Son Of The Champion

by sar_kaz_m

Summary

Fury needs Coulson to do one quick side trip while passing through England, just a check in on a person of interest to S.H.I.E.L.D.

Notes

Notes: Crossover, not fusion. Characters will remain intact within their respective worlds. Playing very fast & loose with timelines, but essentially, set That Halloween as 2001 instead of 1981; MCU events will be set according to the film releases, starting with Iron Man in 2008.

This is my first time posting to AO3, and my first dip into writing for the Marvel & Harry Potter fandoms. Hope you all enjoy. (Most of my other work was posted in the past on FFnet, same handle)

Title was a last minute decision: "Coulson" could be an Anglicization of MacCumhall or MacCool, 'son of Cumhall' ("the champion" in gaelic) and possibly a reference to Finn MacCool, leader of a band of warrior-heroes in Irish mythology.
Chapter 1: April, 2002

The muffled thump of the Apache’s rotors created a counterpoint to the man’s own heartbeat. His sound-cancelling headset protected his ears, but nothing could completely inure a passenger from the experience of riding in a high velocity helicopter.

Thirty-two year old Phillip J. Coulson, level six Special Agent of the Strategic Homeland Intervention and Enforcement Logistics Division, was used to military transportation, and so quite comfortable with the speed that an Apache Longbow could travel. He balanced his laptop easily on his knees as he wrote his initial incident report.

A hiss and crackle in the headset’s communications system heralded the voice of the copilot. “Sir?” the airman called. “I have a priority signal for you from HQ.”

"Go ahead," Coulson acknowledged. After the beep, he said "This is Coulson."

"Cheese!" Cried a cheerful baritone.

"Sir." Nick Fury Jr. might be comfortable with clinging to old Ranger nick-names, but Phil felt it was important to maintain some distance between a field agent and the Deputy Director of S.H.I.E.L.D.

"F*ck, Phil, you’re coming home in triumph. That was some good work in Estonia."

"Thank you, sir." The Estonia mission, a simple contact op to try and garner support within the Estonian government for S.H.I.E.L.D.’s mission, had nearly gone sideways when a neo-Bolshevik terrorist had tried to kidnap the Prime Minister’s daughter practically in front of Phil. A quick application of basic training close-combat skills and suddenly S.H.I.E.L.D. had a new ally in a former Soviet Bloc nation.

"Listen, where you at now?" Nick asked casually.

Phil hesitated before replying. There was no way on this earth that Fury didn’t know exactly where his asset was located at the moment. “En route to London, sir. I’m due at HQ tomorrow before thirteen hundred.”

"Yeah, about that, Cheese. I need you to do me a little favor while you’re in England."

"Sir?" Had they been face to face, Phil would have felt better. Visually he could read the man he’d known in the Rangers as Marcus Johnson much better. Over the communications system, Phil couldn’t tell if Nick was about to play him deliberately or reluctantly.

"There’s a briefing packet waiting for you on touchdown. I need you to check out a P.o.I. outside of London."

"Objective?"

"Just contact, Phil. Ideally, we’re looking for a reliable informant. Be your usual charming, efficient self, alright?"

Phil sighed inwardly. “Yes, sir.”
The packet seemed woefully incomplete. No information about WHY this person was of interest, and certainly that birthdate had to be in error? But no, Local Intel confirmed it – Phil was about to check out the living situation of a 20 month old toddler.

The London field office provided a car and an agent as driver, much to Phil’s relief. He never quite figured out the strange county-oriented geography of England. He reviewed the packet for a fourth time during the ride to a town named Little Whinging in Surrey.

The car’s windows showed a dismally suburban region, but Phil didn’t let that fool him. Hiding in plain sight made an effective strategy for many a terrorist organization. He didn’t think he was about to make contact with a terrorist organization, but who knew? The anemic briefing packet held no clues.

What little it did tell him made him consider his approach carefully. The toddler currently resided in the care of his maternal aunt and uncle. The couple were very middle-class, and by early observation, proud of it. The uncle held a middle-management position with a firm that made tools, drills specifically. The aunt remained home with their own child, a boy, plus the P.o.I. The P.o.I. was placed with them under suspicious circumstances last November. Paperwork regarding the child had straggled in – a hastily acquired duplicate birth certificate request had pinged an ongoing intelligence-gathering operation, codenamed Witchcraft of all things, Phil had to roll his eyes at whatever imaginative analyst came up with that one. The couple had registered the child as in their care, arranged for death certificates to be filed for the child’s parents, set up the tax reporting, census, et cetera. However, they had not adopted their orphaned nephew, which Phil found interesting. He had a sense that they were strictly correct in their actions, and possibly mercenary, given the speed with which the child benefits were requested.

SHIELD’s surveillance stayed on the passive side of attentive. Once the child’s name had registered on their radar, particularly tied as it was by birth certificate to James and Lily Potter, who apparently had a SHIELD file not provided to Phil at this time, the agency began to keep a casual eye on the Dursley family. However, until now, no direct contact had been made. It would be up to Phil to establish it.

Skilled at reading between the lines, Phil had decided to use a fairly thin cover. He’d use his real name, and simply identify himself of an agency with interest in how the child, one Harry Potter, was settling in. The right language would lead the Dursleys to believe he represented Child Services, or some other governmental agency. He’d engage, hopefully establish some rapport, and set up a regular series of communications which would allow SHIELD to keep an eye on the child.

Phil had the agent driving set the car radio to a local talk station, allowing his ear to develop a sense of the accent. He had a knack for accents, even in foreign languages. An hour with a local speaker, and he could accurately mimic the accent in any language in which he was fluent. In another life, he might have turned that skill to acting, but a career with SHIELD was so much more satisfying. He mentally settled on a smooth upper-class accent. That plus an obsequious manner would flatter the Dursleys, increase their self-importance, and make him appear in a more favorable light.

Little Whinging seemed mostly made up of developments consisting of street upon street of
identical row houses. However, SHIELD’s sophisticated GPS system allowed the driver to find the
destination easily. They did one pass, standard procedure, to get the lay of the land. The target
location stood one lot in from the corner with the main road; other occupied lots bounded it on all
three sides. All the lots were fenced in the rear, though the sides varied – some had fences, others
used hedges. Few houses fenced or hedged the street side, and Number Four was no exception.
Exposed to the street, the front strip of yard seemed ruthlessly manicured; some perfectly trimmed
rose bushes, not yet blooming this early in the year, lined the south side of the house, and a
coordinated shed could be spotted to the rear on the north corner of the lot. Phil and the agent both
checked for any surveillance equipment. SHIELD’s ability to hijack governmental equipment
meant no custom cameras were in place – they simply used traffic cams to passively watch the
neighborhood. When their pass revealed no other surveillance in place, Phil had the driver pull up
slowly to the front of the target.

Stepping out of the car and onto the sidewalk, Phil noticed a twitch or two in the curtains of the
house. He drew out a briefcase, a prop, mainly, though it did contain his sidearm, with a single
finger biometric release, adjusted his jacket in a single officious motion, then approached the door.

His ring of the doorbell was answered swiftly by one of the plainest women Phil had ever seen. Her
heels made her as tall as him, but she was rail thin. As one of Phil’s favorite author’s wrote, “When
they handed out ‘necks’, she thought they said ‘sex’, and asked for lots and lots”*, because she had
a long bony face perched on a long skinny neck. She was dressed in some strange interpretation of
an American 1950s housewife, complete with pearl necklace. Phil had a sudden urge to enact one
of SHIELD’s time travel protocols.

“Mrs. Dursley?” When she nodded, he went on. “I’m Phillip Coulson, the Agency has sent me to
discuss the placement of one Harry Potter in your home.”

In that instant, her expression went from distantly pleasant to suspicious. “It’s about time.” She
quickly checked the street behind him, noting the car and apparently making sure no one was
watching, before gesturing for him to enter. “Come inside, quickly.”

Nonplussed, Phil entered, maintaining his cover in the face of her sudden distress. Obviously, no
contact with actual Child Services had happened yet. “Madam, I understand there were some
unusual circumstances around the Potter child being placed with you...”

She cut him off with a gesture as she shut the door. “Well! At least one of you had the sense to
show up in daylight! And dressed correctly as well.”

“Ma’am?” Why would his suit be an issue, he wondered.

She led him into the living room, before turning with her arms crossed. She did not invite him to
take a seat, and Phil began to have suspicions of his own.

“You people.” She started with a sneer. “Unusual circumstances, I daresay. That crackpot
Headmaster of yours left him on the front step in the middle of the night! With a letter! A letter!”

Phil absorbed that information with shock. “May I see the letter?” he asked.

Mrs. Dursley snorted, and then left him to fetch it. Phil glanced around, noting the photographs on
the wall depicted Mrs. Dursley, a morbidly obese blond man with a ridiculous moustache, and a
very blond, very pink, very fat toddler, varying in age from infant to toddler. One boy. Not a single
family image showed a second child.

Mrs. Dursley returned and thrust what appeared to be a piece of parchment at him. Phil took it
carefully by the edges, contemplating how to keep custody of the letter, for Forensics to examine. The letter was addressed to Petunia Evans Dursley. But the content of the letter threw the thought or forensics completely from his mind.

Passages leapt out at him.  *Your sister and her husband murdered... Dark Wizard Voldemort... Killing Curse...famous as the Boy-Who-Lived ... Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry at age 11...protected until his seventeenth birthday...* Witchcraft and Wizardry?

The number one rule of Interrogations: Always act as if you know more than they do. Phil took a deep breath, and prepared to lay it on thick. “Highly unusual indeed, Madam. There’s simply no reason for a school Headmaster to set custody of a child like this.” He gave her an admiring look. “You and your husband are to be commended for acting so well, even under such circumstances.”

Slightly mollified, Mrs. Dursley sniffed disdainfully. “We did what decent people ought.”

“Of course, Madam.”

“At any rate, it’s about time you people sent someone to sort this out.”

Phil blinked. Suddenly, her use of ‘you people’ clicked. She thought he was one of these wizards? “Mrs. Dursley? Am I to understand that you do not want custody of your nephew?”

“Absolutely not! We don’t want anything to do with you people. I don’t care what sort of protection malarkey that crackpot is on about! Anyone who knew Lily would know that she and I hadn’t spoken in years, I didn’t want anything to do with her, that reprobate husband of hers, or that magic nonsense.”

“And your husband?”

“Feels exactly the way I do. We’ll not have the boy around our Dudley, infecting him with this.”

Uneasy, Phil noticed she never used the child’s name. “Well, then, perhaps other arrangements can be made...”

Mrs. Dursley lit up like he’d offered her a prize. “Excellent notion!” She moved to a fussy baroque writing desk in a corner of the room, producing a pen and stationary. She wrote quickly, signing with a flourish. “The letter from that Dumbledore person says I had sole custody, simply because I was Lily’s sister, so you should only need my signature. Oh... and...” With a grimace, she rummaged through the desk, producing a broach and a handkerchief. To Phil’s surprise, she stabbed her thumb with the broach pin, pressing the bloody thumbprint to the stationary next to her signature. “Now you!” she demanded, cleaning off the pin.

Phil read what she had written:

*I, Petunia Dursley nee Evans, do hereby relinquish all rights to the custody of one Harry James Potter in favor of Phillip Coulson, until such time as an appropriate situation can be found for the boy. I also refuse any and all protections, enchantments, wards, etc., on myself, my home, or my family, in favor of Phillip Coulson.*

*Petunia Evans Dursley*

In an instant, Phil mentally weighed his options. Acquiring the P.o.I. had not been the brief, but on the other hand, this certainly gave SHIELD an unparalleled opportunity at him. In addition, it was
clear the home situation was hostile, and Phil personally balked at the idea of any child being raised by this disdainful, prideful woman. The images of her husband and son gave him no hope of any difference there. While he personally didn’t believe in magic, this woman clearly did, and was so convinced of her nephew having it, she’d give him away to the first person who came along and offered to take him.

Unable to imagine having to grow up in this home, Phil signed his full name. He took the pin, and put his bloody thumbprint on the page.

An expression of triumph on her face, Mrs. Dursley rose. “I’ll fetch the boy, you can take him immediately.”

“I’ll need any and all paperwork you have pertaining to his custody, Mrs. Dursley. My agency can take care of them.” He eyed her. “You do understand you’ll be losing his benefits.”

She hesitated only a moment. “Better that than have him here.” She left, and he heard her pause in the hall. A sudden banging, like she kicked the door to a hollow space, accompanied her next words. “Boy! Up!” A click, a tussle. “Stand there.” More movement, and then she said, “Come along.”

As she returned, she handed him a folder of paperwork, but Phil’s eyes were riveted on the tiny toddler staggering in her wake. The child wore ill-fitting clothes, ones that seemed far too large. He had a shock of tousled dark hair, nearly black, and the most amazing round emerald green eyes Phil had ever seen. He also noted a bruised and bony wrist, and what appeared to be a healing bruise on the side of the boy’s face. The evidence of abuse made Phil burn and freeze with fury.

“Why is he bruised?”

Mrs. Dursley sniffed. “He tried to take a toy from Duddy, they fought,” she explained indifferently, but Phil sensed that was only half the story. On a hunch, he strode past her to peer down the hall. He saw no proper doorway except at the end, clearly a kitchen door on swinging hinges. So where? He spotted a small door beneath the stairwell, probably a closet of some sort. Additional anger swept through him.

“Were you keeping the child in a closet?” he demanded, slipping out of both the British accent and colloquialisms in his anger. She took a step back in surprise, and then rallied.

“We didn’t want him! And now you HAVE to take him!” She snatched up the stationary with their signatures and waved it in his face. “You people should take care of your own! There was no call to dump him with us without so much as a by your leave! My sister went off to that school of yours and turned into a FREAK and then she married that lunatic Potter and got herself blown up! Well, good riddance, I say, and I won’t have anything to do with her FREAK spawn!”

The hatred in her tone might have made Phil retaliate, had the child not flinched, drawing Phil’s attention. The baby, for surely he still was one, stood unsteadily in the middle of the living room floor, eyes downcast, shoulders hunched, clutching a threadbare blanket to his chest. Barely five months in this home, and the child already displayed abuse survivor reactions.

Incensed, Phil snatched the stationary from Mrs. Dursley. He added it, and the parchment letter, to the folder of paperwork she’d given him, and quickly stashed all in his briefcase. He then knelt before the child.

“Here, Harry,” he said softly, soothingly. “Let me help you with that.” Taking the blanket gently from the child, he wrapped it around the boy’s shoulders. “That will keep you warm.” Green eyes came up, surprised and wary. “Harry, my name is Phil. I’d like it a great deal if you’d go with me.
Your aunt doesn’t think you should live here, so you can go with me, and we’ll find you a new place to live. Does that sound good?"

Harry gave a wary glance at his aunt before peering at Phil, as if he could read the agent’s intentions. Then he nodded carefully. He couldn’t possibly be making a proper choice at his age, but Phil felt vaguely mollified, and guilty, at the trust a moment of gentleness engendered in the child.

“Excellent. Come here, then.” Phil gathered the boy up, easily carrying him one-armed against his side. He took his briefcase in the other hand, and glared at Mrs. Petunia Dursley.

“If you would get the door, Madam…” he said as coldly as possible.

She gave another disdainful sniff, but happily opened the door, barely giving him time to clear the frame before slamming it behind him. Harry flinched in his arm, but behind him, Phil heard the sudden fussy wail of another toddler, no doubt woken from a nap thanks to his mother’s fit of pique in slamming the door.

At the curb, the SHIELD agent acting as his driver straightened in shock from where he’d leaned against the car when he saw what the legendary Agent Coulson had in hand. “Sir?” he asked warily.

“Please notify Base we’re coming in with an asset, and we need a specialist on hand at Medical intake.” Phil sighed, glancing at the little boy who watched his face carefully. “Specialty is Pediatrics.”

TBC

*Quote is from Callahan’s Crosstime Saloon by Spider Robinson. Humorous Science Fiction. I can see Phil reading it, and still not believing in magic.*
Somehow, finding Nick Fury waiting back at the London base didn’t surprise Phil one little bit. But Phil took some measure of satisfaction from the expression of surprise on Fury’s face at the sight of the sleeping toddler in Phil’s arms. Harry had fallen asleep on the drive, and Phil moved with him as carefully as he could, unwilling to disturb the child.

“Coulson…”

“Medical, sir.” Phil cut Fury off. Maybe his oldest friend had set him up, maybe not. But right now, as de facto guardian, all Phil cared about was making sure Harry Potter was a healthy, normal boy. He noticed Fury had a data binder in his hand, thick with CD ROMs. He had the distinct impression he was about to be read in on something that he was not going to like.

In the future, London agents would gossip about how Agent Phillip Coulson had strode through the base like an avenging angel, carrying a sleeping toddler, with Nick Goddamned Fury Himself trailing along behind, a chastened expression on his face. At that moment, it was worth more than any possible hazard bonus to get in Phil’s way. Even Medical seemed forewarned – a nurse had the door held open for him, a trauma specialist waited by a prepped bed.

“The pediatrician?” Phil asked.

“On her way,” the doctor answered. Phil carefully laid Harry down on the bed and gently tucked a blanket around him. “We can start preliminary…” The doctor started, but Phil shook his head. “Let him sleep,” he ordered. He gave the doctor a look, clearly implying he was expecting they’d keep an eye on Harry. He then turned sharply on his heel and walked out, Fury again quietly following. A left turn, and left again sent Phil into the Observation room, with its large one way glass window into Medical, and soundproofed walls. Once the door to Observation closed behind Fury, Phil turned, crossing his arms and staring impassively at his superior officer.

After a moment of silence, the only possible castigation that Phil’s professionalism would allow him, Fury nodded, understanding his asset was less than happy with the situation, and prompted “Prelim report?”

With a fortifying breath, Phil factually recounted his trip to Surrey, the situation of the target, the conversation with the Dursley woman which led to her unorthodox surrender of the Potter boy’s guardianship, and their journey back to base. He did not mention his own anger at the woman’s clear disdain, his concerns about her mental imbalance in believing in magic, nor how his heart had just about melted in his chest at the trusting way little Harry had leaned against him in the backseat of the sedan, falling into the relaxed slumber of the utterly safe against his side. Nor did Phil relate the ferocity of his own sudden need to ensure Harry’s safety, to be worthy of the trust in those green eyes. Not since his own childhood, when he first read the Captain America comics his mother had given him, had Phil felt such absolute righteousness of a cause.

He didn’t have to; the man formerly known as Marcus Johnson had known Phil Coulson since the latter had been a wet-behind-the-ears Rangers recruit twelve years ago. Nick could read Phil’s thoughts in the twitch of his lips, the set of his jaw. Nick was the only one in the world who could read him since Phil’s mother had died last year.
“Well, it’s not what I planned at all, I’ll give you that, Cheese,” Nick admitted. “I honestly just wanted to make contact, get an in, hopefully create a rapport.”

“Magic, boss? Why does she think-” but before Phil could finish his question, activity in Medical drew his attention.

He’d brought Harry in through the main doors. At the other end of Medical were sliding doors that led to a variety of specialty suites for everything from gynecological exam rooms for female agents to MRI machines and even a hyperbaric chamber. All SHIELD facilities had the best compact Medical facilities they could. Through the doors to these suites strode a man Phil had never seen before, followed by a doctor whose expression was equal parts amused and frustrated.

The absolute first thing Phil noticed was that the man was nearly naked. He wore only a pair of grey boxer briefs. His build was like a gymnast’s – he had broad, extremely muscular shoulders, with incredibly well defined arms. His torso tapered to a narrow waist, and his legs bunched and flexed with controlled movement. A bandage wrapped around one thigh, but he didn’t limp. Phil recognized the sparseness of his frame despite the muscle – this man knew hunger. He seemed under-fed, right on the edge where the hunger would start to feed on him. That plus the silver tracery of scars across his skin told Phil he looked at a mercenary. But the man couldn’t be more than twenty-five, despite the mileage written on his skin.

“That’s why I’m in town,” Nick admitted from beside Phil.

“Who is he?”

With a smirk, Nick answered, “The Amazing Hawkeye.”

Phil almost choked. Nick had latched onto the idea of recruiting the mercenary sniper eighteen months ago when the man killed a target SHIELD had marked for elimination right under their noses, with an arrow of all things. The subsequent manhunt – not because SHIELD was angry, but because the man had made what their analysts said was a flat-out impossible shot – had had the flavor of excitement and anticipation. Nick Fury and Phil Coulson didn’t just both believe in heroes – they believed in superheroes, and Nick was convinced that Hawkeye was one of them.

Inside Medical, Hawkeye had spotted Harry, and froze so quickly the doctor trailing him nearly collided with him. His confident expression shifted to outrage, which segued into angry determination. He looked around, sharp eyes narrowing in on the glass so perfectly, Phil felt the glare. There was no way anyone could see through the one-way glass, but Phil suspected Nick was feeling that glare at this moment as if they were face to face.

And they soon would be – Hawkeye pushed past the medical staff, shoving the door open, and slamming open the door to Observation as if he already knew they were there. He had no consideration for the fact that he was nearly naked, just stomped barefoot right up to Fury.

“What the fuck, man?!?” He hissed, at least marginally considerate of the child sleeping in the next room.

Fury didn’t so much as flinch. “I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Why the hell is there a KID in there? This had better not be any fucked-up, Red-Room, raise-‘em-up-our-way, child-soldier bullshit thing! You said you were the good guys!”

Fury scowled right back. “This is NOT some sort of child soldier thing, and we will be having words in your debrief about how you know what the Red Room is. The child in question was
brought in by Agent Coulson here.” Phil had never quite felt as dissected by a look like the one he
got then from Hawkeye. “I sent Coulson to assess the child’s living conditions. He found them
unacceptable, and brought him back here for treatment until an alternate placement can be found.”

Hawkeye’s expression went suspicious. “Why?”

“Above your security clearance.”

“Fuck you. I don’t have a security clearance yet, so everything’s on the table, Nicky.”

Phil suppressed a wince. No way was Fury going to let an arrogant mercenary get away with
calling him that.

Fury’s nostrils flared, but to Phil’s surprise he let the snark slide. “He’s the offspring of assets that
were taken out by the enemy. His placement wasn’t handled by us; we went in to check on it.”

How much of that exactly was a lie, Phil wondered.

The tilt of Hawkeye’s head was remarkably bird-like. Distantly, Phil made a mental note to coach
him out of that tell – crap like that was memorable, and could blow an undercover op. “You check
on your assets’ kids?”

“I told you, SHIELD takes care of its own.” Fury said dryly. “If I recall correctly, that was a big
selling point for you.”

Anger appeased, Hawkeye shrugged, his face going from harsh to wryly smiling. “Yeah, well, call
me the suspicious sort.” He gave Phil a nod, and turned. “Ok, I better apologize to the doc there.”

“Barton.” Nick stopped him. “Out of curiosity…?”

The man didn’t need the question spelled out. “Acted pissed, pretended to let you convince me,
then disappeared in the night. Taking the kid with me.” He shot a grin over his shoulder, and
politely closed the Observation door behind him.

Once he was gone, Nick turned back to Phil. The triumphant grin on his face would have probably
terrified the junior agents, but Phil knew it just meant that somehow Hawkeye had confirmed
something Nick suspected. It didn’t take Phil long to catch on. Hawkeye was injured, he was
hungry, and now that Phil got a good look, tired too. He’d been running and for whatever reason
had agreed to Nick’s sales pitch, to join up with SHIELD. Yet he’d give up a possible safe haven
instantly to take a child he’d never seen before that moment out of a potentially bad situation.

Back in Medical, whatever Hawkeye was saying had the three staffers smiling. A nurse led a
woman shrugging on a lab coat into Medical, and Phil guessed that was the pediatrician. He
glanced at Nick.

“Go. Stick with the kid,” Nick ordered, and Phil got.

With his attention on the pediatrician and on Harry, Phil lost track of Hawkeye. The man was
somewhere around, going through the Asset Intake. SHIELD procedures required medical and
debrief right away, even if no one was injured, and followed up with competencies and aptitude
tests in the next few days.
Harry Potter was a normal little boy, though he displayed some signs of malnutrition, more on the level of mild deprivation. The pediatrician admitted that the bruising did appear to be accidental, and besides an odd half-healed scar on the boy’s forehead, there were no other signs of injury. Harry had woken for the exams, and only Phil’s constant presence in his line of sight had kept the boy calm.

“He’s not too behind,” the pediatrician said, though she then admitted, “Had the deprivation continued, I’d have been quite concerned. Such a chronic deprivation could lead to a variety of health issues, not the least of which are stunted growth and failing eyesight, but in a worst case scenario, cognitive disorders. Were the former guardians, um, low income?”

“No,” Phil growled, thinking of the porcine portraits of the Dursley males.

“Oh. Oh dear. It was deliberate?”

“I believe so.” Phil had to consciously unlock his jaw. The fleeting expression of outrage on the pediatrician’s face made Phil feel much better about his decision to take Harry out of that house. “Well! What’s done is done. A balanced nutrition plan will get him back on track.” She sent out a nurse to get specific formulas and other supplies, and used Medical’s computer to pull up and print out recommended foods in specific proportions. “The formula can be used to catch him up. Still, we’ll want to watch his eyesight in the future. You’ll need to be feeding him the formula on a regular basis…” She went on to explain her plan for Harry’s nutrition. Phil knew he’d end up pulling the surveillance tapes for Medical to make notes later. He also took the opportunity to ask questions about Harry’s emotional care. As it was, he was seated on the bed rocking a clearly exhausted Harry, the child curled against his chest. One tiny fist clung tightly to Phil’s lapel.

At Phil’s tentative questions, the doctor smiled. “He’s not likely to remember his time in that home, Agent Coulson, so there shouldn’t be any long term psychological effects. He’s not quite 21 months old – Harry has little to no long term memory at this point. He should have limited verbal skills, so you should be encouraging him to talk as much as possible. Eventually, trust me, once he feels settled, he’s not likely to be quiet much. In the immediate future, he might experience some nightmares – upheaval tends to cause that. Children are remarkably adaptive. Once he begins to understand he’s no longer in a hostile environment, his natural personality will start to shine through.”

