Steve, but they do. Steve. Standing behind the Olds with that little smile that Barnes can now recognize as a thing that balances on a point between a grin and tears.

If he had died, would Steve have ever smiled again?

Assessment: unlikely.

She lets him make the shoulder of her sweater all wet.

“Dear heart. My love. Everything’s all right now.”

Not yet.

But getting there.

Everybody needs a turn with the box of tissues after this little display – even Rogers, whose face is about the color of a pot of tomato sauce. It leaves Barnes tired and tender-feeling around all his edges. He leans into each embrace in turn by the Olds, without any sign of increased heart rate or itches in the direction of violence.

Instead, it is simply nice. Lidia insinuates herself at the other end of the sofa and lifts his feet into her lap, where over the course of the next hour she manipulates his toes and presses her thumbs into each foot in a manner that makes him flinch but then lean harder into the pillows at his back and think favorably about a little nap action. Rogers tries to coax Esther into a chair, but she stays where she is, holding Barnes’s hand, while Rogers brings them up to date on the whole medical saga.

“Kinda unfair how you keep leaving out the part where I saved your life, pal,” Barnes says.

The flat, disapproving expression from four different faces is enough to make him sit back and take a temporary vow of silence.

Once they’re done fussing over and at him, it’s cute to watch the Olds respond to the Tower. Building JARVIS breaks in with,

“Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes: Agent Romanoff has asked whether it’s all right to come up.”

All three of the Olds jump halfway out of their skins at the sound of Building’s voice, and Ollie spends the next several minutes quizzing Rogers about it and yelling questions at the ceiling.

Barnes is 93% certain that he hears indicators of amusement in Building JARVIS’s answers to Ollie’s queries.

Nice.

Romanoff arrives shortly after, with Barton in tow. Barnes identifies: trepidation, and for the first few minutes Barton tries to glower, but the manner in which Romanoff and Lidia greet one another, holding hands and speaking rapidly in Polish at the same time to maximize efficient information transfer, is too cute to be withstood by mere mortals. Barton soon collapses into terrible posture in a chair, grinning, and Barnes knows he’s on the road to being forgiven.

The magic of the Olds extends to everyone. Hill arrives next, all squinty and purse-lipped, until she’s dragged into a conversation with Romanoff and Lidia that Barnes never quite catches the gist of, although the implications are terrifying.

Pepper is brought down soon after her entrance by Ollie’s nonstop flirting. Weirdly, this also involves Steve, turning that corner of the living room into Central Blush Station. Adorable.

Stark and Banner, being the truly tough cases of the bunch, require the Esther Treatment to draw them in. Barnes tries to watch how she does it, despite his wooziness and fatigue.
He could never emulate it, the way Esther speaks their names with such warmth that it’s as if she’s
greeting old friends, not meeting them for just the second time. Or the way she wriggles gently on the
coffee table and blinks slowly at Stark until he offers to fetch her a pillow to sit on, to which she
says, “thank you, my dear,” in a tone as if she has loved him for years and that makes Stark smile in
a way Barnes never imagined was even possible on that face.

They are superior people, the Olds.

Confirm.

Sounding better, there, mission.

Confirm.

Barnes misses parts of conversations. He listens to Banner talk to Esther about roasting chickens, and
then in the space of a blink, Esther’s regaling the entire room with tales of her union-organizing days
and the light coming through the windows is at a distinctly lower angle.

Injury recovery is dumb and tiring. But he stays awake through dinner, and is even able to feed
himself, albeit slowly.

Over the remains of takeout Italian and inferior cheesecake (seriously, he requires increased mobility
immediately), Barnes looks around at the faces in the room.

There are a few missing: flying Sam, Thor, Katie, Mr. Hayashi and Kazue. Cat Eleanor. As they’ve
all been trying to tell him, they are the pattern he has woven himself into without meaning to.

It never used to matter, the idea of ending a mission in death. It was a known hazard. The thought of
ending held no terror. Sometimes it even sounded restful.