Harry let out a soft sigh, falling into deep sleep at last. Phil moved to carefully put him down on the bed, and the doctor happily assisted him. The nurse indicated he’d keep watch, and so Phil and the pediatrician left the baby sleeping peacefully.

Outside Medical, Phil ran a hand over his face, momentarily allowing his own exhaustion to show through. The doctor chuckled at him. “Count your lucky stars, Agent Coulson. At least Harry is old enough to be sleeping through the night, plus naps during the day. In fact, until he’s caught up physically, he’s likely to sleep a great deal.” She smiled at him. “I take it he’s your first?”

Phil blinked. “He’s not mine.”

“No I mean, you don’t have any children of your own?”

“No. No, I don’t… I’m …. I was an only child as well.” Phil admitted.

She nodded, and pulled a business card from her pocket. “I’m on retainer for SHIELD. Feel free to call me if you need additional help with Harry. For now, I suggest you catch a nap. Once Harry
wakes up, food would be best. It’s nearly suppertime.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Phil did manage to catch forty winks in a nearby recovery room. When he woke, he headed back to the main room. Fury caught him before he could go in and check on Harry.

“Phil, in here.” He pulled Phil back into Observation. “Take a look.”

In Medical, Harry was clearly awake, sitting up in the bed. The nurse stood close by, but both man and child were watching a fully-clothed Hawkeye who stood in the middle of the room, juggling a variety of items. Harry’s expression of delighted wonder was unlike anything Phil had seen on him until this moment. Seconds later, Hawkeye deftly caught all the items, bowing to his audience with a flourish. The nurse encouraged Harry to join him in clapping. Nick had the audio link engaged, so Phil could hear Harry’s laughter.

As Hawkeye replaced the impromptu juggling supplies with a grin, Phil turned to Fury. “Sir, please tell me you’re not going to turn soft over a toddler.”

“Ha. Cheese, you know me better than that.” But before Fury could go on, his jaw dropped. Phil quickly turned back to see what had caught Fury’s attention.

In Medical, Harry had stretched out his hands at the jumble of items Hawkeye had been juggling. To everyone’s amazement, the items slowly rose into the air to hover, wavering slightly, in front of the baby. Infinitesimally at first, then with slightly increasing speed, the items began to rotate in a circle, just as they’d been in Hawkeye’s clever hands. Harry’s young face showed the strain of his concentration, but when the nurse took a shocked step away, that focus broke. Harry glanced at him, the items stopped, and when Harry saw the shock on the man’s face, his own expression crumpled. The items fell to the floor with a clatter, and Harry gave one choked and terrified sob before stuffing his fists in his mouth to muffle himself.

While the nurse stepped back again, with the first sob Hawkeye swooped forward like the bird of prey he was nicknamed after. He quickly gathered up the crying baby, tucking Harry against his neck and glaring at the nurse. “There there, chick. That was amazing, you’re amazing, don’t cry, baby, shhhh, don’t cry,” Hawkeye crooned.

Phil turned to Nick. “Marcus?” His amazement made his professionalism slip. “What the hell was that?”

Fury heaved a sigh. He picked up the data binder he’d been holding when Phil first returned to base and presented it to Phil.

“Agent Coulson, welcome to Level Seven.”

Chapter End Notes
Unbeta'd. There are a few elements of Phil's backstory from AoS, plus the history between Coulson and Fury from the "Battle Scars" comic, but neither will feature in any significant way.
“Technically, the information in that binder is Level Nine clearance. You’re getting an Eyes-Only Special Exception, Coulson, so don’t fuck this up.” As always, Nick Fury’s confidence in his asset was astounding.

Phil glanced between the binder and the baby cradled in a mercenary’s arms in the next room. He took a fortifying breath, and told himself whatever it was, he could handle it. “Telekinetic?”

“No. Magic.”

“Sir—“

“I shit you not, Cheese. Read the intel. First disc installs a Level Nine encryption on your laptop. For now, get the kid, some food, and find a quiet bunk for the night. Tomorrow, you, me, the kid, and Birdboy there head back to New York.”

Phil frowned. “What about Hawkeye? He’s an initial witness.”

Fury pinched the bridge of his nose. SHIELD had protocols to keep agents on ops if they became accidentally involved. A sort of reverse reward for wrong place, wrong time, if the incident was officially above their security clearance. The brilliance of an organization like SHIELD was the flexibility of its clearance system. For example, the people everyone thought had the most boring basic back office jobs – the Archivists – had Level Nine clearances, and knew the most amazing things. Of course, no one below Level Six even knew that Level Nine existed – unless they had an Exception. “He’s coming on as Level Four. As a witness, I can get him a Need to Know Exception. Only what pertains to the kid directly, how’s that sound?”

“Fine. Better go debrief the nurse.”

Fury grumbled under his breath, but followed Phil’s suggestion. They returned to Medical, and Fury let the startled nurse know in no uncertain terms that what he had seen was absolutely highest-level classified. Even the security surveillance of the last 10 minutes would be scrubbed. The man nodded along, agreeing to everything the Deputy Director said, vowing to never speak of what happened, and looked only too relieved to be dismissed.

Hawkeye still held Harry. The baby had calmed enough to no longer sob audibly, though slow tears still ran down his face. Phil dropped the folder on the bed and reached for Harry. Hawkeye hesitated only a fraction of a second before passing the child over. To Phil’s relief, Harry only made a little hiccupping noise of relief before wrapping one small arm around Phil’s neck, the other little hand gripping his lapel again. Harry’s clear comfort in Phil’s arms made Hawkeye relax.

“Hey,” he said softly, and Phil looked to meet the man’s gaze. “Didn’t introduce myself before. Clint Barton.” He smirked a little. “I’d offer to shake your hand, but your hands are full.”

“Agent Phil Coulson. Welcome to SHIELD, Agent Barton.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Barton rubbed the back of his neck, glancing at Harry, then Fury. “So, Fury, that whole ‘things I never imagined’ bit in your recruitment speech… when does that start?” Fury let
out a soft snort of laughter as Phil hid his smile in Harry’s messy hair.

Although he longed to dive into the intel, to get an idea of what he was really facing, the responsibility of caring for a small child came first. The orderly sent to buy childcare supplies for Harry tracked them down in the small cafeteria, presenting Phil with two shopping bags of items. For her diligence, Fury sent her right back out, this time for a car seat to add to their equipment in the morning.

“Sir?” Phil asked.

“You wanna hold him all the way back to New York, Agent?”

“No Sir.” Given Harry’s status as a classified Person of Interest, for now Phil headed straight for a bunk. Agent Services directed him to a room, and sent up a tray of dinner for both himself and Harry, as well as Phil’s go bag. Agent Services was another surprisingly high-level assignment within SHIELD. Responsible for any and all domestic needs of the Division’s bases and personnel, A.S. was staffed by some of the best Ops and Logistics graduates SHIELD could train up or steal from other agencies. The vast majority of A.S. had level six clearance, some even higher. They assisted agents with bunk assignments, personal supplies, food preferences, even tracking nutritional needs. They also found housing and arranged moves for agents on long term assignments, handled resupplying many safe houses, and worked closely with both Medical and Psych to support SHIELD agents on and off the field. The current head of A.S.-New York was an incredibly professional and smart young woman Fury had poached from the Navy. She’d been on track to become a Flight Commander, but Nick had ideas about Cmdr. Maria Hill’s potential.

For now, Phil let A.S. know he had responsibility for a small child. All he had to report was age, size, and gender, and he knew that by the time they landed in New York, there’d be a reasonable supply of necessary clothing for Harry, and probably a crib or cot added to his regular bunk. As a high level asset, Phil spent more time on mission than off, even spending mandatory down time on base, so he did not own an apartment. Depending on how fast SHIELD found a safe home for Harry, he might have to consider it.

There were several things to be thankful for, Phil reminded himself in the morning. Number one, Harry seemed inclined to sleep through the night. Number two, Harry was clearly potty trained. Number three, Phil Coulson had trained himself well enough that when a very small hand patted him on the back in the early hours of the morning, Phil did not react violently. Instead, he was able to wake calmly, verify that yes, the bathroom was needed, and assist the little boy in taking care of business in the en suite.

One of the items acquired the previous evening by the orderly sent out were moist wipes. Phil gave Harry a cursory clean up, dressing him in the smallest SHIELD trainee tee shirt A.S. could find,
and the ill-fitting pants he’d left the Dursleys wearing. The tee shirt still nearly reached the floor, and though Phil could and did neatly roll up the pants, Harry still appeared to be swimming in his clothing.

Phil sighed. “There’s nothing to be done. No point until we reach New York.” Harry grinned up at him, waving his arms to be picked up. Phil automatically obliged, though he still had to get himself ready. The boy giggled and patted Phil’s cheeks happily.

Suddenly, there came a knock at the door. Phil opened it to find Barton standing there, a slight smile on his face. “Hey. So, I thought you might need a hand again.”

Phil blinked, surprised. “That would be appreciated, Agent Barton, thank you. Come in.” He made room for the newly minted agent to join them. Harry immediately reached for Barton, and Phil gladly handed him over. “If you’d just watch him while I shower?”

“Sure thing. Hey there, kiddo.” Barton chuckled as Harry immediately grabbed at his nose. “Yeah, easy there, sport. That’s already been broken a couple of times.”

Phil took a lightning fast shower, only sparing time to shave properly before donning suit and sidearm. When he opened the bathroom door, he found Barton and Harry seated on the floor. Barton had his palms up, and Harry was slapping his hands, like some sort of game.

“Everything all right?” Phil asked, looping his tie around his neck.

“Da!” Harry looked up and reached for him immediately. The first word, and what a word, the child had spoken since Phil retrieved him, had Phil utterly astounded. “Da!” Harry repeated, waving his arms.

“Pick him up, Coulson,” Barton hissed. That snapped Phil out of his surprise, and he quickly lifted the boy up. He glanced at Barton, but the man’s face was carefully blank.

Barton’s tense air made Phil curious about the man’s history. The feats of Hawkeye, those Phil knew well, as Fury had gleefully shared all the nearly-impossible feats the mercenary had apparently performed that Intel uncovered during the eighteen month manhunt. Phil recalled one particular feat of thievery which he’d thought completely exaggerated, though now having seen the man and his gymnast’s physique, Phil was willing to concede that Hawkeye may have been able to descend three stories on a single line, and then climb back up the line with a desktop computer on his back. Phil wondered if the intel he’d stolen would be turned over to SHIELD. He also wondered what in the man’s background made him so quick to defend and care for children. Most former mercenaries had real tough-guy personalities. Barton didn’t have a hint of that. Instead, Barton seemed… nice. Well, the initial impression had been ‘hotheaded smart-mouth’, but that had been about Harry’s perceived danger. Watching the man interact with Harry, Phil had to remind himself that the new Agent Clint Barton was in fact the Amazing Hawkeye, a mercenary with a very extensive record, not the least of which involved several deaths.

“Hm.” Phil sat with Harry on the bed, not willing to address Harry’s name for him. “You’re headed to New York with Deputy Director Fury today?”

“Yeah. I guess he wants me to go through some training thing.”

“That’s standard for all new agents. It’ll place your skill levels, identify areas where you could use some training, or areas where you might be able to teach us some things.” Barton grinned at that implication. “I apologize in advance for the flight,” Phil went on. “I’m not sure how Harry will take air travel.”
Barton winced. “Good point. I’ve been on flights with screaming kids. Something about the pressure in their ears.”

Phil sighed, looking down at the child in his arm. “I’ll google it, I suppose.”

“I’m gonna find some coffee. See you on the flight?” Barton grinned, and left the room, shutting the door behind himself. Phil hesitated, thinking about how helpful Barton had been since the evening, how quickly he insinuated himself with Phil and with Fury. He wondered what Barton’s angle was.

He glanced down at Harry, who’d taken to kicking his feet on the bed happily. Then again, maybe Barton was just a sucker for children.

Military transport planes left much to be desired when it came to travelling with children. For one thing, they were loud, and while not so loud that sound-cancelling headsets were needed, they still produced a constant roar in the troop berth. Harry, though well strapped into his new car seat, had twitched and whimpered as soon as the engines geared up. And then speed and air pressure became a factor, which lead to sobs and tears, little hands pressing at ears, Phil having to pick him up out of the seat and pace in circles, trying futilely to sooth the little boy. At long last, Harry exhausted himself with his own distress. That led to a massive yawn, which thankfully had the effect of popping the baby’s ears. Harry fell asleep in Phil’s arms about an hour into the flight.

Fury had picked a seat in the very front, just behind the cockpit, and had stoically ignored everything around him the entire hour, but Barton had planted himself on the other side of Harry’s car seat from Phil, and had winced sympathetically the whole time.

“Sheesh, poor kid,” Barton whispered as Phil finally got the sleeping boy bucked back into his car seat. He eyed Phil. “So, I take it you don’t have any kids?”

“No. You?” Phil couldn’t resist the jab.

Barton snorted. “God, I hope not. Maybe. Shit, I don’t know. Mighta been careless a time or two.” Phil hummed noncommittally, as Barton went on. “I do hope not. Or at least, no baby mama ever comes looking for me. I’d be a terrible dad.”

“What makes you think so? You seem fine with Harry.”

Barton shrugged. “Eh, my dad, he was a drinker, ya know? And then he died. Took my mama with him – car accident.”

Phil’s eyes narrowed. “And do you drink much?”

“Not at all.”

“So you’re already a better man than your own father.”

Barton startled, staring at Phil for a long moment. “Shit, I never thought of it that way. Thanks, man.”
Phil nodded politely, then opened his laptop, the gesture indicating his withdrawal from conversation. As he loaded up the first disc of intel, he could feel Barton eyeing him. But before too long, the other man settled into his seat, tilted his head back and promptly fell asleep. It was a common habit amongst agents and military personnel, and Phil again wondered at the man’s history.

Quickly enough, however, Phil became absorbed in the information in the binder Fury had given him. Operation Witchcraft would have been absolutely unbelievable, a construct of utter fantasy, had he not witnessed the ability Harry had displayed the night before. The information centered around two major factors. One, that there were people all over the world with this ability, hidden from normal society. And Two, that SHIELD currently had absolutely no entry into this hidden magical culture.

Phil realized what an amazing opportunity Harry provided to SHIELD. That they’d even identified a family of so-called magic-users was a pure stroke of luck. An agent in Eastern Europe had come forward, admitting that a relative had this ability about ten years ago. That had kicked off the operation. Eventually, that distant relative had agreed to an interview, but it hadn’t gone well, and the man had literally vanished from the interview room.

From what little they’d gleaned, SHIELD knew that magical abilities varied widely in both strength and application. Whereas parapsychology had suggested that strictly mental abilities such as telekinesis might be possible, the intel provided by the magic-user had implied that their abilities were nearly limitless, dependent only on the skills and strength of the wielder. Obviously, teleportation was possible, despite all science to the contrary. Phil had witnessed Harry’s telekinetic abilities. Other hinted abilities such as transmutation of matter made the scientists become excited with the possibilities.

More disturbing were the hints of the social structure of this magical world. The informant had been German, and had hinted that some magical megalomaniac had been involved in World War 2 – and had not been referring to Johann Schmidt, according to later analysis – and another was active in Britain.

This had led to an active surveillance op in England, starting about four years ago. There had been a number of terrorist attacks, initially attributed to either the IRA, despite their denials, or other extremist groups. In retrospect, some of the intel gleaned should have been passed off to other interested agencies, and Phil considered having words with Fury about SHIELD’s ongoing pissing match with the NSA, though Nick had sworn up one side and down the other last September that SHIELD had passed all relevant intel regarding Al Qaeda on to all the US agencies. In the end, several of the incidents on British soil had been tentatively labeled ‘magical’.

Out of sheer luck, it had been that ongoing surveillance that had given SHIELD Harry’s name. Last November 1st, a variety of unusual persons had been visible throughout England, particularly in London. A number of un-traceable fireworks displays had gone off, an uptick in unusual avian activity had been observed, and most particularly, the names James and Lily Potter, and Harry Potter, had been mentioned in conversations recorded near suspicious activity, separated by both participants and location. The analysts had gone to town, and later identified the deceased couple, James and Lily Potter, nee Evans, as having been killed in a gas main explosion at their home on the edge of Wales on the night of October 31st. They were survived by one son, Harry James. Backtracking had identified Lily Evans’s family – she had normal records through a variety of avenues, though interestingly enough, the secondary school she was registered as attending did not exist. This coincided with the ping on Harry Potter. Once Petunia Dursley was confirmed as being Lily Evans Potter’s sister, and only living relative, SHIELD began planning contact.
Currently, besides Phil actually having custody of Harry, London analysts were combing through education records, trying to find others with the same non-existent secondary school as Lily Evans. That report was due in a few weeks.

Phil pinched the bridge of his nose. There were reams of additional information. SHIELD had brought in a few anthropologists who were combing through some of the classified files confiscated by the SSR from Hydra bases, checking to see if any references to magic appeared. Other lines of inquiry were active, and all had reports included in this packet. Phil would need much longer than one flight to be fully read in on this operation.

Right now, all he could do was read up, and take care of the little boy gently snoring by his side.

Chapter End Notes

Unbeta'd. I will be away for the next week, but hopefully this chapter will tide my readers over.
I apologize for the delay in getting this chapter to you all, gentle readers. I was on vacation, and as soon as I got back, my work began to kick my butt like the Black Widow making an object lesson of a probie. I do hope you are not disappointed with this chapter.

Phil caved to the myopic glare aimed at the top of his bent head somewhere around the fourth hour of the flight. He calmly closed his laptop and raised his eyes to meet Fury’s. Yes, it was a little passive/aggressive, given he could feel Fury’s eye on him for the last half-hour, but Phil was still put out by the side trip that had garnered him a child in the first place. He still couldn’t determine if Fury expected him to bring the child back to SHIELD or not.

Fury gave a head-jerk, calling Phil to the front. Phil only paused to check on the other passengers. Harry had woken over an hour ago and had a bottle of formula, then promptly fell asleep again. Barton hadn’t moved from his initial position.

“Sea change, Cheese.” Fury’s voice carried only as far as Phil’s ears. Seated as they were behind the closed cockpit door, with the ambient roar of the engines, they could converse without being overheard.

“Sir?”

“Pierce is moving up.”

Phil suppressed the gasp. The current Director of SHIELD, Alexander Pierce, would be moving up to a position on the World Security Council, an oversight committee sourced ostensibly from a rotating roster of the United Nations, but in actuality dependent on the power and influence of the members in their own countries and within the shadow political arena of the world.

“Are you on deck?” Phil asked quietly. Until he was in his thirties, the man opposite Phil thought his name was Marcus Johnson. But then, someone murdered his mother, and Marcus’s subsequent off-the-books investigation brought him to the attention of SHIELD and then-Director Timothy “Dum Dum” Dugan. Marcus’s real father was Nick Fury, a famous Agent of SHIELD. Marcus’s real birth name was Nick Fury, Jr. And Director Dugan made absolutely sure that once Marcus had gotten a taste of the work SHIELD did, he couldn’t help but sign up. And once Colonel Johnson joined up, it didn’t take him long to convince Captain Phillip J. Coulson, ten years his junior, to follow him.

In fact, Phil had had no ambitions beyond the rank of Captain in the Rangers, and having achieved it, was at loose ends. Transitioning to SHIELD, which had far fewer structures than the US Army, had given both Nick and Phil new purpose and enthusiasm.

But shortly after Nick and Phil had been recruited, Director Dugan had his third heart attack, and was forced to retire at long last, despite being the final member of the original founding triumvirate of SHIELD. Although his own choice for successor was Nick, the younger man hadn’t had enough time with SHIELD to have any influence. So the Council selected Pierce.
Fortunately, Nick Fury Jr. was as byzantine as they come. He immediately began playing up to Pierce, treating the man practically as the second coming of Jesus, crediting any successes to Pierce’s advice. Even Pierce himself forgot that Dugan had recruited Fury, and acted as if Fury was his own hand-picked protégé. If Pierce were to move on and Fury move up, then he and Phil could finally take the reins of SHIELD the way it was intended. Pierce was a conciliator, ratcheting back force initiatives in seemingly capricious ways. Once he’d made Fury Deputy Director, things had gotten better, but as Director himself, Nick could really make a difference. SHIELD wasn’t just about maintaining the international status quo, as the Security Council believed, but about slowly, quietly, ensuring that the world became a safer place. As technology improved and information spread, the opportunities for megalomania increased. SHIELD made sure that no one evil became too much for national concerns to handle. Pierce had never quite seem to have taken that mission to heart, not the way Nick, and by extension Phil, had learned from Director Dugan. But with Pierce moving off, and Nick’s conscientious campaigning having positioned himself as Heir Apparent, the future was finally looking better.

“I am,” Nick confirmed, and Phil indulged in a moment of relief.

“What’s the op?”

“Quiet for now. Recon. Look, Phil, don’t hate me but….” Nick gave him a look that wasn’t necessarily as contrite as it could be, because Nick Fury Jr. was an arrogant bastard. “I’m gonna have you reviewing files for the foreseeable future.”

“Marcus!”

“Look, Cheese, I need your eyes.” He ran a hand over his face. “We gotta get our house in order. From the outside, it’ll look like I’m building you up to A.I.C., which ain’t a lie, but mostly I need you to eyeball all the active ops, make sure they’re on the up and up.”

Level Seven and Agent In Charge within 24 hours was a major jump for Phil. “Is this about the kid?”

Nick scowled. “Look, if you say the home was no good, it was no good. I don’t care if the kid’s folks were bombing the Vatican, I don’t hold with child abuse, okay?” When Phil nodded, Nick went on. “Operation Witchcraft has been on the down low pretty much since inception. So quiet I don’t think it ever made Pierce’s desk. No proof, right? But I found it, and I wanted to know. When we got the tip off, I sent in my best asset.” Nick glanced back at the snoring assassin further back in the plane. “Though I guess I’m pulling you, and getting someone else out there. You’ll be my eyes, he’ll be my hands.”

Phil raised a brow. “You trust a mercenary?”

Nick leaned forward. “Cheese, lemme tell you. It’s a different world out there. There’s nowhere for a Captain America to come from anymore. But Hawkeye? He’ll be a hero for the modern age.” He leaned back. “Fuck yeah I trust him. Because SHIELD is gonna give him exactly what he’s been looking for all along.”

“And what’s that?”

“A family to fight for.”
Agent Maria Hill had heard of Agent Coulson. Who hadn’t? Everyone knew Deputy Director Fury would be the next Director of SHIELD, and everyone knew that Fury’s right hand man was Agent Coulson. The two had been in the Rangers together, had come into SHIELD together, and while Fury became the big man on campus, Coulson quietly and efficiently did everything Fury needed in the field. She’d never personally laid eyes on the man, though he’d passed through New York frequently since she’d hit Level Six and taken over Agent Services, so when the London office passed on a series of specific and unusual requirements to be fulfilled and provided to Agent Coulson, she had to handle it personally.

And there was that whole story about the Taliban cell in Idaho, which she was dying to know if it were true. She figured she’d be able to tell just by looking at him.

The man in SHIELD issue tactical clothing that climbed out of the transport chopper after Deputy Director Fury looked every bit the hardened asset she expected. Cropped hair, muscular build, not too tall, but then she knew that height could sometimes be a disadvantage, particularly on covert ops. He had only a scant couple of inches on her, but his broad and muscular body told of hard use. She could see the flex of power in his back as he slung a beaten civilian pack and an odd rectangular case on straps over one shoulder. Yes, this was definitely a man who could take out five hostiles in minutes using only the items at hand.

Fury merely nodded at her as he swept by, headed for his office and his work. Maria addressed herself to the other man, sticking out her hand to shake. “Agent Coulson, I’m Agent Hill.”

The man barked a laugh. “Sorry to disappoint, Agent Hill, but I’m not Coulson. He is.” He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder.

“And I could use a hand, Barton, if you wouldn’t mind?” The third man to exit the chopper was nothing like Maria had envisioned. He appeared no taller than she, no broader, no more worth attention than your average businessman on the street. His square jaw and blue eyes seemed to speak of unassuming good humor. With one hand, he held a small child close against his chest, the reason for the unusual Services requisitions. With the other, he extended a child seat towards Barton.

“Yeah, sure, no problem.” Barton obediently took the child seat, while Coulson reached back to pull a standard issue small duffle out of the chopper. He stepped clear of the door, allowing the bird to close up and leave. The boy in his arms leaned back to watch the chopper fly away, and Coulson smiled faintly at his antics.

“And this is Harry,” Coulson said, bringing the boy’s attention back. They both turned to look at Maria. “I’m pleased to meet you, Agent Hill. I’ve heard good things about you.”

Despite her misstep, Maria didn’t feel like the man was upset. In fact, he seemed amused, like he was used to people overlooking him, even planned on it, and probably used it to his advantage. Oh, now Maria knew, this was definitely the man everyone said he was. He probably walked right into that Taliban hideout, pretending to be a missionary or something equally ridiculous. And they let him in, because no one could believe he was dangerous.

Which of course made him extremely dangerous.

“Agent Coulson, your requirements have been fulfilled by Agent Services. Due to the situation, your quarters needed to be relocated. I hope that’s not a problem?”
“Not at all.” He started them all walking, with a glance at Barton. “Do you mind, Barton? I know
you probably want to check in and find your own quarters but…”

“But you’ve only got two hands. No worries, chief, I’m in no rush.”

“Agent Barton,” Maria addressed him politely. “I’m sorry I wasn’t aware you were in transit with
Agent Coulson and the Deputy Director.” She let the unspoken question of where the hell did you
come from? carry.