This mission will end in death, one way or another. Given the ridiculous adventures the Avengers
get up to, possibly not nearly as far in the future as he might like. But he identifies the desire to see
these faces more. To continue having loud dinners and prank wars. To read more books, take out
more bad guys, and eat more cheese. To keep baking cookies until Steve says, “this one. This is my
favorite.”

It’ll be okay if this is a lifelong mission. But he has a bunch of stuff he wants to do before it ends.

Chapter End Notes

Well! This chapter contains a huge continuity error! Sorry about that, y'all.

Let it stand forever as a monument of shame. I'll pretend I don't see it if you will.

EDIT: Now fixed! With eternal thanks to reader noman, who pointed out the totally
obvious & totally easy solution.
One has abundant time for thinking, when one’s days consist of sleeping, physical therapy, recovering from physical therapy (i.e., napping), and taking 45 minutes for one damn shower because one moves at approximately the speed of a sloth on sedatives. Barnes and Rogers make a new routine of slow walks, first just down to the coffee bar and back.

“Okay, let me take a look at you,” Katie says.

“You look thin,” she continues after staring him up and down. “Extra extra whip for you, my friend.”

Rogers grins.

Barnes identifies: curiosity.

“Were you here when the robots came?”

He doesn’t miss the way Rogers gawps at him in response to his question.

“No, I was scheduled for a few hours after it happened. The cops wouldn’t even let me in when I showed up. It looked so terrible, with the windows shattered and the floor all torn up.”

Katie puts her hand on his arm. The left arm, which she was never afraid of.

“There was so much blood. I freaked out when I found out you were the one hurt, Barnes. I’m really glad you’re okay. I totally cried all over Sam when he said you would be all right.”

This is gratifying. Katie has long been a mission -

Wait.

“You know Sam?” Rogers asks.

Thank god, someone was going to have to ask.

Adding to the surprise, Katie’s face flushes deep red.

“Uh, I’ve gotten to know him a little bit during his visits,” she says. “Thanks to him, I’m kind of, uh. Dating his cousin, now.”

Barnes remembers the heavy sadness Katie often wore during their late-night visits together when Barnes was unable to sleep over the previous winter. He leans down to look at her pink face, and there’s something easier about the expression in her eyes.

Even she has found refuge in this place.

“Katie,” he says, “that’s good.”

“It is,” she says. “Things are really good.”
“Coffee is magic,” Barnes says when he and Rogers are tucked back into the elevator upstairs, each with a cardboard cup in hand.

“Or maybe it’s Sam that’s magic.”

“Both.”

Rogers snorts.

“You’re probably right about that.”

It takes a week to work up to walking at an obnoxiously slow pace all the way to the Carp, where his welcome involves a great deal more fussing than tenderness, including the application of a ladle to his (left) shoulder, courtesy of daughter Kazue.

Through the fabric of Barnes’s clothes, this makes a dull thunk that causes a highly unanticipated reaction.

“He still on drugs?” Mr. Hayashi asks after a pause.

“I don’t think so. Maybe he’s woozy from the long walk,” Rogers says.

Kazue pats his arm.

“Don’t listen to these two old farts. I thought it was funny too.”

Barnes wipes his eyes and rubs his cheeks, which are sore from the unfamiliar activity. Additionally: laughter is uncomfortable for healing abdominal muscles. Not that he could’ve helped if he tried.

Barnes having the stamina of a malnourished kitten necessitates a great deal of time on the sofa. He and Rogers continue listening to audiobooks, and with careful coaching, Rogers learns to produce an acceptable version of grilled cheese.

Hair Club takes over the place several afternoons, and Barnes is introduced to the intense pleasure of watching Romanoff and Hill "convince" Rogers to stay with them via the skillful application of two knitted afghans and some rapidly tied knots.

Four tall portable heaters appear on the terrace outside the common room – and Barnes resolutely ignores the cleared throats and red noses directed at him the first time he shows up to dinner outside with everyone. But he sees it. Lets them all see him.

The return to routine is comforting: walks, dinners, yanking Rogers’s chain. Even physical therapy becomes a welcome activity, as his strength slowly returns and he feels less shredded and stomped on. The tedium of his exercises is like an op: his brain recovers along with his body as he practices maintaining focus despite creeping boredom. All the small steps necessary to return to baseline.