“DD Fury would like Agent Barton to receive the standard intake packet and schedule, at least for
now,” Coulson clarified, and Maria realized that Fury had apparently picked up a stray. Barton
saw her realization as well, because he gave her a challenging smirk.

“Of course. I can confirm the requisitions now if you like?” She reached for her comm, but both
men shook their head.

“No rush,” said Barton, at the same moment Coulson said, “Let’s get Harry settled first, please.”
The men exchanged a look, and Maria immediately saw what Fury was up to. Whether it was
about the child or not, these two were already a team.

“Certainly, gentlemen. This way.”

SHIELD took care of its people. That mantra went back to the very founding of the organization.
But it didn’t just mean medical attention, or even retrieval missions. It meant that because SHIELD
needed its people to be totally dedicated to the cause, it couldn’t have people worrying about
mortgages or school systems or even laundry. Thus Agent Services was created to handle every
day to day concern an Agent might have. Many SHIELD agents were in operational control or
logistics divisions. Another large group consisted of scientists and analysts. Neither population
moved much, nor needed Agent Services frequently once established.

Less than one quarter of SHIELD’s personnel consisted of active Field Agents and Specialists, and
these people constituted seventy-five percent of Agent Services’ operational budget. Every major
SHIELD base had housing for assets between missions, and an Agent Services office. An asset
could be brought in naked on a stretcher, and by the time he or she was released from Medical, A.S.
would have assembled a care package of daily needs, from a select SHIELD issue wardrobe of the
right size, to a variety of personal care products. A.S. ran every cafeteria, every PX, every linen
closet, in SHIELD, world-wide. What had started out as one assistant making sure that Director
Carter’s favorite tea blend was always available in every SHIELD office had become a sprawling
logistics behemoth.

Agent Services was the single largest division of SHIELD. As head of A.S. for New York, Maria
Hill had stepped onto a faster track than even she realized. And now, she had a new ace up her
sleeve, because she had just made one Agent Phil Coulson very happy.

The new quarters had been quickly carved out of a pair of adjacent units that met in a corner.
Fortunately, it had been the work of a single night to convert the smaller unit into a second
bedroom, which was then refurnished by swapping out the desk and full sized bed for a crib,
changing table, and armchair. The bathroom was fitted with a child proof latch for safety. Then a
door was cut between this unit and the larger one. The larger unit remained a standard SHIELD quarters – a single room with en suite bathroom, containing a full sized bed, small refrigerator next to a cabinet bearing a microwave and small sink, with shelves above, a loveseat that faced a desk above which hung a small flat screen television. Drop a civilian into this space, and they could be forgiven for thinking they were in a rather small, indifferently decorated hotel room. What made Agent Services great, however, was that once the room was assigned, Agent Coulson’s personal effects on base were moved in for him. His suits were hung in the closet already, shoes arranged on the floor, all other clothing stored in the dresser in the exact same position as they’d been in his old quarters. Personal supplies were arranged in the bathroom, and his few personal decorative items were placed around the room. Even his preferred brand of scotch had been stored in the cabinets, along with four heavy bottomed lowball tumblers. A selection of gender-neutral children’s’ clothes in the appropriate size had been stored in what would be Harry’s room, as well as a trio of soft toys – a yellow dog, an orange cat, and a chocolate brown teddy bear – placed on the changing table next to the already made-up crib.

Phil investigated the space while Hill and Barton waited patiently, another small smirk playing on Barton’s face. “I hope this meets with your approval, Agent,” said Hill.

“It’s perfect, Agent Hill. As always, A.S. has exceeded expectations.”

“We’ll leave you to settle in, then,” She replied with a nod, and turned to Barton. “Agent Barton, if you’d follow me?”

The door shut behind them, and Phil smiled down at Harry, whom he had placed on the floor and who now clung to his pant leg. “Alone at last,” he said lightly, and Harry blinked.

Then with terrible shyness, Harry reached up at him. “Dah? Up?”

Phil was less shocked by the designation this time, and picked up Harry before settling on the loveseat. He set Harry close by his side, and the little boy snuggled in happily. Phil allowed himself to stroke his fingers through the boy’s wild hair. He knew in the back of his head that SHIELD wouldn’t be looking for an alternate home situation. Now that they had Harry in hand, there was no way Nick Fury was going to let him get away. He certainly would see that the child got a reasonable upbringing, but it would absolutely be under SHIELD’s titanium wing. And Phil had more than a suspicion, he had an outright expectation, that thanks to Nick Fury, he’d just become a single dad.
For a single man who’d grown up as an only child, Phil found himself settling into the role of parent remarkably easily. It helped that Harry was as good a child as could be, it seemed. He had only a few nightmares, almost no temper tantrums, and seemed to like everyone around him. He even liked Nick Fury, and became the only person who could order the newly minted Director of SHIELD around – Nick never failed to obey an imperious command of “Up!” from the toddler.

Besides Nick Fury and Phil Coulson, little Harry had the new asset known as Hawkeye firmly wrapped around his little fingers as well. Though the former mercenary was tearing through the SHIELD training and orientation courses like they were wet paper, he always seemed to have time to just sit and play with Harry on the floor of Phil’s new office. It didn’t take long for a play pen, toy chest, and a sofa to appear in the bland square room assigned to Phil, and the marksman could often be found sprawled with Harry seated on his stomach, giving close attention to the childish babble produced by the kid while Phil wrote up notes on the latest operation review at the desk.

At this point in time, all Harry really needed was food, shelter, and affection. Fortunately, SHIELD was more than capable of providing all three, which came as something to a surprise to Phil. Food and Shelter he expected, thanks to Agent Services, but once word got around that SHIELD was essentially raising a child in-house, there were plenty of volunteers to watch over Harry when Phil had meetings. Initially, those volunteers were found through A.S., but as Phil became more settled in the New York headquarters as a Level Seven Operations Agent In Charge, he began developing congenial working relationships with many other agents.

Maria Hill, despite her busy work schedule and many responsibilities, was always happy to carry Harry around on inspection rounds. A level Four SciTech Agent, Jasper Sitwell, had introduced himself early on, and found a number of age appropriate games to install on a spare laptop for Harry. “Coding’s just another language, and languages are best learned early!” he’d said when Phil expressed some doubts. Sitwell also began teaching Harry Spanish. Not to be outdone, Hill started teaching Harry German.

Phil would complain, except that Harry seemed a sponge for the attention he received. Though by far, his “Da” and his “Hahk” were his favorites.

At first, when he started speaking again, Harry wanted to dub Barton “Moo-ey”, which made Phil smirk, and Barton object strenuously. “Not a cow, chick, a Hawk. Say ‘Hawkeye’?”

“Haah-guy.”

“Close enough.”

The only mild frustration Phil had was that Harry’s abilities couldn’t be remotely predicted. On two other occasions, the boy had demonstrated his powers, and neither had happened anywhere where the phenomenon could have been observed and recorded. Once, in Phil’s office, a very hungry Harry had pulled a bottle to himself, right out of Phil’s grip, making it fly across the room into Harry’s hands. It had startled the man, but he managed not to react negatively, especially since it didn’t seem to harm Harry in any way. Another time, a nightmare had frightened the child awake, and his distress seemed to make the furniture rattle and shake in his room, until Phil managed to pick him up and soothe him. Both incidents had been duly reported to Operation
Witchcraft, and discussed at length. The going theory now was that Harry’s demonstration in London had been an impulse to mimic and please. The others driven by stress: hunger and fear. When one scientist with more theoretical knowledge than sense suggested deliberately stressing Harry to see if the powers could be brought out, Phil made a notation in the man’s file that he might need to be monitored for lack of empathy.

After about ten weeks, Fury appeared in Phil’s office one afternoon, when miraculously no one other than the agent and the toddler were in residence. Harry immediately squealed “Up!” when he saw the Director and the man obediently lifted the child out of the playpen.

“It’s possible that ‘Up’ is his name for you, boss,” Phil pointed out. “You are ridiculously tall compared to him.”

Fury snorted, seating himself with the child and a plush bear on Phil’s sofa. “Better that than some other less flattering option.”

Phil took a moment to imagine what a childish tongue might make of ‘Fury’…. No, “Furry” was not a nickname the Director would appreciate making the rounds.

“You have something for me, sir?” Phil prompted tactfully.

“So there’s this guy. He’s a pain in the ass to pin down, but he’s based outta here, New York.” Fury began, his attention seemingly on Harry’s antics. His voice had that deliberately casual tone that told Phil he was not going to like where this went. “Until now, besides the original subject of Witchcraft, and Harry here, he’s been the only confirmed ‘magic user’ SHIELD has known.”

“You’re referring to the so-called Doctor Strange.”

Nick snorted. “Dude’s actual name really is Strange, no so-called about it. Shoulda been a dead giveaway he’d end up into something weird, right?” The Director’s humor never failed him. “At any rate, he’s an actual Doctor too, neurosurgery of all things. Car accident fucked him up, made his hands shake. In the course of trying to find a cure, he somehow became a magician. Calls himself the ‘Sorcerer Supreme’ these days.”

Phil frowned, recalling the scarce information about Strange included in the operational files. “Why hasn’t be been brought in on this operation yet?”

“Tried contacting him. Sent a message. After about three months, the sonofabitch replied that we ‘shouldn’t bother him unless it was important’.”

“And now that we have custody of Harry, that’s something important? Harry’s the bait.” No, Phil didn’t like this at all.

“I’m thinking that Strange might find the kid interesting. You remember it was chatter about the kid that put him on our radar in the first place. No other leads have panned out.” It was a fair point. The secondary school Harry’s mother had allegedly attended didn’t exist anywhere outside of her records. Cross referencing it against every possible private school in the United Kingdom hadn’t turned up anything. Nor had they found anyone else with records of attending the same school so far. Research was now stumped. The only other option was to try and define a window of time, identify every child of a certain age in the UK that didn’t attend public* secondary school, and then find all the ones that attended a private boarding school in Scotland similar in profile to the one in Lily Evans Potter’s records, then check those schools against identified existing ones. The scope was mindboggling, and would pull far too many SHIELD resources to be viable and continue to keep Operation Witchcraft under the radar. Bringing in an adult asset if one could be
found was infinitely preferable.

“Have you already sent a follow up message to Strange?” Phil asked.

“I have.” Of course Fury had. Probably within days of Phil settling into New York with Harry. It was probably why he had Phil set up in New York rather than in Washington DC where SHIELD’s main headquarters were located.

“And have you heard back?”

“Not yet.”

“Alright.” Phil thought a moment. “I have another idea.”

“Lay it on me.”

He leaned back in his chair, letting his gaze drift up to the ceiling. The idea had percolated through the back of his brain before, and he just needed to talk it through. “The Potters met somewhere, no doubt within this closed community of magic users. It was probably the school: even if the school was only for children born to normal parents being brought into the community, the population probably isn’t large enough to support too many different institutions, not with such a complete information blackout. So however they met, the school was the agency.”

“Sure. So what?”

“Small school populations, small community…. You get to know everyone. Maybe you make lifelong friendships, right? There’s also a threat, some sort of internal strife within the community. Makes you cling to those you trust.”

“You’re talking about bonds. Brothers in arms.”

“The Potters… were they targeted? Were they leaders? Were they nobodies who got lucky, or unlucky as the case may be? No matter what, they had to have friends, right?”

“Sure.”

“So where were they?” Phil demanded. “If something happened to me now…”

Fury’s teeth were bared a little. “They’d have to fight me, and probably Barton too, to get Harry back. We’d take care of him for you.”

“Right! So where are the Potters’ friends?”

They both took a moment to consider the options. Dead was distinct possibility. Could Harry possibly be the last survivor of this community? But no, the initial intel on Witchcraft said there were magic users all over the world. Could the British community be that insulated? Not likely. There were probably too few people to be biologically sustainable. Statistically, there couldn’t be more than one percent of the population of the British Isles tied to these people.

“Recovery?” Fury tossed out. It was plausible. If the Potters had had even one tight friend they’d have trusted with their child, but that friend was physically incapable of taking the boy at the time….

“He or she would come looking,” Phil volleyed back.

“When?”
“My guess would be, if not right away, definitely by his birthday. July 31st, if the paperwork is correct.”

“So what’s the move?” Fury asked.

Phil leaned forward. “We do a full profile workup of the Dursleys’ neighborhood. Background check on everyone. Then, about three days out, we start a full time face-trace. Anyone who pops up who we haven’t identified, we check. If we can’t ID them, we bring them in, assuming we can keep on them. I think… three days before to three days after.”

“And if we don’t get any hits?”

“Again at Halloween. Three days before and three days after.”

Fury mulled it over. “Thorough, yet limited, so it’s not a drain on resources. Why not just contact the Dursleys, tell ‘em to let us know if someone comes looking for the squirt?”

“I don’t think we can rely on them. The woman was only too happy to toss Harry out.” Phil scowled, remembering the despicable Mrs. Dursley. Still, if any one of the magic users had been close enough friends to the Potters to know about Lily’s sister, logic would demand that they check with her about Harry’s whereabouts. “I think it’s enough to use them as the foci of the net. In the meantime, wait to see if Strange makes contact.”

Fury considered, adjusting Harry so the child didn’t tumble off the couch as he played with his stuffed bear. He ran his fingers through Harry’s messy mop, and his lips quirked as Harry gave him a bright affectionate smile. “Do it, Coulson.”

Operational arrangements were made through the London office. Phil thought long and hard about being on site, but decided given the nature of the op, he didn’t need to be there. His reputation as a field agent made the transition to AiC a little rougher than he’d expected, and in the end, he judged it better to let those with surveillance op experience handle this little experiment for Operation Witchcraft.

Instead, he decided to make Harry’s first birthday with him a fun experience. He took the little boy to Central Park in the morning, making sure to visit the zoo, feed the ducks, splash in the fountains, and generally have as much fun as a reasonably ambulatory two year old could have. In the afternoon, after a nap, he hosted a gathering in his quarters consisting of the birthday boy, Barton, Hill, Sitwell, Fury (whose presence and twisted humor managed to scare the pants off of Sitwell, who just now realized the sort of company he was keeping) and Phil, enjoying Harry’s favorite spaghetti from the cafeteria, and ice cream cake. Harry swiftly learned the properly destructive technique of ripping through wrapping paper, coached enthusiastically by Barton, and seemed delighted with his presents. Hill had provided new clothes; Sitwell a toddler’s first gaming system, entirely educational he swore; Barton gave Harry a set of Duplo blocks, which Phil knew his feet would regret.

Most surprising was Harry’s reaction to Fury’s gift: a large plush dog, black with brown eyes. Harry already had a happy yellow dog, provided by AS when he first arrived. This, Phil guessed,
was meant to both offset the bright dog and represent Fury himself. But when Harry opened the gift bag, he gasped and grabbed the dog tightly, burying his face in the fur.

The adults exchanged confused looks. No one understood Harry’s reaction.

“Harry? Sweetheart? Do you like the doggie?” Phil asked carefully.

Harry’s little arms squeezed the toy tightly. “Paa-foo,” he said. “Paddy Paa-foo.”

Phil tried to parse the boy’s words. “Paddy? The dog’s name is Paddy?”

“Paa foo!”

Barton cocked his head. “Padfoot?” He had a good ear for the words Harry meant to say. Harry nodded enthusiastically before burying his face in the fur again.

“I think he likes it, boss,” Phil said lightly, but his mind was racing. Clearly, a black dog meant something to Harry, and the dog was named ‘Padfoot’. His eyes met Nick’s, but neither of them could place the name.

“He’s naming his toy after a thief?” Maria asked.

“Barton’s influence for you,” Sitwell commented sagely. Barton bounced a plastic spoon off the man’s forehead.


“Is that what padfoot means?” Phil asked Maria.

She shrugged. “It’s a term for a sneak or thief, where I grew up. New England,” she explained to Sitwell, who wasn’t cleared to know her background from her SHIELD file. “I think it’s something else in Britain. More like, some kind of ghost dog.”

“Hound of the Baskervilles?” Sitwell offered.

“Rather morbid idea for a child’s toy,” Nick observed.

“That dry British humor,” Phil tossed out, trying to keep the conversation from turning to Harry’s origins. Sitwell was only cleared to know that Phil was raising Harry, and that Harry was a British citizen originally. Maria had the clearance, but wasn’t read in on Harry’s abilities. Only Phil, Fury, and Barton knew about the magic, but from Barton’s expression, he hadn’t understood the Sherlock Holmes reference.

“Your birth parents were warped, kid,” Sitwell told Harry, tickling him. Harry giggled and loosened his hold on the toy.

“More cake, anyone?” Phil moved the conversation along.

In the end, only Fury lingered as Phil cleaned up Harry and his quarters. Once the toddler was in his crib, black dog still clutched tightly, Phil turned to his boss.

“He’s in love with a stuffed dog he seems to remember is called Padfoot, which may or may not refer to either a criminal or a giant spectral hound.” Phil pinched the bridge of his nose. “What the hell does he come from, boss?”
*Reminder to readers: ‘public’ and ‘private’ schools mean different things in the US than they do in the UK. An American would consider Hogwarts or Smeltings, where one must be invited to attend and students live on site and parents pay tuition, to be private boarding schools, whereas Stonewall, local to Privet Drive and probably supported by municipal taxation (state-supported) to be ‘public’.*
Phil’s surveillance operation around Harry’s birthday was a bust. The only upshot was that SHIELD had identified all the regular inhabitants and visitors around the Dursley residence. That intel could prove useful in the future.

In New York, Harry continued to grow and charm everyone around him. In some ways, literally: Barton had managed to get Harry to exhibit his telekinetic abilities on request, by creating a game of ‘catch’ with various rubber balls. They’d even managed it in a lab setting, though it had taken hours for Harry to relax enough once there, so the phenomenon could be recorded and examined. The scientists were incredibly excited, since there turned out to be measurable readings.

“It’s not electricity, it’s not any known form of energy,” the lead researcher had admitted, “but it’s THERE and we can see distinct activity in Harry’s beta, theta, and gamma waves when the phenomenon occurs. So it’s something biological.” They’d tested Harry genetically, but found nothing unusual there.

By the time Labor Day had come, Phil had conceded that Barton was essentially co-parenting with him. They weren’t on a first name basis with each other, by any means, but whenever the marksman wasn’t in a training session of some sort, he would come by and take Harry for ‘outings’ around SHIELD’s base, or occasionally sit and read Harry a book, or color with him, or just play with whatever toys came to hand. Phil came to trust that Harry was safe with the marksman, and had to admit that Barton made a good parent, despite the reservations Barton had expressed on their original flight from London. The man was patient and affectionate with Harry, and the little boy adored him.

For his part, Barton took to SHIELD like a duck to water. He tore through all of their covert infiltration training in days, rather than weeks. Then he proceeded to teach them some things. His marksmanship scores were off the charts with any weapon. Even with automatic fire, it took him no more than 2 bullets to compensate for any individual weapon’s quirks and achieve perfect scores. Better than perfect – with his bow and with semi-automatic handguns, Barton could put the subsequent shots through the hole of the first. He ended up spending an entire day in Medical on vision tests; they declared him to have 20/5 vision, better than any human ever recorded. This was the result of a concatenation of several naturally occurring variations in Barton’s eyes. While these variations, technically mutations, were rare but not unique, to have all of them occurring in one person was unheard of. The Science division put in a request to have Barton’s SHIELD contract modified so should he die in the line, his eyes would be donated for scientific study. As far as Phil knew, Barton did not agree to that contract modification. Phil was moderately concerned about some of the requests and ideas coming out of R&D these days.

In other areas, Barton at the least exceeded all expectations for a mercenary without military training. His hand to hand combat instructor eventually refused to teach the asset anything
specific. “He’s got no style whatsoever,” the man reported to Fury one day, while Phil happened to
be present. “He picks up things by watching others, and incorporates them in totally new ways.
He’s as slippery as a greased monkey, and if I ever find out who showed him Parkour on
YouTube... well, I might have to buy that person a drink. But it means he’s utterly unpredictable.
Which is a very good thing.”

Barton fell short in only two areas – formal education and espionage. Send him to break into an
embassy and steal files? No problem. Send him into an embassy ball to cultivate a possible
source? Just no. He couldn’t easily assume a persona, direct conversations, or even manage any
sort of subtlety. This wasn’t a problem for SHIELD – they had plenty of spies, but not that many
truly accomplished thieves. And it would surprise many to find out how important thievery was to
their operations. Certainly Barton had been delighted to discover that SHIELD was more interested
in his circus-cultivated gymnastic B&E skills than they were in his marksmanship. In addition,
Agent Services was arranging a series of tutors for Barton, to bring his education levels up. At the
very least, they intended to get him through the GED before the end of his first year. The man
could read reasonably well, high school level perhaps. His math and physics skills at first seemed
non-existent, until his assessor hit upon the idea of showing Barton the math behind his skills in
archery, and then Barton tore through that program as well. Other sciences would be addressed as
needed. He was a sponge, soaking up everything SHIELD could provide. He even took advantage
of Medical services, including dental care – after his first full cleaning, he grinned at everyone all
day.

Barton seemed to love Medical. He brought snacks to the Nurses, and always addressed the
Doctors respectfully and followed instructions to the letter. One day in August, Phil asked why.

“Never had it before. No one has ever been concerned about my health. It’s nice. I like it.”

Meetings with Psych were mandatory for all agents, and Barton was no exception. It took most of
his first six months before he relaxed enough to even begin to talk to the therapist assigned to him.
In fact, initially they’d assigned a male therapist, and after three sessions, that doctor wisely
reassigned Barton to a much older woman. The female presence, plus the occasional session with
Harry in his lap, caused Barton to crack just enough that progress was being made.

Phil knew Fury had “Plans” when he let Phil see Barton’s psych evaluations. Normally those
were only available to an asset’s immediate supervisor, the head of his division, the Deputy
Director (which was still vacant) and the Director. Psych sited early childhood abuse, which
continued into and through most of Barton’s adolescence, as creating a variety of trust issues,
timidity issues, and poor self-esteem. The example of his father kept Barton from developing drug
or alcohol issues, as Phil had already seen, but also somehow created a strong desire for positive
familial bonds, intense protective instincts, and an intuition about people that the therapist labeled
almost uncanny.

“I see what you mean,” Phil told Fury after reading the report. Fury had said he’d make SHIELD
Barton’s family, and they were well on their way to achieving that. “I thought I was your Good
Eye?” he said jokingly.

“You are. You see the big picture. Barton can make a snap assessment, and ninety-nine percent of
the time he’s right, but he’s a real in-the-moment guy. In time, we might get his strategic thinking
up. For on the ground tactics, he’s top notch, but he’s still got some things to learn before we let
him make ops decisions independently.”

“You’re going to make him report to me, aren’t you?”

“No shit, Sherlock. You guys are gonna tag team for me. When I need finesse, I’ll send you.
When I need—“

“Not-finesse.”

“A more direct approach, I was gonna say, I’ll send Barton.” Fury took back the psych file and stood. “For now, a couple of milk runs will do to knock the dust off him, get him functioning within our system. I’ll find him a reasonable handler for those. Maybe even do it myself.”

“Favoritism, Nick.” Phil chided gently.

“Hey, don’t want anyone else breaking my new toy!” Fury claimed.

Central Park had begun to turn crimson and golden by the end of September. Phil had run a few short and simple operations out of the New York headquarters, and felt a lot better about his new roles, both in SHIELD and as Harry’s parent. He’d accepted that there was no chance that Harry would be placed with some SHIELD-approved nuclear family somewhere. Between his own fierce protectiveness for the child and the hodge-podge family forming around the little boy, the chances that anyone could pry Harry out of SHIELD custody were slim and none.

Phil had gone so far as to agree to allow Medical to insert an agent tracker tag in Harry’s arm. Unfortunately, the very next game of Catch with Barton shorted it right out. This was discovered when the active agent tracking immediately called Phil the moment it happened. The frantic Level Three who knew that the tracker ID was a small child had been in a panic. Frankly, Phil appreciated the urgency of the response. When examined, R&D could not determine how Harry’s special abilities managed to fry the thing, but they were eagerly developing theories. The trackers were designed to be proof against a close-range EMP, so the fact that Harry could ruin one just by levitating balls was added to the growing list of questions documented by Operation Witchcraft.

Phil Coulson probably knew somewhere in the back of his head that he’d take to parenting well. He’d always had a calm demeanor, and the ability to keep his cool under extraordinary circumstances, which served him well with the day to day stresses and surprises of raising a small child. What he hadn’t expected was the surges of pride he felt whenever Harry accomplished something new. By now, the boy was capable of running and playing and taking on every challenge he could, from letters and numbers to swings and slides. He chattered on about his toys and his day when encouraged to, cheerful soliloquies about crayons and bugs, but was equally capable of playing quietly when Phil asked.

Harry greeted those of his immediate circle with squeals and hugs, which were never refused. Phil noticed in particular that Barton would lose some undefinable edge of tension the instant Harry’s little arms went around his neck. Despite the complete lack of biological relation, Phil felt that somehow Harry looked a little like Barton. Something around their eyes. They looked at each other with a special affection, as if they’d been searching for something, and finding each other satisfied whatever need sent them wandering in the first place.

So he was utterly amazed one day, when while watching Harry color, Barton chuckled and said, “He looks just like you, Coulson.”

“What?” The senior agent shook his head in surprise.
“Seriously, look at him. That little frown as he colors – it’s exactly the way you look when you’re reviewing after-action reports.” Barton grinned at Phil. “He’ll grow up just like his daddy.”

Years of training kept Phil from blushing at the expression on Barton’s face. Surely that wasn’t affection? No doubt Barton meant to be teasing. “I have to admit, I hope he does not.”

“No? How come?”

Phil shrugged. He took a moment to consider how to phrase it. “I never appreciated how difficult it must have been for my mother, to see me go into the service and risk my life, until I had a child to care for myself.”

Barton blinked, mulling over that statement. “Huh.” He bit his lip before responding, and looked away. “Ya know… I’m an orphan. I told you once about my old man… the drunk bas—bum,” he swiftly edited his language due to Harry’s presence, “took himself and my mother out in one car accident. I guess I never thought… well, I mean, I knew what HE thought of me, but I have no idea what my mother would think of me now.” Harry reached for a crayon across the table, and Barton obligingly moved it closer.

Phil nodded. “Good parents, I believe, want their children to be safe and happy, more than anything. My father was killed in action when I was very young. I wanted to be just like him. I realize now, that must have terrified her.”

“What does she think of you being in SHIELD?”

Phil winced. “She passed, two years ago. She thought I was an investigator for the FBI, working with the Secret Service. She said she was proud of me.”

Barton’s gentle smile comforted Phil more than he’d admit. “Well, there you go. No matter what, you’ll be proud.”

Phil chuckled as Harry held up his latest Crayola masterpiece. “I definitely will be.”

The last day of September was a Monday. Phil was in his office, reviewing activity reports from the weekend. Harry sat in his playpen quietly chattering to himself – apparently he and Padfoot were hunting the other toys, capturing them one by one. Phil considered that SHIELD, while probably a better influence than the Dursleys would ever be, still might not be the best influence.

Just as he was contemplating how to redirect Harry’s imagination, the door to his office flew open with a bang. He managed to not jump, though Harry startled and began crying. Phil ought to be thankful that Harry didn’t make something move or break, but he was too busy hurrying over to pick up the child, and gathering breath to chew out the intruder.

Lucky for him he looked up before speaking – the invader was Fury himself, who, as far as Phil knew until this moment, had been in DC at SHIELD’s international headquarters.

“Cheese!” the man shouted in triumph.
“Shush!” Phil snapped back, cuddling Harry close. Fury had the good grace to look sheepish for scaring the boy.

“Oh, sorry, Phil. I didn’t realize he’d be here.”

“Where else would he be?”

Fury shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Good thing he is, we’ve got movement.” The smirk with which he’d originally entered the room returned.

“What’s going on?” Phil asked.

“I finally heard back from that lunatic! We have an appointment to take tea with the Sorcerer Supreme himself.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow, Cheese. We’re finally gonna get some answers tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

Wow, Movement at last! Yes, finally some things started here, and some action is coming. The next chapter will be SIGNIFICANT.
October 1st, 2002

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The provided address led them to a brownstone in a quiet street on the southern border of Tribeca. Fury had the driver do two passes with the massive black SUV which was the only sort of vehicle Nick would ride in. No other moving cars or pedestrians were visible when they finally stepped on to the street. Fury kept an eye out as Phil lifted Harry from the car seat, along with a childcare bag. The driver was ordered to keep the car close and available.

A middle-aged Tibetan man answered the door. He nodded in greeting, coolly polite, his expression only softening for Harry’s shy wave. The interior of the brownstone spoke of wealth, the floors carpeted with real oriental rugs, the walls decorated with silk instead of wallpaper. Phil noted uneasily that there seemed to be far more rooms off the short hall than the building’s exterior dimensions should have allowed.

The butler led them to a study where their host awaited them. Stephen Strange was a tall man of some Middle Eastern extraction. SHIELD already knew his family history – his parents had immigrated before Stephen’s birth. Whatever the family name had been prior to arriving in the States, his father had legally made the name Strange. Stephen had been born in Philadelphia and grew up with little to no identification with his ethnic heritage. The arrogant young man had earned several prestigious scholarships, including a full ride to Johns Hopkins University Medical, and had become a well-respected neurosurgeon, until Hubris had at last taken its toll. Although the reports had indicated a terrible car accident, the middle-aged man standing beside the broad mahogany desk showed no physical damage. He had thick dark hair, greying at the temples but not receding. His posture was straight and solid, and the hand that extended to greet Director Fury was as steady and strong as one would expect from a renowned doctor.

“Director Fury, welcome to my home,” Strange greeted them, his voice deep and smooth, with only the faintest hint of an accent, as if English was only one of several languages he spoke regularly.

“Thank you for meeting with us, Doctor Strange, we appreciate any information you can give us. This is Phil Coulson, my most trusted Agent, and this...”

“Is Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived,” Strange interrupted, his dark eyes fixed on Harry. The little boy pressed his face to Phil’s chest to hide from the scrutiny. Phil glanced at Fury. He’d recognized the appellation from the note that had been left with Harry on the Dursleys’ doorstep, but he knew that Fury hadn’t used it in his communications with Strange.

Fury’s eyes narrowed. “So you are familiar with these people?”

Strange gestured that they should sit, and his butler offered refreshments, which Fury accepted but Phil declined, preferring to keep Harry in his lap, and thus not having a free hand for coffee served in a delicate cup and saucer. Phil also pulled Padfoot out of the bag for Harry to cling to.

“I am familiar with the wizarding world, as they call themselves. Enough to keep an eye on their antics, but I am not involved in their society in any way.”

“Antics?” Fury prompted.

Strange sighed. “Wizards are no different than anyone else, Director. They live, they die, and they
fight. They live amongst us, have their enclaves in most major cities, and they govern themselves, for the most part.”

“Would you help us make contact?”

Strange hesitated. “I can help you help yourselves.” He set down his coffee. “Please understand – what they do and what I do are very different. To them, I am not a Wizard. And to me, they are… well, in some cases, hopelessly parochial. You see, the Witch Hysteria of the Seventeenth Century had a profound effect on these people, such that they almost completely withdrew from human society at large. So on top of the cultural differences you would find between, say, Philadelphia versus Beijing, you have the additional layer of a predominantly closed society versus the world at large. The only infusion of modern thought or innovation that occurs in the wizarding world comes from what they call the ‘muggleborn’ – children of non-wizarding parents who are indoctrinated in early adolescence.”

“Indoctrinated? Are they cult-like?” Phil asked warily.

“Not so much cultish as… Imagine yourself at ten years old, invited to join a world of wizards, of dragons, vampires, goblins, and fairies. You’re told that you’re one of them, and taught nothing but their way of life throughout the rest of your schooling. Would you return to the world of Chinese take-out and traffic? Or would you remain in the world of magic and wonder?” Strange nodded when he saw that they understood his point. “You see, Agent Coulson, despite the relative smallness of the wizarding World, it has its appeal.”

“You mentioned they govern themselves, yet they live amongst us. Without any oversight?” Fury asked.

“For the most part the wizarding world is divided amongst the same national lines as the Non-magical world. They do cooperate amongst themselves – their version of the UN is known as the International Confederation of Wizards. But each nation has its own governing body. I can tell you that the American wizarding government is organized along the lines of the old Roman Republic. Its chief executive is the Consul; the legislative body is the Century. I imagine that the Consul reports to the US government in some way, but I do not know how or to whom.”

Phil could see Fury’s mind turning, trying to determine who in the US government might be in contact with the wizarding one. “You knew about Harry,” Phil said. “What do you know about his past?”

“Ah, that is an interesting tale.” Strange sipped his coffee slowly, obviously enjoying their anticipation. “You see, there are some wizards who are so convinced of the superiority of magic that they advocate not only closing their societies to even magical children born of non-wizarding parents, but possibly going so far as to eradicate non-magical people entirely.”

“Nazis,” Fury sneered.

“Not unlike,” Strange conceded. “And the German, French, and British wizarding worlds had their own war behind the scenes of World War Two, instigated by what they call a ‘Dark Lord’, or evil Wizard. That particular wizard was defeated in personal combat by a British wizard named Albus Dumbledore.”

Phil sat up straight, his arms tightening around Harry. “The Headmaster?”

“Yes, he is now, as I understand it, Headmaster of Hogwarts, the primary wizarding school in Great Britain. More recently, however, another Dark Lord had begun a campaign of terror in
England. Although his ideas were gaining traction in Europe, his actual actions had not spread much beyond the British Isles. Right-thinking wizards, led by Dumbledore, were attempting to rally against this Dark Lord. And then, on Halloween last year, this Dark Wizard attacked a young family, the Potters.”

“Do you know why?” Phil pressed.

Strange met his eyes honestly. “I do not. I confess I am as curious as you. You see, the Dark Wizard had murdered many. That night, it seems he handily murdered the husband, and the wife, but when he cast his curse at young Harry here….” He waved a hand. “Somehow, Harry has survived. As before, when the primary leader of the movement was destroyed, the movement fell apart. The reign of terror was over. The British wizarding world rejoiced, and hailed a toddler as their savior. It was published that boy had gone to live with his mother’s family…. His expression invited Phil to elaborate.

Phil didn’t even glance at his boss. Strange was a fountain of information, and if what he wanted was an exchange of intel, so be it. Strange was already aware of SHIELD’s interest in the wizarding world, so Phil quickly confirmed that they’d heard chatter about the Potters, and traced Lily Evans Potter through standard channels, which led to her sister and Harry. Strange’s expression was approving when Phil explained that he’d found the home situation unacceptable for any child.

“Can you tell us,” Fury took over, “how does one become a wizard? How did you do it?”

Strange chuckled. “As I said before, I am not a wizard. What they do is exercise an inherent talent. What I do is, well, quite different. And you’re not here about me, you’re here about Harry.”

“So… he’s a normal child?” Phil asked.

“Absolutely normal.”

“Where does the talent come from?” Fury demanded.

Strange shrugged. “Where does perfect pitch come from? Artistic talent? Left-handedness? Why is one child tone-deaf, and another able to play any instrument you put in her hands? The human brain is still largely an undiscovered country, Director Fury, and I say that as a neurosurgeon.”

Silence descended upon them for a moment. Fury was clearly unhappy that Strange couldn’t explain Harry’s powers, Strange unconcerned about Fury’s pique, and Phil was concerned about a society that drew in children and seemed to never let them go, yet produced murderous villains.

“Agent Coulson.” Strange’s voice drew Phil’s attention. “The wizarding world is no better or worse than our own. Truly, the only thing that divides them from us is their talent for magic, and the society they’ve developed because of that.” When he saw that Phil understood, he went on. “However, I do admit to a great curiosity about how a small child managed to repel a curse meant to destroy him. If you would allow, I would like to examine Harry magically.”

“What would you do?”

“Well, I would like to assess his native talent. For example…” He came around the desk and crouched in front of Phil and Harry. With a wave of a hand, he produced a glowing ball of light which rested gently in his palm. Harry’s eyes lit up, as enchanted as any child would be. He hesitantly reached out a finger, and Strange held up the ball so Harry could touch it. Harry giggled, and Strange smiled gently. “Yes, it’s magic, Harry. You know this, don’t you?”
Harry glanced up at Phil for permission, and once granted, Harry handed Padfoot to Phil, and then put out his hand for the ball. Strange set it into his palm. The light wavered for a moment, but then stabilized.

“Can you send it back to me?” Strange asked as he sat back on his heels, and after a moment’s consideration, Harry sent the ball floating back to him, much in the way he played ‘catch’ with Barton using rubber balls.

“What are you getting from this?” Fury asked.

“Harry is very talented, but more than that, he has remarkable control for one so young,” Strange answered. “He was able to take over maintaining the magic, and then pass it back to me.” Strange gently sent the ball back to Harry, who cradled it in his hands, clearly enjoying the game.

“How is control significant?” Phil asked.

“Most wizarding children have episodes of what’s called ‘accidental’ magic. They make something happen, without any conscious intent or control.”

“Like making the furniture shake after a nightmare? Or calling a bottle from across the room?”

“Just so. Summoning is extremely common. For the most part, these episodes are short and the effects either so minor as to be unnoticed, or they fade quickly.”

“What about shorting out an electronic device?”

Strange glanced at Fury. “You should be aware that magic and electronics rarely mix well. Wizards have developed some charms that mimic the effects of electronics, such as cooling for refrigeration, and radio broadcasts, but nothing resembling consumer electronics. Homes are heated by fireplaces. Perhaps in the most contemporary homes, in cities, they might have electricity, but only the most basic of wiring. There is something about the energy of magic that is disruptive to the general flow of physics.” He gave them a small smile. “This little game is hardly an issue, as it requires very little magic. But Harry’s magic is very different from mine. I imagine your scientists are quite at a loss as to why they can’t make heads or tails of Harry’s abilities.”

“He shorted out an agent tracking tag. Nearly gave the tracking officer a heart attack when his signal went dead,” Phil explained. “And we now realize that the reason they weren’t getting any direct sensor readings was because he shorted out the sensors. A passive area scan gave them enough brainwave information to know that it’s definitely Harry instigating things, but that’s it.”

“Unless you can find a way to identify the energy of magic, and shield for it, I doubt you’ll ever do any better than that.” Strange seemed terribly amused by their failure, and by the thought that they’d ever quantify magic.

He dismissed the ball after one last volley, and reached out to playfully ruffle Harry’s hair. But as he did, his fingertips brushed Harry’s bangs aside, and the Sorcerer Supreme hissed a breath in sudden anger. “What is this?” he growled, staring at Harry.

Phil immediately pulled the boy back as Harry cringed. But Strange only leaned closer. “The scar! Why didn’t you tell me about the scar?”

“What about the scar?” Fury asked.

“It’s been like that the whole time,” Phil said. “It never gets better.”
Strange stood. “It wouldn’t. It’s a curse scar, and the inflammation means the curse is still active.”

“What?” Phil gasped.

The Sorcerer reached out with one long finger and ran it down the scar on Harry’s forehead. The little boy didn’t do more than a shiver, but the man hissed in anger. “There is more to this than just an unusually talented little boy,” Strange pronounced ominously. “Come with me.”

The doctor led them from the study and down the hall. Phil again noticed that the building could not possibly accommodate the space through which they passed, though they never went up or down any stairs. At the end of the hall stood a heavy, dark door. Strange pushed through, leading them into a room that might once have been characterized as a ballroom, but now was clearly the Sorcerer’s workroom. Various armoires and heavy tables rang the edges of the room, while the center of the floor was filled with an elaborate circular design inlaid directly into the wood, glinting and glittering with a variety of metals and stones. Strange held up a hand to stop them just inside the door. Phil glanced back to see the butler closing it behind them with a serious expression of concern. The man then moved aside, attentive to Strange’s needs.

“Director, I will need you to stand over there.” Strange sent Fury off to one side. He gestured the butler closer, and after a quiet conference, the Tibetan pulled a large cushion out of an armoire, placing it in the center of the room. Then he moved a small table, placing it a few feet from the cushion, before fetching additional items. Meanwhile, Strange also assembled a collection of items. Finally, the Sorcerer waved Phil over. “Agent Coulson, I need you to sit with Harry on the cushion.”

“Tell me what is going on, first.”

Strange sighed. “I suspect there is far more to this story than we knew. Harry must be cleansed of the lingering remains of the curse that was used on him. There’s no knowing what the long term effects of such malevolence would be on the child. I cannot… I cannot believe,” he threw up his hands in frustration, “that Dumbledore did not see this, recognize this, and take care of it right away!”

“What is it?”

“I suspect it is what the Egyptians called a Cup of Osiris. I do not know what Wizards call it. A soul fragment of the dark wizard that attacked him is lodged in the scar.”

“Soul fragment? Are you shitting me?” Fury asked.

“Many beings have souls, Director Fury, not the least of which is the human soul, though I hesitate to describe anyone who would create a Cup as human. The ritual to create a Cup of Osiris requires a murder of an innocent, premeditated and in cold blood.”

“Harry’s not a cup, he’s a child!” Phil held the boy closer. Harry clung to him now, clearly upset by the change in atmosphere of this meeting.

“Anything that holds the soul fragment qualifies as a Cup. But what we must discover is how this happened, and how Harry has not been possessed by the fragment, and most importantly, how to remove and destroy it. Please,” Strange waved Phil towards the cushion. “This must be done. It is for Harry’s own good. You may sit and hold him the whole time, but we must proceed.”

Phil and Fury exchanged a long look. They were out of their depths here and pretty much at
Strange’s mercy when it came to magic. They could concede that magic existed, and even be blasé about it when it was just a small boy levitating rubber balls, but Strange was talking about souls and cold-blooded murder, and putting an agent and a child at the middle of that. Fury’s fingers twitched, an old signal from the Rangers, telling Phil he was armed, and prepared. Phil gave a slight nod back, then turned and walked to the cushion.

“Thank you, Agent. Just... remain calm.” With that, Strange stepped up to the small table. He raised his arms and began to speak in a voice so low, Phil couldn’t make out what he said.

A feeling like the air pressure of an airplane cabin came over them. Harry whimpered, hands going to his ears. Phil held him tighter. He noticed a haze around them, like smoke, but without any scent. It swirled with faint colors, snaking around the outside edge of the design on the floor and rising until it formed a dome above them. They were cut off from Fury and Strange’s butler, who waited outside the circle. Then the pressure began to stabilize, and fade, though the haze still silently swirled around them. It was like being inside a soap bubble.

“Now,” Strange said clearly, “Let us see what is afoot.” He pointed a finger at Harry and began to chant again. Though Phil could hear his voice, he couldn’t make out a single word. Harry stared back at the Sorcerer, his green eyes as wide as could be. Then he began to whimper, squirming in Phil’s lap. Tears spilled over, running down the boy’s cheeks. Harry let out one sob, then twisted and buried himself in Phil’s chest. The agent gathered him close, glaring at the Sorcerer, but the chanting continued. Strange’s face was a mask of concentration; he didn’t even blink. Harry soon quieted, and then he looked back over his shoulder at Strange.

Finally, Strange ceased chanting, letting his hand fall.

“What was that?” Phil asked.

“We are now safe within a magic circle, Agent Coulson. I have used my powers to look into Harry’s mind, and see exactly what happened to him that night. It seems that there were several significant elements to the events of last Halloween. First, Harry’s parents had performed a ritual, bestowing a protection upon Harry that could only be triggered if his mother sacrificed her life to protect him. This she did, and so Harry became safe from the one who murdered her. However, the Dark Wizard was not aware of this, and so when he tried to murder Harry to create a Cup of Osiris, that protection plus Harry’s own power reflected the curse back at him.

Unfortunately, this did not kill that wizard.”

“What?” Phil gasped.

“He must still be alive in some form. The Dark Wizard had made at least one, but potentially several, Cups prior to attacking the Potters. I can tell because the fragment of soul within Harry is relatively small. Imagine breaking a mirror, and then breaking the pieces. The piece in Harry is a fragment of a fragment. Only enough to infect, but not enough to overwhelm. Let me show you.”

Strange made a gesture, and suddenly there was an additional cloud of colored haze around them. “This is Harry’s power.” It was, frankly, beautiful. Rainbow shades of light danced. Phil was suddenly reminded of a toy from his childhood, called SpinArt. Colors radiated from Harry. But in one area, a sickly dark current oozed. It wasn’t large; in fact it was dwarfed by the colors around it, and hedged in with gold. “You see the gold? That is his mother’s protection,” Strange explained. The gold was interwoven throughout all of Harry’s colors, but especially around the darkness.

“Is the protection permanent?” Phil asked.
Strange suddenly beamed at him, like a proud professor whose student has finally seen the light.
“Indeed, Agent Coulson, his mother’s protection must be renewed. Luckily, to do so is the simplest thing in the world. In fact, you already help maintain it.”

“I do?”

“Yes. Because you love Harry. You have made him your son, and thus you have taken on his protection yourself. And Harry loves you. You volunteered to be his father, and he adores you for it. He knows you and the Hawk are his parents now, and he’s happy.”

“Wait, how do you know about Hawkeye?” Neither Phil nor Fury had so much as hinted at another being involved in Harry’s care and upbringing.

Strange raised a brow. “Harry told me.”

Phil resisted the urge to say ‘what’ again. Strange smirked, and went on. “Children see the world with very simple eyes, Agent Coulson. You are his Mother-father; you protect and defend, and you see to his most basic needs with love and care. The Hawk is his Father-mother; he entertains and teaches and showers playful affection on him. Gender has nothing to do with it. Harry is aware that there should be two parents, and you and your partner have managed to recreate a dynamic Harry recognizes from his biological parents. I saw this all from his point of view in his mind. He is, quite frankly, one of the happiest children I’ve ever had the pleasure to meet.”

A band of tension in Phil’s chest snapped at those words. Without realizing it, he’d been carrying around a weight of stress, constantly wondering if what he was doing was right for Harry, if Harry was happy or if he wanted for anything. Just the knowledge that Harry was truly happy gave Phil such relief, he could almost cry from it himself.

“No, there are two things I’d like to do to you as well, Agent Coulson, while we’re in the circle.”

Okay, he was going to say it. “What? To ME?”

“Yes. We are outside of time here, so I want to take the opportunity. You see, the one thing the wizarding world respects more than magic is the claim of blood. You are not blood related to Harry, and as long as his aunt is alive, it would be easy for those in power to demand that he be returned to her, and if she were to refuse, there are those with more magical power who might lay claim to the boy. I must warn you now: Harry is a child of Destiny. He will in time need to return to Britain and take his place in that world. You will need to learn the ins and outs of that world and how to manipulate it for Harry’s benefit, just as you do for SHIELD and world security. I can bypass those problems by making you appear for all intents and purposes as related to Lily Potter, though distantly, but moreover, I can make you magical.”

Phil shook his head. “You just gone beyond my limits of credulity, Doctor Strange.”

“I can do it. My powers are not the same as a wizards, I can affect things differently than they.”

“You told Fury there’s no way to become a wizard.”

“I won’t make you a wizard, I’ll make you magical. You would not be able to perform magic… well, you might find some small ability somewhere, I suppose, with enough experimentation, but you would seem to the wizarding world to be a wizard, if only of very little power, and thus you would have full claim to Harry according to their thinking.”

“Would it be your magic?”
Strange smiled. “Actually, it would be Harry’s.”

Phil looked down at the little boy in his lap, who looked back with love and trust. “It won’t hurt Harry?”

“Neither damage nor diminish, I swear it.”

Phil took a deep breath, and then nodded. “Alright, do it.”

Strange lifted his arms again, and it was as if a maelstrom had been unleashed. Light and color swirled around them, picking up speed until they became a howling wind. Strange’s voice echoed as he resumed chanting. Phil felt a sensation like flame run through him, making him cling even tighter to the child in his lap, who clung back. The Sorcerer reached out, suddenly grasping that oil-slick of darkness in Harry’s magic. Harry let out a shriek as the blackness was pulled, sobbing until at last it let go. The dark miasma seemed a living thing, echoing Harry’s shriek in a piercing tone, writhing against the Sorcerer’s grip.

Strange raised his arm as if to strike a blow but Phil shouted, “Wait!”

“It needs to be destroyed.”

“Yes, but does it need to be right now?”

Strange’s eyes narrowed. “You’re thinking of leverage.”

“If I had a piece of your soul, wouldn’t you think twice about crossing me?”

“He may not be aware that we have it.”

Phil’s smile was all bared teeth. “Even better.”

Strange nodded. “I need an object to make the Cup.”

Phil pulled his tie off with one hand and tossed it to the floor between them. Strange nodded, and with a few more un-clear words, shoved the blackness into the tie.

Immediately, the winds died down and the air began to clear. The colors faded away. With a gesture, the outer haze of the circle began to fade.

Nick Fury stood with his arms crossed. “Well? All you did was raise your arms and drop them.”

Outside of time, Phil recalled as Strange smirked. “All is resolved, my dear Director Fury,” Strange announced. “Come, let us return to the study, and I’ll tell you how to access Cauldron Court.”

“Cauldron Court?”

“Yes, it’s the wizarding enclave here in New York.”

“Where is it?”

Strange chuckled. “Why, it’s just off Broome Street, of course.”
Big chapter! I hope you all enjoyed it. As you can see, canon has pretty much gone out the window.
SHIELD had protocols in place for every situation. Operations went smoothly because of that, because when everyone followed the protocols, people lived.

Not even the Director was above the protocols, which was why Fury and Coulson returned to base with Harry after a morning spent with Doctor Strange, instead of rushing across Lower Manhattan to try and find the entrance to the wizard enclave in New York. Strange's magic meant that Coulson had had a very different morning than Fury; the Director had not seen or heard anything that happened within the Sorcerer's circle. Therefore, the debrief of the morning's meeting was vitally important to Operation Witchcraft. Both Fury and Coulson had to make reports taken by read-in Archivists, who made records and replicated the various reports to the analysts who’d need them.

Because of the events within the circle, both Coulson and Harry were subject to a complete round of tests by both R&D and Medical. Unfortunately for the scientists, despite Doctor Strange’s assertions and Coulson’s report of the events and sensations within the magic circle, R&D could not discover any changes in Harry, or in Phil. Neither registered any change on any metric SHIELD had.

These meetings and exams took several days, and they were not the only operation Phil was involved in. As a Level Seven Agent In Charge, he had direct operational control of several missions, and eyes-on supervision of several more. Fury had the entire division to supervise, and yet he still found time to argue with Phil.

"I'm going," Fury stated in one of their regular secure calls.

"No, sir, you're not."

"Sir, Cheese, really? We're going there?"

"Yes, SIR, we are. You are the Director of SHIELD. This mission will involve infiltrating absolutely cold territory, with an initial contact of a potentially hostile nation. You cannot be risked on this mission."

"As the Director, I can take interest in whatever operation I damn well feel like, AGENT Coulson, and you would do well to remember that."

Phil waited a beat. "Honey's got you listening to audio books again?"

"Shut up, Cheese."

The argument got revisited every time they spoke, as they sorted out Phil's reviews of past operations during Pierce's tenure as Director, examined the goals of current and future operations, discussed potential promotions and assets, and Harry's latest antics.
Phil was busy enough between his work - his *life* really - and taking care of Harry, who was apparently blossoming, with the appetite to go with it, that sometimes he hardly noticed the various currents and eddies of people around him.

It was nearly the end of the month the night he returned to his quarters expecting to find a frustrated AS agent/babysitter trying to get a fussy Harry to go to sleep, only to find his front room dim and empty. The door to Harry's room stood slightly ajar, and though the only illumination Phil could see came from Harry's yellow night-light, he could hear a pleasant tenor voice singing softly.