Except.

Is it baseline that he returns to. Or something else.

Barnes has greater access, now, to everything. It makes discomfort, but also gratitude, to remember what it was like to recover from injury in the Asset days, roughly patched up and slung into cryo,
pulled back out again amid lightning, drugs, and orders just to do it all over again.

The same, but different.

It’s not as if the world has a shortage of bad guys. Somebody’s always going to be causing trouble somewhere for the downtrodden and helpless, and it’s the job of everyone around him – not to mention Steve’s avocation – to assist said helpless (and, occasionally, hapless). A direct comparison can be made: the tower is like cryo, now: his place of rest between episodes of danger and violence. But how vastly improved, to be warm and awake. To be surrounded by people who have made it clear that his presence is welcome. People who will not follow him into danger, but go with him, alongside, and share the burden.

Barnes returns from physical therapy several times – and wakes on the sofa several other times – to see Rogers sitting in front of the easel, paint on his hands (once a smear of orange on his cheek) and an expression of peaceful concentration on his face. But he covers the canvas with a cloth any time Barnes might see it.

Barnes spends 160 minutes one afternoon pretending to sleep and watching through slitted eyes as Rogers paints. The briefing adds a new layer to his thinking while he sits still and quiet, his cheek leaned against the back of the sofa. It shows him the Bucky-person with the Howling Commandos: another group of people who went with him into danger. Another population of those caught up willingly in Steve’s gravitational pull, and whose presence made various spaces, no matter how cold and muddy, feel something like home.

Perhaps Rogers would like to know that Barnes and the Bucky-person have this pattern in common. It makes an idea arise in his head. He stretches, and Rogers pulls back from the canvas, runs a hand smeared with several paint colors through his hair.

“Okay over there?” he asks.

“Okay.”

It’s a true statement, both specifically for the moment, and in general. Rehab is slow and obnoxious, but Barnes regains strength, with the added benefit of Stark’s medical interference having resulted in decreased back pain and increased efficiency.

“Well, you know,” Stark says, staring at the floor, when Barnes tells him this.

“It’s fine. No big deal. Whatever. Don’t grin at me like that, Barnes, I told you it’s no big deal, you’re weirding me out.”

Barnes expresses his gratitude to Pepper, too, so Stark’ll get the bonus points. He’s generous like that.

“That’s normal, Barnes,” flying Sam tells him, voice warm over the phone line while Barnes sits on the balcony on one of the last warm afternoons of the year.

“Lots of people feel open and grateful after a close call.”

“It’s good, Sam,” he says.

When he answers, flying Sam’s voice is soft.
“It is, Barnes. You sit with that feeling as long as you can, it’ll stick with you. Got any ideas about what to do about it?”

Barnes tells Sam his Halloween idea.

“Aw man, that’s really good. That’s gonna go over great.”

And it’s fun, to enlist the tower residents in his plan to surprise Rogers by dressing as the Bucky-person. It creates satisfaction to see how eager they are to assist in something that will make Steve happy.

To see how they love him.

Mission. We know what love looks like now.

CONFIRM

It’s good.

CONFIRM

“Jeez, what a sap,” the briefing adds.

But Barnes can tell that also means “confirm.”

He sees it again, walking into that loud, dark room at the Halloween party, when Steve’s face breaks open at the sight of him in the outfit from the past. There’s still a tiny corner in the back of his mind that feels bitterness and fear that Steve can’t identify the difference between the Bucky of back then and the Barnes of now. But with greater access to his own memory, Barnes can understand better how mixed up it all is for Steve. Especially given Steve’s poor self-knowledge skills. And Barnes can also choose now. He has practice at making choices. He can choose to give Steve the benefit of the doubt, while retaining the option to berate him later if he screws up.

He can let Steve cry on him again, and set aside just that much more of the weight Steve carries around. He can sit close, shoulders touching, until Steve’s turmoil eases, leaving behind the easy grin that Barnes knows better than his own face.

The whole Halloween thing must be a success, emotional outbursts and all, because 3 days later Rogers presents him with the canvas.