He pushed the door wider slowly. Harry slept in his crib, chest rising and falling gently. Next to the crib knelt Clint Barton, his hands wrapped around the bars as he stared at Harry, like a man in prison staring through the bars at freedom. His unaccompanied voice turned the early-80s rock ballad he sang into something soulful and sad.

With his training, Barton had to have known Phil was there, but he didn't turn, finishing his song and trailing into silence. Phil realized he hadn't seen Barton in more than a week; the other man must have been out on a mission. If Phil recalled correctly, it should have been Barton's final probationary mission.

Finally, Barton turned his head to look up at Phil, and Phil was shocked at the bleak and wounded expression on the man's face.

“Barton?”

Barton looked terrible. He appeared exhausted and grim, and he merely looked up at Phil as if not truly seeing him.

“Bad mission?” Phil asked gently. He’d had enough of those to know they could haunt you. And given Barton’s affection for Harry, maybe this quiet serenade was a coping mechanism.

The other man shrugged. He turned back to Harry for a long moment, then got to his feet. He seemed to have come to some sort of resolution. Phil stood aside as Barton slipped past him into the living room. Phil drew the door to Harry’s room nearly closed as he followed.

Barton hesitated in the middle of the main room, then turned to Phil. “I wanted to thank you.”

“For what?”

“You… you’ve been really nice to me, since I got here. And you let me spend time with Harry, which I really, really appreciated… I just… It’s probably not a good idea for me to do that anymore, anyway, you know? So… so thanks, and…”

“What do you mean?”

Barton just shifted nervously.

“What the hell happened out there? Barton, talk to me. What’s going on?” Clearly, Barton thought he was in some kind of trouble, even kicked out of SHIELD, and Phil had no idea why he’d think that, given he was Fury’s new favorite minion.
Barton just shrugged. “Hand said… well, she said a lot, but…. I mean, I guess I thought…”

“Sit down. Let’s debrief here. You were out on a mission with Agent Hand? I presume she was the handler.” Agent Victoria Hand was a well-known Level Six, often given operational command. She was on Fury’s short list for promotion to the upper echelon, although Phil felt she was sometimes a little strict in the field, where flexibility is often advantageous. Still, if this was Barton’s final probationary mission, how he dealt with a martinet like Hand would say a lot about his potential as an independent field operative. “What sort of mission?”

“T.A. and E,” he choked out.

A Target Acquisition and Elimination mission. On the one hand, Phil wasn’t surprised. Barton was an exceptional marksman, and sending him almost guaranteed mission success, because he simply Did Not Miss. But Phil clearly remembered his tales of the two contract killings he had actually performed as a mercenary. Despite his reputation, only twice had Barton killed in cold blood. Both times he’d been absolutely desperate, needing medical care he simply could not have afforded without the payday of a completed contract. Both targets had been reprehensible people, and although his employers had definitely been on the side of the devils, the targets were equally villainous. According to his original intake debrief, both times Barton had vomited immediately over his own actions, and the second time had spiraled into a near-suicidal depression that he’d only escaped through the assistance of a friend he would not identify. Only a quarter of the deaths attributed to Hawkeye were actually true, and with the exception of those two contracts, all the others were in self-defense. He actually regretted those intensely as well.

Phil waited for Barton to regain some composure, and then asked, “Did you make the shot?” If SHIELD marked a target for elimination, then SHIELD was absolutely certain that the target could not be contained if captured, could not be negotiated with, bought off, devalued, or made harmless in any way. When Barton nodded, Phil said, “Tell me what happened.”

“Target was located at the third of three possible compounds. Mission briefing included security analysis of all possible bolt holes; we had the specs for this one.” He clearly tried to distance himself by falling into debrief mode, his voice dull and mechanical. “I found a good location, one with clear line of sight to the target’s office. I had to wait….”

“How long?”

“Seventeen hours.”

Phil sat back. Seventeen hours alone in a blind with only the handler’s voice in his ear, and if Phil knew Hand, she certainly didn’t make any attempt to lessen the tedious tension of the wait. In fact, she probably either ignored attempts at conversation – and Hawkeye could be remarkably gregarious – or threatened him with disciplinary action for failing to maintain radio silence. It wasn’t that Phil didn’t think Hawkeye was capable of that type of focus; in this situation, it may not have been necessary.

Sure enough, as Phil drew out the mission specs and progress from Barton, he became convinced that Hand had set up the mission to be as pointlessly challenging as possible. He wondered if Fury had done it deliberately, to see how Hawkeye might break.

“The target finally entered the office, along with two known associates, and…. And his kid,” Barton reported, his voice cracking at the last. “Jesus, Coulson, the kid was barely a year older than Harry! And Hand is in my ear ordering me to take the shot, and I just couldn’t. I mean, I knew what I was there to do, and I know it needed to be done, but shit, I couldn’t pull the trigger and … and blow this guys brains out all over his goddamned little boy!”
“What did you do?”

Barton’s breath hitched, but he held it together. “I waited. Hand’s in my ear, going nuts, and I sat there and waited. Eventually, the nanny came in and took the kid away, and the target had about a twenty minute meeting with his two lieutenants. Had it looked like he was going to leave, that I was going to lost the angle, I’d have taken the shot. Instead, the son of a bitch dismisses his flunkies, and sits down at the desk to do paperwork, in front of a goddamned open window.”

“You took the shot through the window while he was alone.”

“Yeah.” The shudder than ran through Barton went from his head to his feet. He continued, “I didn’t barf this time. I mean, at least, here, I knew I was doing something for … the Greater Good, or some shit like that. Hand, though. She was losing her shit, pissed at me for not taking the shot right away. But I couldn’t kill the guy in front of his kid!” His eyes pleaded with Coulson to see his point of view.

“I presume Hand has threatened you with disciplinary action?”

“Yeah.” Barton deflated. “In fact, I’m lucky I even made it back. She had the whole ops center packed up and loaded. I had to run and jump in the transport as it left.”

Phil surged to his feet. “She was about to LEAVE YOU?”

Barton stared up, surprised. “Yeah, I mean, looked like. She could've been relocating to the secondary extraction site, expecting me to go there, but I wasn’t too outside of the ops schedule at that point.”

Phil immediately crossed to his phone. He stabbed out the number of Operational Control. “This is Coulson. I want all analysis on the mission just completed by Agents Hand and Barton frozen immediately. Label it for my review tomorrow. What? .....I’m not surprised. Lock it down. I will address it in the morning.” He snapped the phone shut. Agent Hand had already submitted a report, one the OpsCon agent said was ‘scathing’. He would sit down with Hand and find out exactly what sort of bullshit she thought she was pulling. SHIELD did not leave people behind, certainly not when the mission was completed.

“Coulson?”

“Agent Barton, my apologies. Agent Hand’s behavior will be investigated.”

“So… I’m not in trouble?”

Phil ran a hand over his face. “I can’t imagine there would be any reason to eliminate the target in front of witnesses. Definitely not in front of his child. In addition, taking the shot with the two lieutenants in the room would have completely tilted them off, and would likely have compromised your extraction. Also, SHIELD prefers to avoid engendering a Vendetta in family members. Eliminating the target in front of his child would certainly have been traumatic, and SHIELD prefers to NOT be unnecessarily cruel. In fact,” Phil thought a second. “We might be able to plant intel that implicates either, or even both, of the lieutenants in the death, play them against each other and other factions, destabilize the entire syndicate.” He sat back down, facing Barton directly. “You did not do anything wrong. The delay in taking the shot did not cause you to fail the mission. Waiting until the target was alone was probably the best option, and when you do the formal debrief tomorrow, make sure you point out that you knew you’d have to take the shot if it looked like you were going to lose the target. I will try to pull Fury into this. Your delay was certainly within operational standards, and likely better for the mission objectives in the long
run. Hand was absolutely out of line to threaten your employment with SHIELD, given you hadn’t actually broken any protocols, and she was absolutely out of line to nearly leave you behind, simply because you didn’t follow her orders exactly. Barton, SHIELD has always trusted its assets to make the right decisions on the ground. It’s why you were hired; because we knew we could trust you to do the Right Thing.”

The expression on Barton’s face told Phil he’d never expected anyone to come down on his side, to defend him. He’d been alone long enough to be jaded, but not so long that his loyalty couldn’t be earned by loyalty given to him. At this moment, looking at those shocked eyes, Phil realized he’d achieved what Fury had intended all long. He’d just earned Barton’s loyalty, to himself and to SHIELD, simply by having the man’s back, something that Phil would have done for ANY agent, given these circumstances.

“Now,” Phil said. “Get some rest. And no more nonsense about not spending time with us anymore – with Harry, I mean. You aren’t getting fired.” At Barton’s suddenly blank expression, Phil got suspicious. “What? Is there some other reason you think you shouldn’t be around Harry?”

He looked down, clenching his hands on his knees. “Coulson… I’m a killer. I mean, yeah, I might’ve made the right call by waiting, but I still took the shot, and this time, I didn’t get sick. I mean, I felt sick, but more because Hand though I should’ve taken the shot in front of his kid, and that’s just.. wrong, you know? But this guy… he needed killing. He was bad news.” He shivered again, and said, “I just don’t think I’m a decent person, to be around a great kid like Harry… or around you.”

Phil did Barton the courtesy of thinking about that fairly. Then, he expressed himself succinctly.

“Bullshit.”

The shock on Barton’s face at the curse was priceless.

“Do you honestly think I’ve never killed anyone? Hell, Barton, I’ve been a field agent for years. I’ve got more kills than you do. You had to have heard the one about the Al Qaeda cell by now.”

Barton flushed. “I didn’t believe it. It sounded like bull.”

“It’s true.” Barton looked at him like he was seeing Phil for the first time. “I’ve killed a lot of people in my service here. I’ve saved a lot of people too. My comfort is that the saving has so far outweighed the killing. And when I start to wonder, I go down to Psych and I talk it out. You don’t have to be an unthinking weapon, Barton. SHIELD doesn’t want a weapon. We want an Agent. We want a thinking person out there, because if you turn into a weapon, then you’re not concerned about the ones you’re saving, and that’s wrong. Go down to Psych and talk to your doctor. Spend as much time with her as you need; that’s what Psych is for. You won’t get absolution – you want that, there’s a Chaplain. But you will learn coping mechanisms, ways to live with yourself. I think you can do it. I think you can be one of the best Agents in SHIELD.”

“You do?”

“Yes. You’re not just skilled, you’re smart. You’ve got a good, creative, tactical mind. And you’ve still got compassion, which is more important in this line of work than you’d expect.” Phil was pleased to see a bit of pride in Barton’s face, a bit of peace. “Now, I’ve got to rack out, and you need your sleep after seventeen hours in a blind. Tomorrow we’ll do a full review, and sort this shit out, but in the meantime, it’s twenty-three hundred and I’m beat.” He stood, and Barton immediately jumped up.
“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Phil didn’t expect his own reaction to Barton’s sudden crooked grateful smile. It hit him in the gut. He could practically see the dedicated shine in Barton’s eyes. But more, he felt himself returning that feeling. Clint Barton was a good man; Phil would make that oath any day, any way. And Hawkeye had just become a full Agent of SHIELD.

The next morning, when he spoke to Nick in their regular call about everything, Phil added, “Oh, and I’ll be taking Barton with me.”

“With you where?”

“To infiltrate Cauldron Court.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry, dear readers, about how long this took. The first iteration of this chapter was lost when my MSWord got corrupted on my personal laptop. The second iteration was lost when my USB drive used to transport files home from work got corrupted. Then (SQUICK WARNING!) I sliced off the tip of a finger in a kitchen mishap, and couldn't TYPE.

However, I am now healed, I have downloaded a more reliable word processor, and my school term is done for the next few weeks, so expect more frequent updates from now own.

--Sarkazm
"Thank you for your report, Agent Barton. You are dismissed." Fury's larger than life visage on the screen nodded at Barton, who rose and left the conference room with only a single confused glance at Phil.

Agents Coulson and Hand waited for Director Fury to speak again. Coulson had called this meeting, getting Fury on video-conference, because of the way Barton's last probationary mission went. While Coulson wasn't pleased they'd given a TA&E mission to the young probie, he was furious over the way Agent Victoria Hand had run the mission.

Now that he saw Hand and Fury both, he sensed there was something more going on. Hand didn't look angry about being called to the carpet. Fury looked amused. Phil felt his anger increasing.

"The whole leaving-behind thing was pushing it, Agent Hand," Fury finally said.

"It was staged?" Phil cried, standing in anger.

"My orders were to push Barton as far as I could, to see if his ethical limits could be reached." Hand announced calmly. "I was told to be as 'bitchy' as I could be."

"Jesus." Phil sat back down hard. He looked between Hand and Fury on the screen. "Seriously?"

"I had to know, Phil."

"You nearly broke him, Nick." Phil didn't worry about the slip in front of Hand. Everyone knew Fury and he were close. He'd been Fury's asset for years. "Target Acquisition and Elimination for a man who'd already shown extreme remorse at those contracts in the past. Almost suicidal with guilt..."

"To be fair, his arguments against taking the shot were complete and well-thought-out, for being spur of the moment," Agent Hand observed. "I would suggest advanced strategic training for Barton. His on-the-ground thinking is quick."

"We knew he was good with tactics when we recruited him," Phil snapped, not liking the sudden change to support coming from Hand. He knew he would have a hard time being polite to her for a while.

Hand nodded in acknowledgement. "And now we know that he can hold to ethical objections, still follow and achieve mission objectives under extreme pressure from authority, complete a mission under extreme emotional duress, and accept the consequences." She gave him a sideways look. "I'm actually surprised he came crying to you, Coulson. I rather thought he was the lone wolf type, more likely to lick his wounds in private."

"I pushed him to debrief. He wouldn't have told me otherwise. He was absolutely prepared to be let go. In fact, he was expecting it." Phil scowled. "Six months with SHIELD, and he expected us to kick him out at the first hiccup. That's not exactly us inspiring his loyalty."
"No, Cheese, YOU did that." Fury smirked, which was disturbing on most days, and downright evil when paired with the old nickname in front of an agent that Phil ostensibly outranked. As it was, he could see Hand mentally filing the nickname away behind her eyes, no doubt as blackmail fodder in the future. "You got him to talk, to find an outlet for his ethical concerns--"

"But he didn't!" Phil protested. "He expected to get booted, he only came to say goodbye to Harry! He tried to give me the old thanks-and-fare-well speech. And you--" He wheeled on Hand. "It is NEVER acceptable to imply to an Agent that extraction is not available. Ever! SHIELD brings its agents home, no matter what. Even if it's in a bag!"  Phil's taken those missions, the ones where he's gone in to confirm and retrieve proof of death of an Agent lost in the course of a mission. Those are the worst. He considered them necessary, grim missions to provide closure to the agency and the family. Those missions sometimes gave him worse nightmares than the ones where he's obliged to kill someone.

Hand nods solemnly. "You're right, Agent Coulson, and I apologise. I'm willing to apologise to Barton too, if you like. I pushed. In fact, I had fully intended to relocate to the secondary extraction site and wait."

Phil gave her a long look. "You never expected him to show."

She met his gaze calmly. "No. I expected him to cut and run. Until he took the shot, I honestly expected him to fail out."

Phil Coulson rarely found himself at a loss for words, but at that moment, he found himself genuinely hating his fellow agent.

"Thank you, Agent Hand." Fury broke in. "I will review your full report. You're dismissed."

"Sir. Agent." She nodded politely to both and departed.

"Marcus," Phil said softly. "He has the potential to be the best of us, and you nearly drove him away."

Fury sighed. "I had to push him, Phil. I had to. You're absolutely right, but we had to know how he'd react, if he'd stay or cut and run, if he'd voice his objections or not. But you know what's most important?"

"What?"

"He talked to you. I've got plans, Cheese. Plans for Hawkeye, plans for you." Phil looked up at his old friend in surprise. "I'll let you know when you need it."

Phil conceded defeat. "Permission to explain it to Barton?"

"Sure, if you think it's necessary."

After a moment of silence, Fury added, "I'm fast-tracking Hand."

"Oh?"

"She's willing to get her hands dirty, no pun intended, for the right reasons."

He could see that. He didn't have to like her personally to agree she was an excellent Agent of SHIELD.
"Base, comm check."

"Check, Mal'akh"

"Comm check."

"Check, Hawkeye." Barton gave Phil a sideways glance over his callsign. When Operational Planning had started a week ago, Barton had latched onto the unusual name immediately.

"What the hell is 'Malak'?" he'd asked. "It's not even English, is it?"

"It's Hebrew," Phil had answered mildly. "It means 'one who is sent'."

Barton's expression remained baffled. "I thought you were Boston Irish. Or Chicago."

"I had a well-rounded education."

"Mal'akh, we've got visuals of you at the limit of coverage. Two meters forward and we'll lose you," Base warned Phil. SHIELD had done a thorough job of examining all possible views of the quiet side street, but somehow NYC traffic cameras miraculously missed this one block. Fury had someone backtracking the designs, to see if someone messed with the city's planning to ensure no camera coverage. Because this was NYC, even a year after 9/11, SHIELD could not get permission to set up their own discreet surveillance in the area.

"Acknowledged, Base," Phil replied on the comm. "Be ready to note positions of signal loss." Given how Harry seemed to always short out any agent tracking tag, SHIELD was prepared to lose all contact with Coulson and Barton, right down to their tags.

"Are you ready?" Phil asked Barton, who nodded. Barton wore an innocuous looking backpack that in fact could be swiftly converted into a child carrier, kevlar-lined and hooded, along with several extra weapons. Both agents had concealed sidearms, under their jackets, and secondary weapons in ankle holsters. Barton also carried four throwing knives in forearm sheaths. Loaded for bear, Barton had joked, given they were headed into unknown and possibly hostile territory, but Phil was not anticipating trouble.

Their mission objective was to find the wizards bank, per Doctor Strange's advise, officially to open an account for Phil and Harry. Unofficially, they were performing reconnaissance into the wizarding world.

Phil hitched Harry a little higher on his hip, and lead them forward. Three steps off the curb, Base lost visual. By the time they'd crossed the street, Phil reported static on the comm line, indicating they were starting to lose audio contact. But the first true sign of interference came when they hit the curb directly opposite the unlabeled business storefront. Suddenly, Barton turned and began walking away down the sidewalk.

"Barton!" Phil barked. The other agent hesitated, looking back with a confused expression. "Barton, where are you going?"

"Sir?" The confusion in his voice couldn't be faked. "The mission?"
"The mission is this way."

Barton shook his head. "No, I'm sure it's.... It's...." He frowned, looking around him.

Phil felt a shiver run down his back. "Agent, report. Mental status."

"Confused, sir. Weren't we.... We were?"

"Mission Location, agent."

"Um... C-Cauldron Court, sir."

"Barton, come here." Phil watched as Barton turned and walked back. Every step seemed increasingly difficult.

A few feet away, Barton stopped. "Coulson..."

"Report, Agent."

"Intense feeling that I should turn and walk away, Right Now," Barton answered between gritted teeth. He seemed to visibly be fighting the impulse to turn. "Pressure... like air pressure, only.... IN my head."

"Base, are you getting this?"

" Barely, Mal'akh. We'll need to review." The static on the line clearly went both ways.

"Sir... I'm starting to feel pain..."

Phil reached out and pulled Barton close, so close they were pressing Harry between them. Phil thought maybe he'd landed in a free zone, but Barton still looked uncomfortable. Then Harry reached out to Barton, his small hand landing landing on the man's neck, and Barton gasped in sudden relief. "It's fading!"

"I'm going to try something, Barton." Phil shifted, so Harry couldn't reach any more, and almost immediately Barton winced.

"Now it's coming back."

Then Phil shifted his grip from Barton's arm to his hand, so that his palm pressed against Barton's.

Barton sighed. "Ok, fading."

"Base, note skin contact with a magical mitigates the effect."

"What the hell was that, Coulson?" Barton asked.

"Some sort of spell, I'd guess. To keep non-magical people away." Phil mulled over the meaning of it. Clearly, the wizarding world protected itself. But if magical children were born to non-magical parents, someone must warn them about the spells, to get them into the magical district. "It looks like a boring office storefront, like an accountant's office, or insurance agency," Phil commented. "Which I suppose is another layer of protection - so boring as to be uninteresting."

"Wait, you see an office?" Barton turned to look back over his shoulder at the target. "Huh. A minute ago, it was boarded up."
Phil stared. "Are you saying you didn't see an office?"

"I'm saying when we started across the street, I thought we were crossing in front of a boarded up, abandoned store, like a burnt out quickie mart or something. Did you see an office this whole time?"

"I did. Base, please note, visual perception of the target changed with skin contact."

"Acknowledged, Mal'akh."

The spells were more complicated than Phil expected. Doctor Strange had warned them that the entrance to Cauldron Court was protected by magic, but that neither Phil nor Harry would be effected by it. Barton's reactions were very interesting.

"Alright. Base, we're heading in." Without relinquishing his grip on Barton, Phil moved them to the door. To him, it appeared to be a glass front office, although the windows were entirely covered by closed blinds, ridiculous given the lack of sunlight that would reach the windows, but not outside the every-day.

Of course, Barton had to open the door, as Phil's hands were occupied with him and with holding Harry. They might have to rethink their arrangement, Phil thought.

Inside looked like any sort of office building lobby, just like any number of hundreds of office buildings in the Financial District, which edged right up against their location. At the far end of the room stood a security desk in front of a pair of elevator doors. The desk was manned by a single elderly guard in a nondescript gray uniform.

"Morning," the guard said. "Can I help you folks?" His expression clearly displayed his suspicion.

"Good morning," Phil replied easily. "Just headed to the bank, for this one." He bounced Harry lightly.

The guards eyes flicked over them, lingering on Harry and on their joined hands. Phil wasn't about to drop his grip on Barton, since he had no idea what that would do, and frankly he was willing to let them appear as a family, if a rather modern one. Barton immediately played along beautifully, shifting a bit closer, his posture going from guarded to affectionate.

"First accidental?" The guard asked, and Phil chuckled.

"Summoned his bottle from across the room," He replied with a proud parental smile, glad that Doctor Strange had given him the right name for the magic Harry had used.

The guard laughed in turn. "Sure that's a common one. Starting his education account early, that's smart. Go on in." He gestured them by, towards the elevator doors.

"Ah, would you mind? My hands are a bit full," Phil asked.

"Phil," Barton sighed, playing up the embarrassment. "Really?"

Phil gave him a grin. "Who almost didn't make it through the door?"

From the corner of his eye, he could see the expressions on the guard's face flicker. So, 'blended' families weren't totally accepted by the common run. Two men, no problem, but one wizard, one non-wizard was apparently less acceptable. Still, the man rose obligingly. "Sure, no problem."
From his wrist, he produced a thin stick, crossing over to the elevator button and giving it a jab with the stick. "There you go."

"Thank you so much," Phil said as the doors slid open. They went into the elevator, Barton's grip tightening a bit at the enclosed space.

"Have a nice day," the guard called as the doors closed.

Almost immediately, the doors slid open again, and though they experienced no sensation of movement, some sort of magic had clearly occurred, as instead of the bland lobby they'd just left, they suddenly saw an open brick archway, framing a view of a bustling pedestrian open-air shopping area. Above the arch, a wrought iron sign proclaimed 'Cauldron Court.'

"Pressure's gone, boss," Barton muttered as they exited the elevator and crossed under the arch. Phil immediately dropped his grip on Barton's hand.

Phil began visually scanning the area, as did Barton. People crossed to and fro, heading in and out of various shops. About fifty meters down, Phil noted a cafe with street tables. Bookstores, clothing, housewares, all appeared perfectly normal, until one began to look closer.

The first stage of infiltration was to look like you belonged, and Phil was relieved to see that they did not stand out in any way. Luckily, only slightly better than half the people walking around looked any different than any other New York population. That sixty percent or so wore long flowing robes. Some were open front, revealing basically normal clothing underneath, but others were buttoned to the neck. Phil immediately noted that the older members of the population wore more buttoned up robes, whereas he saw several men about his own age wearing coordinating open front robes over perfectly acceptable suits. Remove the robe, and those men would look absolutely unremarkable on Wall Street. Younger people apparently generally forewent robes, if the college-aged trio of young women giggling around a cafe table were any judge. Very young children also didn't wear robes, though their parents seemed a mixed bag. So Phil's suit did not stand out in any way, nor did Barton's jeans and tac jacket appear particularly unusual.

Next, he noticed a casual use of magic, all performed by the wave of a stick, which he decided he should start thinking of as a wand. Mothers cleaned up their children with the wave of a wand, shopkeepers moved wares, the waitress at the cafe cleaned up a table and sent glasses and dishware flying, presumably back to a kitchen.

Then, he began to notice the goods on sale. While cafes and bookshops weren't terribly unusual, the books that moved by themselves or the frothy drinks that spilled over but never dripped certainly were. As they began to walk down the pedestrian mall, Phil spotted a classic apothecary, apparently selling both pre-made potions and ingredients, a pet store full of exotic animals that certainly were not legal to own in normal New York, if the owls were anything to judge by, and a joke shop advertizing a new line of 'transfiguring treats'.

"Sir," Barton interrupted Phil's observations. "Large white marble building at the end of the block."

"Yes, that's probably the bank. That's our target," Phil agreed.

"Yeah, sir? The two whatdyacallem's out front, like on a church, on either side of the brass door?"

"Gargoyles?" Phil could just make out the statues that had drawn Barton's attention. "I see them. What about them?"

"Sir, those aren't statues. They're... well, they're alive."
"What? Are you sure?"

"I just saw one of them shift his grip and weight."

Phil didn't doubt Barton's sight. From here, the two beings did indeed look like large gargoyles, armed with medieval halberds. As the SHIELD agents ambled casually closer, Phil realized they were armored and armed as guards, and they were definitely Not Human.

"Sir? What do we do?" Barton seemed nervous. He'd been prepared by the briefing to infiltrate a culture of magic users. He'd not been prepared for something that was not human.