“I don’t usually work in abstract,” Rogers says, looking at the skyline outside. “It just. Felt right. I hope you like it, Buck.”

Barnes sits in front of the painting for an entire afternoon while Rogers and flying Sam yell at football, watching the sunshine move across it. At first, it looked like a mess of color, but over time, in the shifting light, Barnes sees patterns emerge. In one corner, there’s a bright whirl of red, navy, gold, green, and grey that over time reminds Barnes of the Avengers moving together as a unit. In the background there’s a faint grid, as of brick buildings, and a slash of bright blue across most of the middle – a calm color, not quite the shade of his own eyes, or Steve’s, or even the blue jacket, but reminiscent of all three. There’s a small puddle of sunlight near the top, and a dark bit near the center that has a thick texture, raised up off the canvas, but it’s broken up by that peaceful blue.

There’s a story in this painting. He doesn’t understand it, yet, but he can see that it’s there. That it is
their story. If he looks at it enough, maybe he’ll be able to read the story in it.

“I get it,” he says, finally. “I like it.”

And he sees that the bright bit in the top corner is really Steve’s sunrise smile.

It’s funny that he has more trouble convincing Stark about Thanksgiving than he did about Halloween, given that the latter was the one that required actual effort and cost outlay on his part.

Barnes sits on one of the workroom stools, holding hands with Bite Size and letting Hamburger Helper make his hair into stubby little braids, and listens to 7 different variations on,

“I don’t see why you want to put yourself to all that trouble. It only takes one phone call and we can have the best food in the city,”

before Barnes realizes that Stark’s being shy. That his discomfort is based on having to receive.

Barnes remembers that feeling. And he knows how to get around it.

“I like to cook,” he says. “I was hoping if I gave you the menu, you’d take care of the wine.”

Stark blinks, and a small smile flashes across his face that Barnes would’ve missed if he hadn’t been looking for it.

“Oh, well, sure. I can help if you need it, Barnes. The whole gang, right? And our Brooklyn friends? Yeah, I can do that, if you insist.”

Conjecture: Stark would benefit from a closer relationship with both Esther and flying Sam.

There’s time to make that happen.

Preparations for Thanksgiving are even more enjoyable the second time around. Barnes and Banner go to Brooklyn together and sit with Esther in the bright, warm apartment, looking at approximately 700 recipes before they decide on a menu. It takes more than one visit, because they discover that Esther has a whole collection of elderly, annotated cookbooks and two small plastic cases full of handwritten notecards, with accompanying stories for nearly each recipe. It gives Barnes a number of ideas in the direction of Christmas cookies. And cat Eleanor immediately loves Banner, who is so alarmed and pleased by her attentions that Barnes is only a little envious.

He and Esther make pies, cheesecake, and dinner rolls the day before the holiday. The driver of the Stark car he takes back to Manhattan remarks on the excellent scent of his numerous boxes, and in the spirit of the holiday, Barnes gives him a dozen dinner rolls. Not like it isn’t a simple matter to make more at home.

At home.

Nice.

CONFIRM
In the morning, Rogers assigns himself cleaning and table-setting duty.

“Thanksgiving superhero,” Barnes says.

Rogers grins.

“Just trying to serve my country,” he says.

“Yeah, well, your country can see a glob of dried paint over on the floor by the balcony door.”

“Sometimes my country is an asshole.”

Stark and Pepper arrive early, each carrying a box filled with bottles, and leave again to each bring another. Rogers sets Stark up in the corner at a makeshift bar and finds space in the fridge for various wines to cool. Barnes puts Pepper to work peeling potatoes both sweet and white.

“As long as you won’t ruin your manicure,” he says.

Pepper grins, making her nose crinkle in the way that he likes.

“I guarantee that I like mashed potatoes better than I like fancy fingernails,” she says, demonstrating her usual excellent taste.

“Now tell me about these sweet potatoes. You’re not putting anything gross like marshmallow fluff in them, are you?”

The description of the recipe, involving shallots and balsamic vinegar, makes her do a little dance. It’s very cute.