"Parameters remain unchanged, Agent. Maybe they're just magically animated?"

As they got closer, Phil could see the story-tall brass door had some sort of verse engraved upon it. He quickly read it, a trite array of couplets warning against theft. Once they were within a few meters of the broad stairs leading up to the door, however, Phil could see that Barton was absolutely right -- the two beings on either side were absolutely alive. Their eyes followed the moving crowds on the street attentively. Their little trio was seen and assessed by both, one after the other. Unlike most people, however, Phil thought he saw the guard on the right note the pull of Phil's jacket over his shoulder-holster. If they were living sentient beings, they certainly weren't stupid about security.

Well, no way out but through, Phil thought, and approached the one on the right. "Excuse me, but we're new to the community. Is there a protocol for accessing the bank?"

His politeness drew a surprised blink from the creature, who exchanged a glance with his cohort. When it replied, its voice was surprisingly deep and gravelly. "You can go right in."

"Thank you." At a nod from Phil, Barton reached for the door, but before he could grab it, the creature spoke again.

"You should know, Muggle, that drawing a weapon in Gringotts will be treated as an act of aggression."

Phil hesitated. "Is that often a problem in the bank?"

"Drawing a wand in anger is forbidden by treaty and will be met with equal force. A gun will be treated the same."

Phil nodded. So despite the isolation of the wizarding world in general, at least the bank policies took into account both magical and non-magical worlds.

"Thank you again, we appreciate the warning, but we aren't intended to do anything other than open an account today."

The creature nodded, and then clearly dismissed them by turning its attention outwards again.

Phil met Barton's eyes, and signaled for them to proceed into the bank.

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't going to include the part with Agent Hand, but several people asked for the
fall out of that, and once I started writing it, I realized it worked better as part of this chapter, rather than as a separate stand-alone.

The next chapter is actually already underway -- It's amazing how productive sitting in a Laundromat can be....
The main lobby of Gringotts appeared to be a vast chamber, the sort of ultra-formal banking establishment one generally only saw in old world cities like Paris or London. Fluted marble columns supported the vaulted ceiling. Directly ahead stood a bank of teller stations composed of heavy dark woods and wrought iron bars. Bankers desks for more involved business stood behind this wall to the right and left, and behind those, Phil could see two hallways leading away into darkness.

But beyond the impressive scope of the bank's interior, what threw Phil the most were the employees. They were all of them creatures like the two guards outside, whereas all of the customers that Phil could see were humans, wizards no doubt.

A docent of sorts stood next to a podium to the right of the tellers, and clearly that being was directing wizards to the various bankers. Phil instantly decided to take a direct approach.

"Barton, do the bodyguard thing," he whispered, adjusting his hold on Harry and straightening his shoulders. Barton immediately fell into step just behind Phil, on the side he held Harry, and he dropped the 'boyfriend' mien for an air more alert and competent, much like the guards outside. Satisfied, Phil led the way to the docent.

"Yes?" the creature snapped. Obviously, polite customer service was not the norm.

Momentarily thrown, Phil raised a brow. "I wish to speak with a bank representative about an issue of some... delicacy."

"What sort of issue?"

Phil glanced around, to play up the secrecy angle. "Regarding provisions for Harry Potter."

The creature eyed Phil with suspicion, then Harry, then Barton. Finally, it snorted. "Fine. Gragnut!" The shouted second word appeared to be a name, as a second creature scurried forward. "Take these three to Accounts Manager Kragan."
Gragnut nodded, waving for them to follow. It led them to the left hand passageway behind the bankers' desks. Phil gathered that an Accounts Manager was more important than a Banker, and that the Potter name had something to do with being directed this way.

About seventy-five meters down the downward sloping hall -- wood paneled, windowless, lit by glowing balls that appeared to be globe sconces but were probably magical -- Gragnut knocked on a door. The sign on the door didn't bear any writing Phil recognized, so he guessed it might be the creatures' native language. At his shoulder, Barton stood tense and ready, clearly unhappy with the lack of clear escape routes.

A voice barked through the door at the knock, and their guide garbled something back. Phil had a good ear for languages, and this was not one he'd ever heard before. It sounded slightly like gargling rocks, and he wondered if human vocal chords could even replicate it. The voice inside replied, and their guide swung the door open.

The office appeared exactly like any executive office Phil had ever seen, though more towards the banker/investment or law end of the business spectrum. The conservative decor leaned towards dark oak and oxblood leather, with a tall broad bookshelf full of tomes behind the imposing desk. Between the desk and shelves stood yet another Gringotts creature, this one taller than both the docent and guide, though not as powerfully built as the guards outside. It wore a fine wool pinstripe suit perfectly tailored to its shape -- shorter than the average human, narrow in the shoulders, with bowed legs and disproportionately long arms. Its head was bulbous, with a long pointed nose and long pointed ears that extended perpendicular to the skull. A few fine wisps of white hair clung to its scalp. Given that the guide Gragnut had had dark wisps of hair, Phil guessed that this Accounts Manager Kragan was much older. He did note the strong long fingers on capable looking hands, with apparently an extra joint compared to humans, and thick claw-like nails. Perhaps the ornate dagger on a stand on the side of the desk was not merely decorative.

"Who are you?" Kragan barked as Gragnut swiftly retreated.

Phil paused. He liked to take a moment before negotiations began to size up his opposition. Although his initial impressions were still colored by his awe at meeting a completely non-human sentient species on Earth, he was still an Agent of SHIELD on a mission to make contact with an institution that had no reason to cooperate with SHIELD. He suspected the rudeness on the part of the Gringotts employees was meant to throw the customer off, or perhaps a cultural response to humanity in general. Once the door closed behind Gragnut, Phil decided the mostly-direct approach would be best.

"I am Phillip Coulson. I have recently taken custody of my young cousin here, Harry Potter. I wish to enquire if his late parents left any instructions or estate information with the bank regarding his care or legacy in the event of their deaths."
Kragan's stare grew sharp. "I will say this, you're the first to show up with the child in tow."

"I beg your pardon? Others have tried to claim the Potter Estate?"

It snorted and sat, waving Phil to do the same. Barton remained standing behind them as Phil arranged Harry in his lap. Kragan eyed Barton with suspicion for a few moments. "You're wise to bring protection, Muggle. Even in New York, there are those who may be interested in the Boy Who Lived."

"Why do you say I'm a Muggle?"

"You don't carry a wand. You do carry a gun."

"That doesn't mean I'm not magical. Just that I don't carry a wand."

Kragan leaned back in its seat and regarded Phil with growing interest. "You say you are both related to the boy, and magical? Others have made the same claim, but never had direct custody of the boy."

"I'm curious about these 'others' you mention," Phil commented idly. "Seeing as how Harry was left with his mother's sister, who then surrendered custody directly to me, legally, in the... 'Muggle' world, as you might say. So I have to wonder who had the gall to try and claim the Potter's estate."

Kragan waved a hand. "They've all been wizards, but none could claim the estate as Heir, given the fact that the boy lived, and none could claim Regency, since none had custody. Even Dumbledore himself failed the Regency test."

"Regency test?"

Kragan ignored the prompt. Instead, it pulled a small stone bowl and a crystal vial containing yellow liquid from a drawer. From a different drawer, he produced a large piece of parchment, and a rather old looking knife.
"First, we establish blood relationship. Without the child, we had to rely on family trees and such. The Supreme Mugwump tried to claim Regency due to his position, but the inheritance laws are clear. Of course, he didn't allow the Potter Will to be probated either."

Phil found that extremely interesting. This Dumbledore person had some sort of interest in Harry, yet he left Harry with the Dursleys, who would not have taken the child in if they'd had a choice, and hasn't checked up on him, according to SHIELD's ongoing passive surveillance of the Dursleys. Phil found such machinations around the placement and care of a child to be highly distasteful. He was starting to develop a dislike of this Dumbledore person. He didn't ask what 'Supreme Mugwump' meant, however, not wanting to display too much ignorance of the Wizarding world.

"Prick the child's finger and let three drops fall into the bowl," Kragan instructed, offering the knife. Phil hesitated; the thing looked like it hadn't been cleaned in centuries.

"Sir," Barton said softly. Phil knew he was offering one of his own knives, which would be clean and sanitized.

"Does it have to be that knife?" Phil asked.

Kragan cocked its head. "You brought your own?"

Phil nodded at Barton, who produced one of his fine double-edged throwing blades. It was also shorter than Kragan's knife, which made it easier to do careful work with.

"That's fine," Kragan said.

Harry willingly let Phil extend his hand over the bowl. Carefully, Phil laid the blade against Harry's finger, and very gently split the skin, so that Harry didn't even whimper. When three drops of blood landed in the bowl, Kragan added the contents of the vial. Silently, Barton handed Phil a Band-Aid for Harry from the backpack, and Phil covered up the cut with whispers of praise and cuddles. As the liquid swirled in the bowl, Kragan eyed Phil and Harry's interaction. Then it tipped the bowl over, pouring the liquid out onto the parchment.

Phil watched with interest as the liquid soaked into the parchment and began to glow. Soon, script spontaneously appeared on the page, proclaiming *Harry James Potter*. Fine lines began appearing leading away, and Phil realized he was seeing a magical family tree draw itself before his eyes.
Names began filling in, the vast majority of them with fine strikethroughs, which clearly indicated the deceased, since *James Charlus Potter* and *Lily Ophelia Potter nee Evans* both had them. All of the other legible names trailed away from James Potter. After about three generations back, more lines leading sideways appeared, displaying several clear, and therefore living, relatives. No lines led from Lily Potter's name. Phil suspected that non-magical names did not appear.

"Now you," Kragan said. "Three drops, right on the parchment."

Phil handed Harry to Barton, who spared a small smile for the child. Using the other blade of the throwing knife, Phil carefully nicked his left index finger, and three even drops splashed onto the parchment. Instead of staining the page, the blood soaked in.

A moment later, additional lines crept away from Lily Potter, blank spaces with a similar strikethrough for deceased appearing for her parents, up two generations, then across one and down two, until finally *Phillip Josiah Coulson* appeared. According to the tree, one of Phil's unnamed great grandparents was sibling to one of Lily Evans' unnamed grandparents, though Phil's name was no more closely related than any of the clear names on the Potter side. Doctor Strange's sorcery had worked. No other magical person appeared on the Evans' side of the tree.

"Here," Kragan pointed at the blank space connected sideways to Lily Potter. "Who is this?"

"Petunia Dursley, nee Evans, Lily's sister," Phil answered immediately. "Dumbledore left Harry on her doorstep in the middle of the night following the Potters' murder."

His bluntness surprised the creature. Kragan's eyes narrowed again. "Did she adopt?"

"No. Filed custody papers with all the right non-magical authorities, but did not adopt. I had a business trip to England this past spring, and decided to check in with family I hadn't spoken to in years." Phil chose this moment to fill in the background SHIELD had developed. "I hadn't even known that cousin Lily was magical. But it was clear that Petunia didn't want anything to do with Harry. She was.... a less than caring guardian." As usual, Phil's voice dripped with condemnation for the Dursley woman. He couldn't think of her without wanting to punch her in the face, despite being a woman. "When I realized she outright feared and despised magic, I offered to take care of Harry. She signed over her guardianship immediately, and I've filed all the correct paperwork for adoption."

"You changed his name?"
"On the papers that have been filed, yes. This is the first opportunity I've had to come to Cauldron Court since taking custody."

Kragan leaned back. "The child is direct heir of the Potter line. You cannot change his name magically."

Phil waved that concern away. "I wouldn't. I am familiar with what happened that Halloween. I doubt Harry will ever be known as anything but a Potter in the Wizarding world."

They both sized each other up for a moment. Then Kragan snorted in amusement. "I hope you pass the Regency test, Mr. Coulson. I suspect working with you will be very interesting." He turned to the shelves and drew down a wooden box black with age. He placed it on the desk and opened it to reveal a lump crystal, yellow and raw-cut, nestled in a bed of red velvet. "Take it."

"What will happen?"

Kragan eyed him. "The stone decides if you're worthy to be Regent for the Heir."

Phil still hesitated. But in the end, he really didn't have a choice. They needed the entree into the Wizarding world. He also didn't know if by refusing he'd create a situation wherein someone would try to take Harry from him, and that simply could not be allowed. He had signed all those papers in good faith, SHIELD forgeries or no, and to his mind, he had adopted Harry. This was his son, and if Harry was entitled to an estate of any sort, it was Phil's duty to take care of it. He reached out with his right hand and picked up the crystal.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then it grew warm in his grip, glowing, brighter than the parchment magic had. Just as the warmth was reaching the level of uncomfortably hot, the crystal vanished from his grip. Instead, the weight of a heavy signet ring appeared on his ring finger.

The ring was gold and squared off, the flat surface of it engraved with a rampant stag, with a thick line scored above it.

Kragan nodded with satisfaction. "Congratulations, Mr. Coulson. You are now magically, officially, Guardian of Harry Potter and Regent of the Potter Estate."

Phil sat again, accepting Harry back from Barton, who gave him a wild-eyed look, no doubt meant
to convey his amazement at Phil's daring, and the magic.

Kragan cleaned up the desk before sitting as well. The creature steepled its long fingers and regarded Phil quietly, waiting for his reaction to fade.

Phil held Harry close for a moment, then met Kragan's gaze. "Now that I obviously have the right to do so, may we speak freely?"

"Of course, Mr. Coulson." Phil noted that Kragan seemed much more pleasant now.

"Good. First of all, I wish to tell you... I have had no previous contact with the Wizarding world. I'm not even aware if there is a proper form of address for you."

"I gathered you were only marginally familiar with magic, Mr. Coulson. Frankly, I was amazed your name appeared on the Family Tree. The lack of wand is rather telling. As for address, simply my name, or Accounts Manager, will do."

"Not to be rude, but.. What are you?"

Kragan showed surprise. "Ah. You are completely new. Yet you knew how to access Cauldron Court?"

"I had some knowledgeable assistance."

"I see." Kragan drummed its claws on the desk. "I am a Goblin, Mr. Coulson. Gringotts is entirely owned and operated by the Goblin Nation. We are independent of magical governments, all governments in fact. Gringotts is completely autonomous, though by treaty we comply with certain Wizarding laws."

"Such as?"

"Generally those things that are sound business practice in the first place. We do maintain the International Statute of Secrecy, to hide the magical world from the non-magical. I can tell you, we do a great deal of business with the non-magical world, but entirely through shell corporations,
hired human representatives, and so forth. For example, if you wish to do business in the magical world, you can open an account with us using a wire transfer from your non-magical bank."

"I see." Goblins. Sentient non-human beings running an international financial firm, on Earth. "I'm sorry if this is impertinent, but.. have there always been Goblins on Earth?"

Kragan leaned back. "I suggest you open an account right away, Mr. Coulson, and then visit the book store. You'll find the History of Magic section most educational."

"Of course, my apologies. To business then: The Potter Estate."

"Yes." From the shelves, Kragan pulled a large leather-bound ledger. "At this moment, the Potter Estate is valued at just over one hundred and seventy-four thousand, three hundred and sixty-two galleons. That's just over one point seven million dollars in American currency."

Phil maintained his expression, but he heard a soft huff of surprise from Barton.

Kragan continued. "That's the value of liquid assets in the Potter vault, and includes gems and other valuables. It also includes Harry's educational trust vault, number 687. There is a townhouse in Origin Alley in London that is currently leased to a cadet line of the Greengrass family until 2099. The lease provides an annual income to the Estate of three thousand galleons. Some of the Potter wealth is tied up in various business enterprises, such as the Nimbus Broom Company. The family property is a large farm that was leased to the PureGrowth Herbal Supplies company in 1950. That lease expires in 2025. There is a manor house on the property, currently maintained by a half dozen bonded House Elves. You should check that as soon as possible - if the family bond was not established with Harry before the Potters' death, the elves may be struggling."

Phil's mental list of areas to research expanded with every sentence out of Kragan's mouth. "What about the house on the Welsh border where they were killed? Does that belong to Harry?"

Kragan shook his head. "That house belongs to Albus Dumbledore. The Potters didn't own it."

Alright, now Phil was incredibly suspicious about the events leading to the Potters' murder.

"There may be some other valuables loaned out that are not accounted for here. In addition, at least two keys are missing. I suggest you do a Recall in the vault as soon as possible."
"How would I do that?"

"I can have Gragnut take you down."

"Wait. The Potter vault is here? The Potters were British, shouldn't their vault be in London?"

Kragan smirked, which was a strangely appropriate expression. "Gringotts vaults are accessible from any Gringotts branch."

"How?"

"Trade secret."

Not only were there Goblins, but they were somehow able to bend space, making distant parts of the globe easily accessible. Or maybe they transported customers to an entirely third location? How did magical transportation work anyway? Phil considered asking, but doubted the Goblin would answer. Still, "Would it be possible, hypothetically speaking, to enter Gringotts in New York, and exit in London?"

"Hypothetically speaking, yes." Kragan chuckled. "Not many think of that, Mr. Coulson. Wizards are by and large incurious and illogical."

Phil took that to mean there was no law against it either. So in his first day, he'd just found a way around international travel.

Changing the subject, Phil said, "You mentioned that the Potters' Will had not been probated. However, as Accounts Manager, I assume you have some knowledge of what it contained."

"I did."

"I don't suppose you could clarify for me: was Petunia Evans Dursley named a possible guardian?"
Kragan's smirk turned toothy. "She was not. In fact, as Regent I feel free to inform you that the only named guardian for Harry Potter was his godfather, one Sirius Orion Black."

"I presume Mr. Black is deceased?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Black is incarcerated for allegedly betraying the Potters to their death."

Phil sat up, and Barton tensed behind him. Betraying Harry's parents? "You said allegedly?"

"There was no trial. Supposedly, the Potters were protected by the Fidelius Charm, which hides a secret in a single living soul. The secret of their location was allegedly entrusted to Sirius Black, who then allegedly told it to Voldemort, their murderer. Black was apprehended at the scene of a duel between himself and another wizard, Peter Pettigrew, which resulted in the death of Pettigrew and twelve Muggles."

A magical duel that killed thirteen? Phil would have Research hunt down any reports of the event. "No trial, for killing thirteen and accessory to two more murders?"

"I mentioned before that wizards are incurious and illogical, Mr. Coulson. 'Everyone knew' that Black was James Potter's best friend, so 'naturally' he was the secret keeper. However, the Blacks were a famously Dark family, and nearly the rest of the family was on Voldemort's side in the conflict. So Black himself must have secretly been Voldemort's right hand." The fact that Kragan was not human didn't impede Phil from understanding the sarcasm and contempt in the Goblin's voice. Kragan clearly doubted this reading of events, and Black's guilt.

"Would there be a way to put pressure on the British Wizarding Government to make them hold a trial? Surely better late than never."

"The Supreme Mugwump should have seen to it."

Now THAT was definitely interesting. A small child somehow defeats the villain that murdered his parents. The only named guardian conveniently disposed of in prison, without trial. The one who should have ensured a trial places the child with uncaring guardians, doesn't follow up, and then tries to claim Regency over the child's inheritance.

Something was clearly rotten in Denmark, Phil thought. He realized he was going to have to
become as politically savvy in the Wizarding world as he was in any other culture he worked with for SHIELD, if only to protect Harry from the machinations of others.

Chapter End Notes

Just two quick notes.
1) Phil's middle name is absolutely a nod to 'The West Wing'. I've had a bit of a crush on Clark Gregg since back then, and 1st time I saw IronMan, I cried "Hey, it's Agent Mike Casper!" ;-
2) Kragan is named for the Capt. Cragen on Law & Order: SVU, which is my husband's favorite show....
“Agent Coulson, please describe the journey to the vault.”

“The hallway gave way to a more roughly carved chamber, where we boarded a narrow-rail mine cart of the sort from the nineteenth century...”

“Agent Barton, please describe the journey to the vault.”

“... Okay, have you guys seen ‘Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom’?”

Although the mine-cart system they boarded for the trip to the Potter Vault had a distinctly roller-coaster quality to it, the braking mechanism clearly involved advanced engineering. Or magic. They came to a stop very smoothly, not even a hint of backlash. Both Phil and Barton had braced themselves for a jolt, Barton holding Harry close and securely, but Gragnut the Goblin simply pushed a lever, and the next thing they knew, they were stopped in front of a huge steel door.

“Potter Vault,” Gragnut announced, clambering out of the cart. It eyed Phil, its patience clearly thin.

Both agents waited. Finally the goblin sighed. “The Regent should put his hand on the door.”

Phil exchanged a glance with Barton before putting the hand with the Potter ring against the door. Immediately, the grind and groan of numerous heavy locks disengaging could be heard. The door then swung inward.

“First impressions of the vault?”

“It was a large space. Initially dark, but as we entered, more of those magical light sconces of the sort we observed in the Gringotts hallways began to light up, showing a large main chamber with at least two antechambers....”
“First impressions of the vault?”

“Big! Jeez, like a dragon’s cave, you know? Gold piled everywhere…”

One never saw “treasure” outside of movies, but that was really the only description he could find at the moment. Piles of glittering coins littered the floor around various fine furnishings and objet d’art.

Barton let out a low long whistle. Phil nodded absently.

“Who are you?”

The voice came out of the darkness. In a flash, Barton had a gun out and aimed as he shoved Harry into Phil’s arms. Phil ducked, defensively placing his body between the voice and Harry.

“Here now, what’s that? A muggle gun? Who are you and what are you doing in the Vault?” A flicker of motion drew their attention to the side, where a large portrait frame leaned against one wall. To their amazement, the figure depicted moved.

“Could you please clarify that statement, Agent Coulson? The portrait moved? You mean the frame?”

“No, I mean the individual depicted moved freely within the image, as if it were a video conference screen, rather than a painted picture.”

“What the hell?” Barton’s aim never wavered, though his expression clearly showed his bewilderment.

Phil glanced briefly back at the vault entrance, but their goblin guide apparently didn’t care that a gun had been drawn inside. It wasn’t even watching them.

He quickly turned back to the animated image. The large formal portrait, like ones from the seventeenth century, leaned against the wall in its gilt frame. The man depicted appeared to be in his seventies, dressed in Victorian era adventurers’ clothing, right down to the British pith helmet and knee-high boots. He had an impressive moustache, shot with grey, bristling below a pointy
nose adorned with wire-rimmed glasses. But he MOVED – he shifted his weight, he frowned and peered at them, and he tapped his fingers impatiently. It was unlike anything Phil had ever seen. He could even spot brush strokes in the background of the image, a gentleman’s parlor of some sort, with a fire in the grate between massive bookshelves, and what had to be a mounted dragon head over the mantle.

Before Phil could even get over his surprise at being addressed by a painting, a woman of similar age walked into the frame to stand beside the man. She too wore Victorian adventurer’s clothing, with a French pith helmet instead of British, artfully draped with netting, her skirts and petticoats at ankle-length, revealing tightly laced boots. Her hair appeared to be greying as well.

“Well? Speak up, man,” the gentleman demanded.

“You talk.” Barton had no issues finding his voice.

“Harumph. Apparently, so do you.”

The woman laid a hand on the man’s arm. “Dearest,” she chided. She stepped forward, as if closer to a non-existent camera. “No one has visited the Potter Vault in some time, and we do not recognize you.” Her eyes lit on Phil and Harry. “Oh! Oh, my. Is that my great-grandson?”

“What? Harry?” The man peered over his glasses at them.

At his name, the child squirmed in Phil’s arms. Judging that a painted picture couldn’t harm them, Phil straightened, letting Harry stand on his own, though Harry still clung to his leg. Barton also relaxed, dropping the gun.

“Our apologies,” Phil said politely, reaching for some sort of equilibrium. “We aren’t used to…”

“Are you muggles?” the man observed a bit snidely.

Phil hesitated. If an interactive animated picture could tell they weren’t used to magic, then they had a long way to go before being convincing.

“Theo. Be kind,” the woman nudged the man. “This is Theophilus Reginald Potter. I am Eudora Katherine Gump Potter.” They both nodded politely in the style of their times.

“Phillip Josiah Coulson,” Phil indicated himself. “I have recently become guardian of Harry.” He hesitated, before continuing, “My partner, Clinton Francis Barton.” He used full names, since that seemed to be the proper fashion, but he caught the flinch from Barton at the use of his middle name.

The painted couple were silent a moment, then Eudora said, “So, James and Lily?”

Phil added research on painted wizards to his ever-growing mental list, and replied “I’m sorry.”

“And no one else stepped up for Harry? Where is Black?”

“You mean Sirius Black?”

“Just so! James’s best friend, brother of the heart, Harry’s godfather!” Theophilus seemed incensed and insulted that someone other than who he had expected had appeared with Harry.

“Sirius Black is in prison, suspected of conspiracy with the dark wizard Voldemort in the murder of the Potters.” Phil delivered this blow as matter-of-factly as he could. The painted people gasped,
Eudora’s hand flying to cover her mouth. “I don’t suppose you have any insight into the validity of the charges?”

“Even if we did, portrait testimony isn’t valid before the Wizengamot,” Theophilus said bitterly.

“You are aware that you’re… portraits?”

“Of course we are! Good lord, man, do you know nothing?”

“Theophilus! Please!” Clearly, the gentleman was the firebrand and the lady his ever soothing helpmate. “My apologies, Mr. Coulson, but we’ve had no news for some time now. Our only other portrait is at the manor house, and no one has been there since James and Lily moved out.”

Sentient self-aware non-human beings were one thing. Sentient self-aware non-human interactive two-dimensional images was quite another. Phil struggled to keep in mind the mission, when all he really wanted to do was debrief these… people.

While he hesitated, Harry suddenly walked towards the picture. Barton went with him, crouched and ready to snatch him away. The boy raised a hand and placed it against the painting, which caused no reaction, just as if he’d touched a normal canvas. In the image, Theophilus knelt and put his hand against Harry’s, like they were on opposite sides of a pane of glass.