Everyone but flying Sam arrives long before the meal is ready – the Olds because Esther is needed for preparation, and everyone else because they’re too nosy to miss out on any potential fun. Flying Sam will only be available once released by his mother.

Hill brings a paper grocery bag with bright-colored boxes in it that she sets by the door before setting to bossing Rogers around from an unhelpful perch on the sofa next to Lydia.

Banner brings his alarming contraption for cooking the turkey, with Romanoff and Barton in tow bearing birds and jugs of peanut oil. The three of them set up outside on the balcony in a mild effort to make it look as if they’re not going to burn the tower down, and Ollie joins them to supervise and flirt.

It makes the apartment feel small and loud, but Barnes identifies: enjoyment. They’re missing a few members – Thor off on some other world, the Hayashis clearly thrilled to have received an invitation but insistent on the Carp remaining open to take advantage of hungry Thanksgiving parade-goers, flying Sam coming by later, hopefully with Katie and cousin in tow.

Barnes and Esther work, with Pepper as the world’s most charming assistant, with the Macy’s parade as background accompaniment and afterward, at Hill’s insistence, piano music from an album called “December,” despite its being the incorrect month. Stark lubricates everyone from his kingdom of bottles, Rogers has cleaned the apartment to a sparkle that’s probably medically sterile, and everyone’s on their best behavior in honor of the Olds.

Previously, Barnes remembers, he had been concerned with correctness. Given his incomplete understanding, Barnes had thought that the holiday could be ruined by sub-optimal comestibles and a lack of proper gratitude. He knows now that the parameters of a successful holiday have less to do
with the perfection of food than with the company and the willingness of all attendees to have a good
time despite any circumstances. Also, he knows the sound of the damn oven timer and is therefore
less likely to throw anyone across the room for their own safety.

But he is a man with highly developed cooking skills and excellent assistance, and the food comes
out amazing. Banner et al. deep-fry their turkeys to a delectable golden-brown without setting
anything on fire. The various vegetables come to fruition without incident, and the breads cause only
the slightest trouble by browning slightly too much under the broiler. Rogers and Hill have made the
long table beautiful, and Stark has ensured that everyone’s just enough soused to feel happy and
loose.

It is – lovely. The food is delicious, the conversation is ongoing, and Barnes cannot identify a single
flaw. The Olds, the tower residents, the blue sky outside, and the warmth and rich scents of the room
- it is almost everything he could ever desire. After the meal, Hill pulls out her bag, and it’s full of
board games for those who do not wish to watch sports. Barnes finds himself happily strong-armed
into a game that requires him to use strategy to take over proscribed world territories.

Please. Like anyone has a chance beating him at that.

(Romanoff wins.

Brat.

CONFIRM)

Just when everyone has had enough time that they’re beginning to speak to one another approvingly
of dessert-type items, and Stark has retreated to his bar for a new round of alcoholic adventures,
flyng Sam arrives, albeit without Katie and mysterious cousin in tow. He refuses all offers of dessert
until presented with a slender wedge of Lidia’s bourbon-pecan pie, after which he lies on the floor
with the button of his jeans undone.

Barnes stands, a small plate with a half-eaten slice of apple-crumble cheesecake in one hand, and
surveys the room. His room, filled with almost all the people he would wish to have in it. Banner and
Romanoff are out on the balcony, tipping partially cooled peanut oil back into plastic jugs. Pepper
sits in the chair that usually lives inside the reading forest, a mug of spiked coffee in one hand and the
other tangled in Stark’s hair as he sits at her feet. Hill and Ollie are playing gin, with Lidia
“advising,” and Esther leans against Rogers while they speak quietly of something that makes them
smile at Sam.

The Asset could never have imagined this – the Asset never knew such a thing could’ve existed. But
the Bucky-person, deep on the inside, makes a long sigh of content. So many decades, they’ve
wanted, and now there will so many more to come in which to enjoy.

“What doing okay, Barnes?” Barton asks at his shoulder.

“Better than okay,” he says.

Barton narrows his eyes, nods his head toward the sofa, where Rogers sits with Esther.

“Dinner was great,” he says. “Made me think of a poem.”