“Do you remember your Poppy, Harry?” the man asked with affection and sadness in his voice. “Your Poppy and Nana have missed you.”

“Charlus and Dorea’s portrait was destroyed in the attack,” Eudora explained softly, as Theo made silly faces at Harry. Harry’s giggle lightened the atmosphere. “James and Lily hadn’t bothered yet. It seemed foolish, to plan a portrait when they were still so young.” Her eyes met Barton’s, and at his questioning look, she explained, “We are echoes, Mr. Barton. A touch of the magic we had in life was imbued into the painting when it was painted. We know all of our lives until the painting was made, and we know anything we are told or witness to once we passed on and the painting active, but we cannot learn, create, or change. We are echoes.”

*Limited artificial intelligences*, Phil decided. They could retain information, but not learn or grow. “You mentioned another portrait?” he prompted.

“Yes, there is a second copy of this portrait at the Potter Manor. We can move between our own portraits, and we can move between images within a magical location. There are older portraits at the Manor, Theo’s parents, grandparents. Generations of Potters, but for the last two. James took the only portrait of his parents with them when they went into hiding.”

Harry tired of the picture and relaxed into Barton’s arms. The man stood, and he and Theophilus eyed one another warily, before Theophilus gave a sharp nod, as if in approval. “Now, please explain how you came to be Harry’s guardians?”

Phil reiterated the same backstory he’d given Kragan. Since he’d seen the goblin-created family tree, he knew the portrait couldn’t come up with anyone more closely related to Harry as a candidate, and the ring on his hand proved his qualifications.

He took the opportunity to question them on the actual requirements of Regency, and he was relieved to find out that the term, despite its implications of nobility or rule in the modern world, meant merely that he was entitled to act as the head of the Potter family in all things, to Harry’s benefit, until Harry reached his magical majority.

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“Many of the old pureblooded families like to behave like they’re some sort of aristocracy,” Eudora
explained, “but that’s a lot of folderol.”

“They do say the Princes…” Theophilus began, but Eudora waved him off.

“Revisionist nonsense! They made their money in farming, everyone knows that. They just tried to pretty up the history to try to lord it over the others.”

———

“Uh, despite what had to be an intense wish to grill them on everything they knew, Agent Coulson remembered to complete the Recall thing the goblin had recommended. That was... weird.”

———

“Simply put your hand on the plinth, there. It will automatically recall any Potter property not either in a designated vault or at the Manor house. The parchment there should tell where they came from.”

Phil did as Theophilus directed. A glow centered on the ring surrounded his hand for a moment, and then with an odd popping noise, a number of items appeared, and a scrolling text wrote itself across the yellowed parchment.

“A trust vault key reclaimed from the Office of the Headmaster at Hogwarts!” Phil exclaimed. “An ‘invisibility cloak’? Also reclaimed from the Headmaster’s Office!” He grumbled to himself over some of the items – household objects from a variety of private residences. Had the house where the murders occurred been picked over by sightseeing vultures? “James Potter’s wand! Lily Potter’s wand!”


“Ministry of Magic, Department of Mysteries.” Phil frowned. “Did we just rob an evidence room?”

———

“What happened next, Agent Barton?”

“Agent Coulson and the portraits discussed wands. It turns out that there are laws about them – goblins and other magical creatures can’t carry them, although there’s apparently a gray area around some conditions, like werewolves and vampires… which do exist, yeah, I was pretty surprised by that, too…”
“You don’t carry a wand?!?”

Phil froze. That was a slip, and from their expressions, a major one.

Theophilus’s eyes narrowed. “Perhaps you should explain your circumstances a little more clearly, Mr. Coulson. You wear the Potter Ring, therefore you are a wizard, yet you carry no wand?”

“Yes this an American thing?” Eudora asked. “I had heard there were a variety of magical traditions thriving in the Americas, but ….”

Instinctively equivocating, Phil replied, “My talents are… modest.”

Theophilus and Eudora exchanged looks. “Where did you attend school?” Theophilus demanded.

Barton watched Phil closely. Phil knew he was waiting for a signal to break off and abandon this contact.

Theophilus looked like he wanted to say something, but Eudora not-very-subtly stomped on his foot. “Mr. Coulson, you have enough magic to be Regent for Harry, that is enough for us. The Potters may be proud, but they are also practical.”

“Do these portrait people constitute a reliable intel resource, in your opinion, Agent Coulson?”

“I believe they could be used to improve our understanding of the history, cultural and political, of the wizards, but should not be relied upon as the sole source of intelligence.”

“Could the portrait be removed from the vault and brought to SHIELD for study?”

“I inquired, but evidently a location where magic is heavily used creates a field or atmosphere that’s necessary for the portrait’s continuing function.”

Phil conceded the intelligence that they did not live in one of the magical areas of the US, but close by. He allowed the portraits to believe that he lived and worked in the non-magical world because of his ‘muggleborn’ heritage and modest magical talent, and that contributed to his lack of knowledge of ‘proper wizarding ways’. Theophilus Potter muttered a few uncomplimentary things about Americans and ‘contemporary nonsense’, but Eudora was always polite and kind. Phil gathered she’d cooperate with anyone who’d care for Harry the way Phil and Barton did.

But eventually, they had to leave. Harry started to get fussy, and although there were snacks and juice boxes in the pack for him, those went only so far. Barton had kept him entertained while Phil conversed with the Potter portraits, who managed to assure him that no, they could not tell anyone else about the visit, yes, the house-elves were fine, and it would be no problem to visit the manor
sometime and lastly that unless they lived in a magical area, it would not be wise to take the portrait out of the vault.

“Do return soon, Mr. Coulson, Mr. Barton. We appreciate the opportunity to visit with little Harry as we can.” Eudora Potter curtseyed gracefully in the fashion of her time, ever the proper lady. Theophilus Potter bowed brusquely, allowing his wife to handle the niceties.

Phil glanced at Barton. The whole time he’d conversed with the portrait, Barton had quietly minded Harry, but also casually snooped around the vault. His report would be of great interest, Phil knew.

They had spent at least two hours in the vault, but Gragnut still waited outside the vault. The goblin made no comment as it ushered them into the cart to return to the New York Gringotts.

It was only the work of a few minutes to open a vault in Phil’s name, funded by a wire transfer from a SHIELD shell account that had been set up expressly for this purpose. The bank provided a small drawstring bag of coins – the weirdly named gold Galleons, silver Sickles, and copper Knuts – in cash from the account at Phil’s request.

Outside, blinking in the midday sun, Phil took a deep breath to mentally regroup. Barton tucked Harry into the carry pack, the boy patting the agent’s broad shoulders and enjoying the view from that height.

“Bookstore, sir?” Barton offered quietly.

Phil shook his head. There was simply too many impressions; he didn’t want to start gathering further intel without debrief, and some decision into what next. “Return to base.”
Barton stole a wand.

That one act changed everything.

Well, ‘stole’ is actually too strong a word. Barton slipped a wand out of a rack in the Potter vault while Phil had been discussing things with the portraits. He chose a relatively short one because it would slide neatly along his forearm, tucked under one of his knife sheaths up a sleeve. He reported this to Phil once they’d left Cauldron Court and reported back to base.

“I thought…Okay, I figured it might make it easier to deal with that place. I mean, the goblins were able to tell right away you weren’t carrying one, right? So carry one. Even if you can’t use it, it’ll improve your cover.”

Phil couldn’t deny the genius of that logic. Fury agreed. Technically, it wasn’t even theft, because Phil had authorized Barton’s presence, and from what they could gather of Goblin security, once Phil had taken over the Potter accounts, it was Phil’s responsibility to police anyone he brought into the vault with him. No one, not even the portraits, had noticed the pilfering. If their goblin guide had noticed, it certainly hadn’t commented.

The wand was made of very dark wood, almost black with age. It tapered only slightly from base to tip, with a strange design of intersecting lines carved into it. At only eight and a half inches, it fit easily under a forearm sheath, and R&D gleefully discussed adding a ‘wand slot’ to one of Phil’s knife holsters for future use.

However, it took only five minutes to discourage any experimentation with the wand. When Phil held it, he had a curious sensation of tingling up his arm, like constricted blood flow. He’d even waved it around a little, encouraged by R&D. A few odd sparkles had fizzed off the end when he’d done that, sickly green like a nearly dead Fourth of July sparkler.

“Perhaps because I’m not really a wizard,” Phil explained it away. No other attempts could cause any reaction, until one young scientist had the bright idea to bring Harry in to give it a try.

Looking back, Phil could see that it had been a monumentally stupid idea, not unlike giving a gun to a child. What happened next could only be inferred from reports of bystanders and forensics.

With an enthusiastic wave, Harry had apparently sent a blast of magic screaming out of the wand, which punched through the wall of the lab and into the next and then right out the wall of SHIELD’s building, sending cement and glass raining fifteen stories down onto a New York sidewalk. It simultaneously fried every piece of electronics – every computer, every diagnostic device, every security camera and microphone, every light-bulb, right down to the brand new cellphone in the Lead Scientist’s lab coat pocket and the calculator in a desk drawer – for a radius of thirty feet.

Agents and scientists in the neighboring lab had hit the deck with the initial blast, and thus were not visible from the room where Harry, Phil, Barton, and the science team assigned to Operation Witchcraft were operating. They were able to report what they heard next.

Within moments, two loud pops heralded the apparent sudden appearance of two men out of
literally thin air. A tech in the Witchcraft lab screamed “INTRUDERS!”

The two new arrivals were obviously wizards. Forensics was later able to locate two bullets tied to Phil’s and Barton’s side-arms lodged in walls. The lines of fire from where Phil and Barton each last remembered standing crossed, so both fired at one of the two wizards. The scientists in the lab next door reported hearing a third pop almost simultaneous with the gun fire, implying that the targeted wizard teleported out ahead of being shot. The scientists, out of the line of sight of the intruders, then reported hearing two shouted words, “Stupefy” and “Obliviate”, followed by a moment of silence, and another pop.

No one in the lab remembered anything from the moment Harry was handed the wand until one of the techs from the neighboring lab hit the alarm.

And the wand had vanished.

The fallout from this event was enormous. SHIELD went into lockdown. They had absolute proof of the destructive power of magic, but more, the ability of these wizards to infiltrate even the most secure locations. It was theorized that somehow, Harry’s use of the wand had caused some sort of alert or alarm within the Wizarding world. Wand usage was obviously monitored. Given the casual magic usage Phil had observed in Cauldron Court, the wizards must monitor for magic used outside certain geographic areas.

Unfortunately, the instant violent reaction of trained SHIELD agents meant that whatever normal procedure the wizards may have for such events was clearly not followed. When they contacted Doctor Strange, he confirmed that the words heard uttered by the wizards were spells, the first to freeze everyone painlessly in place briefly, the second to wipe their memories for a designated span of time. Strange theorized that the wizards were as startled at finding themselves in a laboratory – and shot at – as the SHIELD agents were by their arrival.

Horrified at the implications of this level of invasive magic, Fury locked down every element of the event to Level 10 classified. An intense discussion about next moves ensued.

Despite being unnerved by how easily the wizards had infiltrated SHIELD and how they’d altered his mind, Phil flatly refused to give up raising Harry. He also refused to give up working for SHIELD. If anything, he became more determined to understand the Wizarding world and learn to navigate it. Barton was an enthusiastic partner in this attitude.

Barton also had another idea, this one perhaps smarter than taking the wand in the first place: return to the vault and recall the wand. Two days after the event, Phil and Barton returned to Cauldron Court, again posing as a couple, though this time they left Harry with Sitwell back at base.

They managed to get by the security guard at the entrance by lucky timing of their arrival with another wizard’s. A simple “hold the door” got them into the elevator and out to the court.

By sheer good fortune, neither portrait observed from the painting as Phil recalled the wand. The parchment read “From Evidence, Accidental Magic squad, 2nd Wizarding Precinct, New York.”

Phil slipped the wand into his forearm sheath.

Barton shuffled his feet. “You’re not gonna leave it?”

“You original idea is still a good one. Obviously, to be taken as a wizard, I need to carry a wand.”
Barton pointed out the rack where he’d found it. The ornate stand had dozens of little ledges, neatly organized, though dusty. The wand in question had lain above a small plaque labeled *Dorea Black Potter*. “Harry’s grandmother,” Phil observed.

“Wasn’t Black the name of the fella who was supposed to take care of Harry?”

“You’re right. So Sirius Black is related to Harry as well as his Godfather.” The issue of Black was a loose end Phil mentally reminded himself to look into in the future. Phil took a moment in the quiet vault to assess a few things.

Eventually, Barton said, “Coulson? What are you going to do?”

Phil sighed. “I think it would be safer if we moved out of SHIELD headquarters.”

By February, Agent Services had located a brownstone in Chelsea, not too far from SHIELD headquarters, where Phil and Harry moved into a three bedroom apartment which took up the entire top floor. Of course, SHIELD acquired the property directly, converting the rest of the building into semi-permanent housing for other agents, allowing the agency to completely secure all access to the building, and ensuring that all the other residents were trained to handle surprise situations.

Phil also made many more excursions to Cauldron Court, buying books and other items for research, working with the Goblins on the Potter Estate, and perhaps most importantly, to a Wizarding government office, where he registered his address as a ‘magical residence’.

His cover as Phil Coulson: ‘muggleborn single dad’ expanded constantly. A smile and a line about ‘refreshing his memory’ got him cheerful assistance at the book store, to acquire all the beginner level magic texts that a child would see, including a few extras such as a book of fairy tales. Phil knew from experience that context was important in understanding a culture. He also found a few books on Wizarding manners, magical creatures, and a very interesting scholarly tome about theories in potion making which Phil himself found fascinating, and he toyed with the idea of experimenting with potions.

Another area of magic he felt drawn to was Ancient Runes. He’d had a passing familiarity from his own school days with earlier writing systems, but some were completely new to him, such as the Elder and Newer Futhark of Norse runes, and the Irish Ogham script. He realized the carving on his erstwhile wand was Ogham, and spent a painstaking few evenings trying to decipher them, before realizing he’d need to also learn Gaelic, which he simply did not have the time to do.

Unfortunately, while his work with SHIELD remained as important as ever, and his studies of the Wizarding world engrossing, there was one area of Phil’s life that was not going so well.

Harry.

He hadn’t realized how very involved and active Harry’s days had been when they lived in SHIELD quarters on base. A constant stream of fellow agents had kept Harry entertained and engaged. Now, it was just the two of them, in a large apartment. At first, Harry had been delighted to be with his Da all the time. But then Phil decided Harry needed to attend day care. A child
needed socialization with other kids, Phil knew.

Harry’s first day, the little boy was confused but game for the adventure. Phil walked away from large puzzled green eyes with a distinct sinking feeling.

Apparently, Harry understood when to pick his battles. He behaved beautifully through day care, according to the SHIELD-vetted and -approved staff. Shy with the other kids, polite with the staff, Harry had been very quiet and obedient. He’d greeted Phil with joy at the half-day mark, and happily spent the rest of the afternoon in his play pen in Phil’s office.

The next morning, however, was a different story. When Harry realized he’d have to go to day care again, he threw a temper tantrum the likes of which Phil had never seen before.

Harry kicked, he screamed, he wiggled out of Phil’s grasp, he took off his clothes so he couldn’t leave the apartment, he peed on himself, he hid under the bed, sobbing.

Bewildered, Phil had needed to call in late to work and then still ended up bringing Harry along to SHIELD, rather than take him to day care. Harry had been happy but subdued all day.

On the third day, Harry clearly thought he had won, because he behaved normally right until their driver pulled up in front of the day care. Then the screams and howls began. Phil made a mental note to put a letter of commendation into the driver’s agent file, as the man stoically endured not only Harry’s tantrum and Phil’s ineffectual attempts to calm him, but the sudden crack of the rear view mirror splitting from accidental magic.

Caving, Phil had the agent drive them into SHIELD. He also made an appointment at Psych, with one of the doctors who assisted in cases involving children.

A long conversation later, Phil learned that it was unlikely Harry would throw a tantrum in front of the day care staff and other children. The boy was terrified of being abandoned again. In analyzing the recent upheavals in their life, Phil realized that since they’d moved into the apartment, they hadn’t spent any time with Agent Barton at all. For whatever reason, Harry had interpreted the missing Agent as having ‘left him’, and as a result he was clinging even tighter to Phil.

A quick call down to Operations Command let Phil know that Barton had been on an ex-filtration mission in Pakistan, and was actually due to return the next day. Phil left a message for Barton to check in with him when his mission obligations were complete.

Friday evening, just as Phil finished wrangling something resembling dinner into a petulant Harry, the security buzzer for their apartment sounded.

Hitting the button, Phil answered, “Yes?”

“Hey, Coulson. It’s me.” Barton’s voice sounded cheerful but tired. Harry immediately perked up, staring at the intercom.

“Hawk!”

“Yeah, kid, I’m back. Buzz me up, Coulson.”

Phil put action to the words, and in minutes, opened the door to a tired but grinning Clint Barton. Harry shrieked in joy and ran for the agent, who gamely crouched and lifted the boy into his arms.

For his part, Phil suddenly realized how much he himself had missed the company of the archer.
He’d hardly noticed when Barton had left, too busy with the move off base and other missions, but now, looking at the man’s gray-green eyes and crooked smile, Phil felt a punch of relief and attraction he hadn’t felt for another person in ages.

Barton kissed Harry’s forehead and hugged him close. Then he smiled at Phil. “Missed me?” he teased lightly.

Taking a shot in the dark, Phil answered honestly. “Very much. Come in.”

Barton wasn’t called Hawkeye for nothing. He spotted the seriousness of Phil’s expression, but didn’t seem to know what to make of it. “Thanks, Coulson.” He entered the apartment, taking a good look around.

Coming out of base housing, Phil had very little input or opinion into how the apartment had been initially set up. He’d pulled a few personal items out of storage, a couple of framed vintage Captain America posters which he’d hung in the living room, his late mother’s ridiculous rooster-shaped cookie jar in the kitchen, but for the most part, the place was furnished a la Ikea and little more than that.

“Nice,” Barton commented. “New, huh?”

“Very new,” Phil confirmed with a sigh. “We haven’t had time to decorate yet.”

“What about those?” Barton indicated the posters.

“Vintage. Collectors’ items I’ve had for a while.”

“Why Coulson, are you a Cap fan boy?” Barton asked with a smirk.

Phil blushed a bit but didn’t respond. “Something to drink?”

“What are we drinking, little man?” Barton asked Harry.

“Milk!”

“Milks all around then, I guess.”

The transformation in Harry was remarkable. For the next hour the boy was cheerful and loving, with hugs for everyone, begging a story and a song from Barton at bed time, and getting into bed without a fuss. It was as if the temperamental monster of the last few days had never existed.

After Harry was asleep, Phil and Barton met by the couch. Phil broke out a couple of beers for them, and they settled in side by side.

“So, what did you need to see me about, boss?”

Phil snorted. “First of all, not your boss. I may be senior agent, but right now you actually report directly to Fury.”

“Get out, really? Why didn’t I know that?”

“Well, you may have a handler on specific ops to report to, but in terms of hierarchy, my position is more like … mentor rather than supervisor. Any time you’re sent on an op, Fury has approved it himself.”

“Okay, that’s cool. But still, what did you need me for?”
Phil let out a heavy sigh. “Harry.” He explained the temper tantrums, and the psychologist’s analysis, how Barton’s unexplained long absence had affected Harry. “I’m fairly certain that Harry believes we are his parents now, both of us.” He wasn’t about to share Doctor Strange’s interpretation of Harry’s point of view.

Barton looked flabbergasted. “Jeez, Coulson, I’m sorry! I never meant to horn in on your family here. I just… y’know, was trying to be the fun uncle or something.”

“Don’t apologize, Barton, I’m not upset about this. Obviously, Harry has imprinted on you, and I want to do what’s best for him, emotionally. And…” he hesitated, but decided being straight with Barton would be best. “I appreciate your company as well.”

“Oh.” Barton fidgeted a little, and then admitted, “You’ve been incredibly cool to me since that first day, Coulson, and I’ve really appreciated that too. Some folks, well, when I first joined up and started going through the training, some folks were a little snarky, y’know, all ‘who’s this merc, thinks he can be a SHIELD agent’ at me.”

Phil frowned. “I didn’t know that. Harassment and hazing is strictly forbidden at SHIELD.”

“Naw, wasn’t anything that bad. Just a little snobby, y’know? Until I showed ‘em what I can do.”

“That you did. The range master still has your first target up on the wall.”

Barton blushed a little at that. “Yeah, well, you were never like that. I always felt like you had absolute confidence in me.” Phil blinked at that, remembering his private reservations about the former mercenary’s motivations, reservations that had dried up and vanished long ago. Barton went on, “Meant a lot, is all I’m saying.” He looked away, picking at the label on his beer bottle.

“Friends, then.” Phil offered a hand.

“Friends,” Barton – Clint – agreed, shaking it. “Partners.”

“Co-parents,” Phil added with a sigh.

“Yeah, what about that?”

In for a penny, Phil thought, and offered, “Well, there is a third bedroom here. You could stay whenever you feel like it.”

Clint gave him a crooked smile. “I’d like that. I mean, sometimes. And, um, I don’t know about you, but I’m a pretty decent cook.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Stone soup style, but still, everything comes out edible.”

Phil nodded. He himself was an indifferent cook at best, relying heavily on things like ‘Campbell’s Soup 30-minute Meals’ recipes. “We can trade off, then, when you’re here. We should also try to coordinate missions, so one of us is with Harry. I can propose that to Nick, point out that it would have to be something extraordinary to require both of us to be away from Harry at the same time.”

“Y’know, it’s mostly going to be me sent away, since you’re usually running things. Maybe we should try to explain to Harry what we do, and why sometimes I have to go away. Maybe if I’d explained I had to go away for a bit, instead of just going, Harry would’ve been better.”
“You’re absolutely right,” Phil acknowledged. He took a long pull on his beer and leaned back, still exhausted from the stress of the last few days, but now much more optimistic. Clint shifted closer, nudging Phil’s shoulder with his own in solidarity.

“We’ll figure it out, Coulson.”

“You can call me Phil, you know.”

“Y’better call me Clint then.”

“Fair enough.”

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes.

“Oh, hey, Phil.”

“What?”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, co-parent.” The grin on Clint’s face was absolutely evil.

Phil had to set his beer down, he laughed so hard.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the lengthy time between chapters! I am always thinking about this, but Real Life (read: WORK) frequently interferes. Hope you enjoyed this one.
April 2003

Chapter Notes

Oh my god, I'm so sorry, Gentle Readers. It has been so long since I updated! Work and School have been terribly demanding, and because of that my Muse spent much of October hiding under the bed, sniffing. But now she's starting to stretch her legs again, and hopefully, this chapter will make up for much of the delay. Note some updated tags, briefly applicable, but there nonetheless.

This was a terrible idea, Phil decided.

Having Clint Barton move in was tantamount to shooting himself in the foot. Not that the man was difficult to live with – well, he could be a bit of a slob but he kept his mess to his own room and always helped clean up in the common areas. He also could cook, rather well, with a particularly deft touch when it came to meats on a grill pan. He had no problem walking into any bodega, grabbing things off shelves even when he couldn’t read the labels (the Lebanese grocer three blocks away had taken to explaining the cuisine of his homeland to Clint’s eager attention), and producing something as good as any fancy restaurant.

It’s said if you live in New York City, you either learn to cook really well, or never learn to cook at all. Clint definitely managed the former; Phil was firmly in the latter.

On top of that, Clint still had such a way with Harry, Phil sometimes felt like the outsider looking in on their special relationship. They both had histories of neglect, and made up for that with constant physical affection. It still amazed Phil how easy a former mercenary like Clint could be with the sheer volume of hugs and kisses Harry gave and received. Not that their relationship was entirely about cuddling. Clint took Harry to every possible park, teaching the boy how to climb like a monkey and balance high above the world on a jungle gym, how to swing hard and leap trustingly into Clint’s arms, never once falling, never once dropped. The circus skills Barton came by the hard way he passed on to Harry, by turning them into shared joy.

Even now, they were ‘cleaning’ – Harry perched easily on Clint’s shoulders, wielding a feather duster against the top shelves and central air vents, giggles floating through the air to Phil, who managed a salad while Clint’s previously-completed casserole finished baking.

For a moment, the sheer domesticity of the scene caused Phil to catch his breath. If only…


“So I see,” Phil snickered as the mass of feathers rained dust and down on Clint’s head.

“Here, monkey boy,” Clint swung the boy down, relieving him of the duster. “Go wash up.”
Harry ran out of the room. Clint turned back to Phil, and for one moment, Phil couldn’t breathe. *This is ridiculous,* he told himself viciously, turning back to the chopped veggies. *Do Not Develop a Crush on Clint,* he ordered himself.

“Hey, y’alright, Phil?” Clint paused on his way to put the duster away, resting a hand briefly on Phil’s back. Phil tried not to shudder.

“Fine. A bit tired, is all.”

“Yeah, hopefully Harry will fall asleep easy tonight. We could all use a bit extra shut eye.”

Phil hummed in acknowledgement, watching from the corner of his eye as Barton bent to reach the lower cabinet. *This is unfair.*

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Clint checked on Harry, chivvying the boy out into the kitchen so he could wash his own hands. Closing the bathroom door behind himself, he paused to lean against it. He couldn’t believe he’d had the courage to touch Phil like that. It was almost flirting!

So far, Phil had not caught on to Clint’s case of nerves. Clint had been to psych today, part of his ongoing therapy with SHIELD, which strangely he really liked. His doctor had the best manner, friendly but aloof enough that Clint could trust her assessment of his messed up brain, trust she wasn’t playing him or messing with him, because she wasn’t emotionally tied to him in any way. He’d never known how nice it could be, to just get that outsider’s point of view on the nonsense in his head.