Barnes knows how this goes.
“Doesn’t everything make you think of a poem?”

Barton laughs.

“Benefit of good taste, yeah. But watching you, today. Makes me want to paraphrase Rilke. ‘All this is mission’,” he says.

Barnes looks at the people gathered in this space that all of him knows is home, each of them critical to his chosen mission – living a good human life. People who will stand with him, even when that mission is tough.

Of course, the place where his eyes come to rest is on Steve.

That will never change.

He feels the new smile that surprises everyone since his injury bloom across his face. He takes advantage of the day, the feeling, and puts his arm across Barton’s shoulders.

“Yeah,” he says.

“All this. Confirm. All of it.”

Chapter End Notes

This would not have been possible without the vital help of Guinevak, mighty beta reader and delicate encourager in Times of Long Delay. Thank you times one million!

These 3.5 years (can you believe it has been THREE AND A HALF YEARS???) have been so amazing, and that is thank to all of you. Your comments have made me squeal, made me laugh, and most often made me cry.

EDITED TO ADD: and my GOSH, all the fanart! The podcasts, and the translations, and the art, and the videos, and the spinoff-stories! You guys. You're amazing.

I'm so PROUD of the commentariat - for your recipes, for your encouragement of one another, and especially for your kindness.

I'm so grateful to you all for your kindness to me.

I'm so grateful that my writing has brought you joy and comfort. It's all I've ever wanted to do with my writing.

Your support has made me work harder, which made me a better writer. And it buoyed me through some personal tough times and some writerly dark nights of the soul.

I may not keep writing Barnes, but I'll keep writing for you.

Please keep in touch. My web page is linked in my profile. My tumblr is vmohler, and I guess it's more likely that I take up posting there than blogging on my website? I'm so bad at that kind of thing, but I'll try to be better. Honestly, I'm most active on twitter, but then you run the risk of finding out just how angry a liberal I am, so YMMV.
Mission-assists! I wish you well every minute. May your safe places bring you comfort, may your good lists ever grow, and may you always know that I'm cheering you on and glad you're around.

Translation into Mandarin! http://www.mtslash.me/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=283441&page=1&extra=#pid4874852

Works inspired by this one: 
Advanced Culinary Training by thegracious, Spa Day by ManyManyMonsters (orphan_account), Mission Assist Bucky by Galadnilien, A Methodical Progression of Steps With a Defined Ending by sandrayln, [Podfic] The Long Road Begins at Home by quietnight, [FANART] Sheep Pants are Mission Assist by TrishArgh, Fill the Cracks with Kintsugi ~Abandoned~ by Kerica (orphan_account), Lynx Tiger, [Podfic] Spa Day by quietnight, Thankful by danceswchopstck, Wizard Mice, Wooden Boys and Other Ways to Spend an Afternoon by Purrdence, Barnes' Top 100 Music Charts by Kimbali, Talking Deer, Flying Elephants and Other Ways to Spend a Morning by Purrdence, (PODFIC) The Long Road Begins at Home by Owlet by AvidReaderLady, Inktober 2017: 31 days of Infinite Coffee and Protection Detail by potofsoup, The Five Times Peter Got Help With Schoolwork and The One Time It Was Done For Him by DJ_unicornsgr8, Give Them What They Want, It'll Be Over Sooner by DJ_unicornsgr8, The Field Trip by DJ_unicornsgr8, Loss by DJ_unicornsgr8, The One Where Bucky Discovers Legos by DJ_unicornsgr8, In Which Peter Makes A Friend (His Own Age) by DJ_unicornsgr8, The Doctor's Appointment by DJ_unicornsgr8, A Chance (Of Life, Of Death) by DJ_unicornsgr8, The One Where Bucky Gives Peter a Teddy Bear by Aprilmallick, Experiments and Apologies by Yokogreyword, Late-night walks and reciprocity by Yokogreyword, Three days to the next bad idea by Yokogreyword, Support operations by Yokogreyword, Revelations from ancient history by Yokogreyword, Return, reunion, and a gendered meal by Yokogreyword, unwanted stories by MrsCalculation, Mission Override by Kerica, Not horrible, by MsPooslie

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