But today’s session had been pretty difficult. Ever since he agreed to mostly live with Phil and Harry, for Harry’s sake, he’d been getting all twisted up inside, this time over Phil. At first, it was just about being trusted, with Harry and with their living space, even more so than when they were all on base. Then it got to be about Phil himself. When Clint caught himself admiring the way Phil’s old worn tee-shirts clung to his back and shoulders, he decided he’d better talk to the doctor.

That decision lead to a hard core conversation, one that Clint might not have ever had with himself, because when it came to his own heart, Clint was something of a coward. Some surprising realizations had occurred, and he’d spent several hours on the range after his session, sorting out his own emotions.

Now, of course, the awareness that what he was feeling towards Phil was *attraction,* he felt himself struggling to not get awkward around the other man. Everything Clint had ever seen made him believe that hitting on another man was a one-way ticket to the beating of a lifetime, and even if Phil didn’t react that badly, he’d still probably throw Clint out, and that would mess up Harry. The last thing Clint wanted was to do anything that would mess up Harry.

Not that he didn’t like women! He did, he really liked women. They were fun and soft and usually smelled better than men and they were a whole lot safer than men. He just never made a serious connection with any. Well, except for one. But he didn’t have THAT sort of relationship with her. And she was anything but safe.
Clint washed up and hurried back to the table before anyone came looking for him.

Phil breathed a sigh of relief that Clint never turned around and caught Phil eyeing his ass before going off to wash up. The man had a fantastic ass, that couldn’t be argued. He couldn’t stop himself from admiring Clint.

All his life, Phil knew he liked men and women both. He actually preferred men sexually and emotionally, because like all men, sometimes he found women a little baffling. Men were easier to deal with, he felt. His point of view – he’d had partners in the past imply that Phil himself was nearly impossible to deal with, but Phil didn’t think that was his fault on an emotional level. There was only so open you could be in a relationship with someone who didn’t have the appropriate security clearances. Yet even among men in their line of business, there was still a machismo that Phil found distasteful. He’d done little more than the occasionally hook up, male or female, in years, because sometimes other people were just so difficult.

But Clint slipped right into Phil’s life like his spot had been waiting for him. Even the annoying things were endearing: the propensity for purple, which Clint tried to pass on to Harry, the tendency to bypass mugs and go directly for the coffee carafe, things like that made Phil smirk rather than grumble. And the things Clint did that were unconsciously charming were hideously charming, terrible thoughtless moments of adorableness that Phil had to resist with all his strength, like Eskimo kisses with Harry or singing softly while folding laundry.

Phil knew Clint’s psych profile backwards and forwards. While Clint may make the occasional emotional attachment to men in positions of authority over him, the vast majority of those pseudo-parental figures had screwed him over royally. Fury worked very hard to make sure that if Clint formed any of that sort of attachment at SHIELD, it was firmly pointed at Fury, and that in no way would it appear that Fury would screw him over. One early issue Clint had in SHIELD involved male doctors; he was far more likely to open up, admit injury, or obey medical and psychological directives if they were given by a female maternal figure.

Psych had Clint Barton down as completely heterosexual. He’d even had a few one night stands with fellow female agents since he’d joined up. An agent’s sexual health being an important mental health factor, his psychologist inquired about it regularly. He never admitted to any sexual contact or activity with another male, not even the clichéd circle jerk as an adolescent. Of course, Clint Barton hadn’t had the standard sort of childhood that might have led to such experimentation, but then he certainly hadn’t shown any inclination to experiment since joining SHIELD, which was an aggressively egalitarian and accepting organization.

In fact, the only way to end up on the shit list at SHIELD was to turn traitor. Since its inception, SHIELD’s internal policies pretty much boiled down to “whatever keeps you sane”. Short of harming others and trying to achieve world domination, naturally.

Because he knew Clint’s file so well, Phil didn’t even consider flirting. While Clint hadn’t ever
shown a homophobic tendency, Phil needed to maintain the pleasant atmosphere in their home, for Harry’s sake.

But that didn’t mean the skin on his back didn’t tingle from the brief warmth of Clint’s touch.

Had Phil indulged in fatalistic ruminations, he might have anticipated what happened that next weekend.

A scheduling miracle occurred, and it worked out that neither Phil nor Clint had to work on an April Saturday of surprising warmth, just before the anniversary of Harry’s rescue by Phil. Therefore Phil decided the trio should make a day of it. Clint agreed and plans were made.

It was still a bit muddy for a picnic, but they did go to Central Park Zoo and some of the playgrounds. Many families were taking advantage of the suddenly nice weather.

While playing on a jungle gym with Clint and Phil, Harry paused to stare at another small family nearby. Phil glanced over to see the two mothers exchange a warm kiss. He looked at Harry, but the boy had gone back to trying to reach the top of the metal dome from the inside, Clint attentively poised beneath him. Phil shrugged it off.

Later, he noticed Harry watching another family, when the father kissed both little girls, and then the mother. Again, Harry watched, said nothing, and went on with his play.

Finally, as they were heading home, Harry paused to watch two young men exchange kisses as they sat on a bench.

“C’mon, monkey boy,” Clint said, distracting Harry. Phil noticed Clint had a faint blush, but not an expression of disapproval or disgust. Phil took that to mean Clint wasn’t bothered by the gay couple. “Let’s get dinner, yeah?”

“Pizza!” Harry cried, raising his arms to be picked up.

“Didn’t we just have pizza last night?” Phil said mildly.

“No!” Both Harry and Clint chimed together. “Had, um, chicken last night, Daddy!” Harry cried after Clint whispered to him.

“Maybe it was lunch?” Clint’s eyes rolled with humor as Phil continued to tease Harry.

“Daddy! Lunch was.. um..Hot dogs!”

“Hot dogs huh? I don’t know, seems like a lot of junk food…”

“C’mon Phil! It’s a vacation day, live a little.” Clint winked as he wheedled.

“Alright, we’ll get pizza.”

“Yay!” Harry and Clint both cheered. “Kiss!” Harry demanded. Phil leaned in and kissed Harry on the forehead.
“Kiss!” Harry turned to collect a kiss on the cheek from Clint. “Kiss!”

“You just got one!” Phil protested with a laugh.

“No! Daddy kiss Hawk!”

Phil froze. He realized now what Harry had been thinking about, watching the other families today. He and Clint both kissed Harry on a regular basis, but now Harry was realizing he should be seeing affection between his parents as well. Only Clint and Phil weren’t like that…

Before he could come up with a response, with a wicked grin Clint leaned in and planted the loudest most ridiculous smacking kiss on Phil’s cheek. “Mmm-waa!”

Harry laughed and hugged Clint, as Phil wiped his face. “Thanks.” Something must have shown on his face or in his voice, because Clint gave him a sharp glance. “Let’s go order that pizza.”

“Pizza!”

At home, dinner went the same as it always does, particularly when ordering pizza, which they did only once a month. Phil would cut a slice up in to little pieces for Harry, who’d much rather try to fold a slice in half and stuff it in his face, the way Clint did. But Phil won, because Clint as always deferred to his decisions regarding Harry. Phil himself tended to eat pizza with a fork and knife. He didn’t like grease on his hands. Between Clint and Harry, they went through nearly a full roll of paper towels.

Then it was time for baths and stories. But again, Harry threw them for a loop. He demanded his own kisses, and then demanded “Daddy kiss Hawk!”

Prepared, this time Phil leaned in and brushed a kiss against Clint’s cheek. To his amazement, the younger man flushed red in the dim lamplight. “Okay, good night,” Harry announced with satisfaction, snuggling into Padfoot’s fur.

Clint fairly bolted from the room as Phil patted the blankets into place, stalling a little. Obviously, Harry got ideas, and while it was okay to play along a little, it wouldn’t be appropriate to make him think his daddies were a couple. After all, what would happen when Clint went on a date? Not that he had in the two months since he’d moved in, but still. He didn’t think Clint would bring a woman home here, but explaining a night away as a date rather than ‘work’, which Harry had come to understand, would be a totally different paradigm for the boy.

Determined to talk it over with Clint and figure something out, Phil switched the lamp to nightlight mode and headed to the living room.

Clint was pacing back and forth. He still looked a little flushed, and clearly upset.

“I’m sorry about Harry,” Phil said.

The look of utter incomprehension he got told him that Harry’s antics had been the furthest thing from Clint’s mind. “What? No, I’m not…” Harry asked me the other day about families and showing affection, well, I mean, he didn’t say it like that, and I told him that hugs and kisses were normal. And things like yelling and hurting were NOT normal and he should tell me right away if he saw that.”

Phil blinked. “So you didn’t see him watching the families today?”

“Oh god, was he checking up on people? Good lord, kid’ll be a SHIELD agent before he’s
Phil chuckled a bit. Whatever was bothering Clint had nothing to do with being obliged to exchange kisses. “We should figure out a way to explain to Harry that we’re not like the other mommies and daddies.”

The look Clint gave him was sharper than his arrows. “What do you mean?”

“Well, he’s going to expect to see us hug and kiss each other now. And we don’t.”

“Oh.” Clint fidgeted, and then quietly offered, “We could.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Clint’s face began to heat again. “I mean, we could kiss. If… if you wanted.”

“Clint, you’re straight.”

“Um… well. Maybe.”

“Maybe?” Phil had to sit. So it was about kisses. Or rather, about Phil. Or … what was this about? “You may want to explain to me what’s going on in your head right now. I’m a little bit lost.”

“Um, okay. So…” After several attempts, Clint groaned and flopped onto the couch next to Phil. “Okay, shoot me now! This is hard.”

Biting back the obvious joke, Phil said, “How about this? I am mostly gay.” Clint shot up to sit staring at Phil, wide eyed. “Are you familiar with the Kinsey Scale? It’s a measurement from zero to six, zero being totally straight, six being totally homosexual. I personally land around high fours, low fives. I prefer to be with men, for both sex and relationships, though I do enjoy sex with women occasionally. Technically that’s bisexual” Clint’s eyes were nearly round with shock, probably that Phil could talk about it so calmly. “Until this minute, I assumed you were a zero, completely straight.” That should be enough of an opening.

Clint swallowed hard and nodded. “I know. I’ve… I’ve only been with women, but….sometimes I wondered. And sometimes I would get, like, really really attracted to a man, but I never…”

“I imagine there was a certain amount of risk involved,” Phil observed as an out. Sometimes he forgot how young Clint was when he became a mercenary, and with an abusive background behind it, any tendencies that were outside the norm were probably pretty suppressed.

“Um, yeah. It was risky, alright. And um, well, sometimes I’d think it’d be okay, and then they’d say something that made me think it would be a bad idea, like they’d call someone a fag, and I figured that was a pretty good sign to stay away.”

Phil idly wondered how good Clint was at flirting really. He never seemed awkward around women. “And… are you saying you’re attracted to me?”

Clint laughed. “Hell yeah. Looked in the mirror lately?” It was Phil’s turn to blush at the openly appreciative look Clint gave him. “But I mean, I LIKE you too, you know? It’s not just…. I mean, it’s…”

Having mercy, Phil interrupted. “Is that what’s been bothering you this week?”
“Ugh, you noticed? I figured you’d seen the report for Psych and just didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Clint, okay, first of all, Psych isn’t spying on you or anything like that. Secondly, I haven’t gotten a report from them since you moved in. I told Fury if we were going to cohabitate for Harry’s sake, it wasn’t fair to keep acting like I might be your supervising officer or handler. Those reports go exclusively to Director Fury, and I know for a fact these days he only has time to skim for the red flags.”

“Red flags?”

“Homicidal, suicidal, words that mean something’s affecting your ability to be an agent. Your sexual orientation is about the last thing Nick Fury is going to waste time caring about.” Clint chuckled weakly as Phil went on. “Even if I was seeing reports from Psych, I wouldn’t invade your privacy by bringing anything up! I’m your friend, Clint. If you want to talk to me about something, then we’ll talk. If not, well, I’m not pushing.” He shifted, turning so he faced Clint across the couch. “But since you’re admitting an attraction for me, I can admit that I’m attracted to you too.”


“Well, for starters, do you want to try a kiss for real?” Phil offered, trying to make it sound like no big deal, when actually, the idea this gorgeous man was attracted enough to risk making a move, something he’d never done before in his life, was pretty flattering, and Phil could feel a curl of anticipatory arousal in his gut.

“Yeah. Yes, we can do that.” Clint waited attention on Phil like he was waiting for orders.

With a laugh, Phil reached out. “C’mon.” He brushed his hand lightly along Clint’s neck before cupping the back of his head. Gently, he drew Clint in and brushed their mouths together. Clint gasped, lips parting, and Phil took full advantage, pressing close and tilting their heads for a long warm kiss.

Clint made a soft noise through his nose, not quite a sigh or a whimper, but clearly a surprised and positive reaction. His hands clasped Phil’s arms, pulling him closer. By the time the kiss had progressed to tongues, Clint had practically pulled Phil into his lap, his arms like iron bands around Phil’s body. He still let Phil control the kiss, but definitely didn’t want him getting away. He relaxed into the kiss, realizing there was little difference between kissing a man versus kissing a woman, and Phil appreciated the skill improvement that came with it. In addition, Phil could feel Clint’s arousal against his thigh, much like his own. In fact, they’d have to stop soon.

Phil drew back, and the blatant noise of protest Clint made caused him to laugh. “Clint. C’mon, we can’t get too carried away.”

“Why not?”

Phil sighed. “This isn’t like para-training. You don’t just jump.” He shifted, getting comfortable but still touching, pressed close against Clint’s body. “You just figured out it’s okay for you to be into men THIS WEEK. Give yourself some time.”

“Wasn’t JUST this week,” Clint grumbled. “I mean, it’s been off and on since I was a kid.”

“Yes and when was the last time you felt safe enough to say something about it?” At Clint’s disgruntled face, Phil went on. “Trust me, if you’re interested, we’ll get there eventually.”

With a pointed look at his crotch, Clint snarked, “I’m interested alright.”
Phil raised a brow and gestured at his own erection. “I am too, but again, we don’t have to go all the way right away.” Clint giggled and Phil sighed. “Maybe that was a bit high school, but it’s true. For now, let’s call it a night.”

“Okay,” Clint conceded. He stood, offering a hand to Phil. But once both of them were on their feet, he pulled Phil close for another quick kiss. “All I’m gonna do is go in there and jerk off thinking of you.”

“For the first time?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you have some catching up to do.” With that parting shot, he left a startled Clint behind and went to bed.
For the next few weeks, nothing much changed in their day to day life, but at the same time it felt like everything changed. Clint was as touch-starved as Harry in some ways, and now that he had permission to touch, sometimes it seemed like Phil had a Clint-shaped blanket over him. Clint would lean against him while they worked in the kitchen, or sit snugly beside him on the couch. TV time turned into a puppy pile of Phil, Clint, and Harry now all touching each other in some way.

Harry seemed delighted. For the first few weeks he would demand they kiss, clapping his hands. Luckily, he only did that at home. After a while, though, he relaxed into contentment. All was well in Harry’s world.

Clint came alive, in Phil’s opinion. He would flirt, sneak kisses and caresses, drop innuendo and look up at Phil through those frankly ridiculous eyelashes. It wasn’t as if he tried to play it up, but rather as if he’d been given the freedom to unleash an aspect of his personality long suppressed.

Phil felt himself opening up as well. He’d always had a tendency towards straightforward communication, but now he learned to banter and tease, to flirt instead of single-mindedly assessing interest. It bled over into his work as well, though his natural inclination to deadpan delivery sometimes went over the heads of his co-workers.

It made him happy that Clint always got his jokes.

One evening about a month into their budding romance, Phil decided it was time for the next step. Until then, he and Clint has mostly made out on the couch, with some frottage and one memorable exchange of hand jobs. They couldn’t enjoy every evening together: they did work for SHIELD. Clint went out on three minor missions in that time period when he was required to spend a night or three away from home. Phil never realized until then how much the absence of someone could affect him. But now they had a hopefully uninterrupted weekend ahead of them, Harry was already in bed, and Clint was lying on the couch already shirtless and breathless from twenty minutes of necking. He’d let Phil control the progress of their physical relationship, partly from inexperience and partly because he apparently liked letting Phil run things.

Phil looked down at Clint and decided that patience might not be a virtue in this situation. Time to get horizontal. Maybe naked. With another kiss, he offered, “Want to move this to the bedroom?”

Clint’s eyes widened briefly, and then he grinned. “Absolutely!” He practically lifted Phil to his feet, bouncing up afterwards. His enthusiasm was gratifying, and Phil couldn’t resist giving him a fast hard kiss before leading the way to his bedroom.

Clint didn’t sleep in the third bedroom ever again.
Clint and Phil were both sent on SHIELD missions, though never together. On occasion, Phil would have operational control from Base for a mission where Clint was in the field. During those missions, Phil and Harry would return to SHIELD NY, allowing Harry’s faithful fan-base to take sitting duties. Jasper Sitwell in particular liked to find new educational computer games to play with Harry. Maria Hill somehow managed to still terrify first and second level agents, even with Harry riding piggy-back.

And of course, no-one would ever admit witnessing a rare occasion of Director Nick Fury playing with the boy.

Unfortunate mission timing put Clint overseas in the week leading up to Harry’s third birthday. He wasn’t due back at home base before August 1\textsuperscript{st}. Clint had been thoroughly annoyed by the mission schedule, but Phil wasn’t concerned. Harry was still too young to associate a particular date with his birthday, Phil insisted, and so they’d simply celebrate when Clint got home.

Not that they didn’t miss him. Both Phil and Harry were always somewhat subdued when Clint was away. Phil knew that Clint and Harry missed him when he was the one on mission, so Phil didn’t dwell. Instead, because he was on limited assignment due to Clint’s absence, he took the time to research more of the magic books he’d acquired in Cauldron Court.

Doctor Strange had implied that there was an outside chance that imbuing Phil with part of Harry’s magic would give Phil some sort of magical ability. From his research he came to understand that most magic was simple – minor hexes and charms, even potions, required less native skill and power, and more the use of the magically imbued materials in the correct ways. The right words and motions of a charm would work primarily based on the wand, it seemed to Phil.

Since Clint had essentially moved into Phil’s room, the third bedroom which had been Clint’s was now available space. In fact, sleeping - just sleeping - together turned into one of their favorite things. Phil had forgotten the simple comfort of waking next to another warm body. Although mission specs sometimes required shared sleeping space, it had none of the comfort of home and affection. Now, on slow mornings, Phil could wake up and roll over, press his nose against the back of Clint’s neck and breathe in his scent. Clint would mutter something, and pull Phil’s arm over him like a blanket, and they’d both drift off again together.

Rather than revert the third bedroom back into storage, Phil decided to turn it into a practice room for magic studies. Keeping in mind Doctor Strange’s warnings about magic and physics not mixing, Phil removed as much electronics as he could, right down to disabling the outlets and light switches and removing all the light fixtures. The room had one window, and he hung a simple sheer curtain over it, so they could have both light and privacy. A basic wooden desk, practically just a table, and chair were moved in, along with wooden shelves and a simple freestanding pantry cabinet. It was not a big room – very few apartments in New York City had big rooms – but it was large enough that when Harry needed study space, a second smaller desk and chair would still fit.

Phil intended to use some candles or oil lamps for light, but couldn’t bring himself to do so once all the electrical lines were disconnected. It seemed too risky to have open flames in a room where no smoke alarm could be installed. His research told him that magical residences had charms on them to prevent fires, but that magic seemed totally beyond him. Instead he found a cheap battery operated lamp and if that got fried, he’d just buy another one. He still kept an extra fire extinguisher in the cabinet, just in case.

He didn’t expect to make any progress in the wanded magics, though he did diligently try everything in the first few chapters of “The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1” and “A Beginners Guide to Transfiguration”. His only success was a weak and wavering light spell with the
incantation “Lumos”, cancelled with “Nox”, and frankly not as useful as a decent penlight or Maglite. He couldn’t cause any change to a wooden match, nor could he levitate a piece of paper. The “Magical Theory” text didn’t help much, not having much in the way of actual science in it. It mostly discussed bloodlines and how some wizards exhibit special talent in specific areas, and how levels of magical power are scaled, and other in-community concerns that appeared to have little serious study behind them. Even the chapter on Magical versus Muggle seemed dismissive and not well researched. He supposed if one were fully immersed, the book might be of use, but it certainly didn’t have any hints of how to maximize usage of little talent. Maybe if they developed a good partnership with a fully qualified wizard someday, Phil would inquire about tutoring – it was possible there was something he was missing from just reading the books.

Having eliminated wand-usage from his immediate future, Phil turned to the two areas of magic that had interested him from the first: Runes and Potions. He had read through the first grade potions text, which puzzled him because it lacked context for some of the instructions, but again, perhaps that was left to the teacher to explain. The supplementary book he’d purchased, “Theories in Potions Development” by one S. Snape, Potions Master, with a London publishing address, was much more promising, and though again it seemed to skip some basics. Still, it started with outlining a guide for potion experimentation that Phil immediately recognized as basic Scientific Methodology. It seemed S. Snape may have either grown up in a non-magical household, or at least had the wisdom to investigate non-magical science and incorporate it. The dry narration of the text when relating a particularly explosive failure on occasion made Phil chuckle as well. Phil found himself making notes, questions arising from some of the assumptions in the text that he’d have to investigate further out of sheer curiosity.

Since he was mainly reading for now, he’d settled into the living room couch while Harry played on the floor. Tomorrow was Harry’s birthday, but Phil was careful not to make any allusion to it, as they would wait to celebrate when Clint returned from his mission.

“Dad! Bird!” Harry pulled on Phil’s pant-leg, pointing to the window. Due to the summer heat, the window at the fire escape was open, and outside Phil spotted the bird that caught Harry’s attention. The Red-Tailed Hawk, colored richly russet and brown, with creamy breast feathers, perched on the escape railing, staring intently in at them. It took Phil a moment to realize the bird had a tube of something that appeared to be paper tied to its leg. Concerned, he lifted Harry to sit on the couch.

“Wait here, okay?” Harry nodded, and Phil crossed to the window. The hawk never moved, even as Phil came right up to the screen. Judging the bird needed help, he slowly unlatched the screen. But when he set it aside, intending to step out onto the escape, the bird jumped right to the window-ledge.

Startled, Phil jumped back, earning himself what had to be an eye-roll from the bird. It balanced on one leg, sticking the burdened one towards him. Cautiously, Phil reached for the tube, and the instant his fingers touched it, the string he could now see tying it to the bird’s leg unraveled, and the hawk hopped back out the window to the rail, and then flew away.

“Magic,” Phil realized.


“It looks like it, huh champ? Let’s take a look.” He could now see it was a scroll of parchment, with a wax seal. He couldn’t make out whatever symbol was embossed in the wax, but just below the green blob was written Phillip J Coulson, Reg.Potter

Realizing it must be from Gringotts, Phil broke the seal and unrolled the parchment.
To: Phillip J Coulson, Regent, Potter Estate

From: Kragan, Potter Account Manager

Date: July 30th, 2003

Regent Coulson,

I am writing to inform you of two items of interest to the Potter Estate.

First is regarding an attempt by a Certain Person to access the Potter Accounts. On July 29th, at our London Branch, one Albus Dumbledore, chief of the British Wizengamot, and Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, did request to withdraw a sum of thirty thousand, eight hundred Galleons from the Potter Educational Trust vault, to be converted to Muggle currency. To give you a better idea, that amount would convert to nearly one hundred and fifty-five thousand British Pounds, or two hundred and fifty thousand American Dollars (rounding based on the current exchange rates of Galleon to Pound to Dollar). This would have represented roughly a quarter of the trust vault principal, though still a fraction of the overall value of the Estate.

Our Teller rightly demanded the vault key. When the Supreme Mugwump couldn’t produce it, the Teller asked for any proof of permission to access any Potter vault. Again, the Supreme Mugwump could not produce any proper authorization for access. He insisted he’d been given verbal permission from the late James Potter, but the late Mr. Potter would have known to provide documentation of the permission granted. Therefore, our Teller denied the withdrawal. When the Supreme Mugwump made to argue, he was reminded of the Treaties in place, and reminded that violation of those treaties would be most inconvenient to him, as Gringotts Management would certainly make it fully public, thus damaging to his reputation and possibly his positions. The Supreme Mugwump then demanded a meeting with me as the Account Manager, but I was happily ‘unavailable’ for consultation.

Secondly, there is currently an advertisement posted at the local bookstore in Diagon Alley, London, announcing the impending publication of a series of “Harry Potter Books”. Our agent, upon inquiry, found they are meant to be the ‘adventures of the boy wizard’, and the storybooks are aimed at young readers. Because you have not indicated any knowledge of these publications, we are writing to bring them to your attention. For a small percentage fee, Gringotts would be happy to assist in contacting the publishers regarding collection of Mr. Harry Potter’s rightful royalties for the use of his name and personage in these publications. If you do not wish to authorize this, Gringotts would also be happy to represent Mr. Potter in any lawsuit to prevent publication going forward.

The only concern with either business decision would be the likelihood that your position as Regent of the account could be made public, should the publishers try to contest the injunctions. It is the opinion of those versed in Wizarding Laws that quietly requiring a share of the profits through royalties, perhaps even an interest in the content of the publications, would cause the least amount of attention to fall on the Estate and its management. In addition, this would set a precedent that the Estate is not being left idle and profitless even though Mr. Potter is still a minor. His considerable celebrity, even in absentia, could prove a lucrative source of income in the future, such as through additional royalties or endorsements.

If you wish to discuss anything in person, I am at your disposal through the New York branch.

Signed,
Well. Maybe for Harry’s Birthday they’d visit Cauldron Court.

While Phil thought about the implications of this Dumbledore trying to take so much of Harry’s money, and Harry admired the parchment, the wax seal, and the spindly handwriting of the letter, Phil’s phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Agent Coulson, this is Ops Command. I have a call for you from London Ops, may I patch it through?”

“Go ahead. This is Coulson, authorization Papa-Juliet-Charlie-Five-Seven-Oscar-Three-Eight.”

“Confirmed, Agent Coulson. This is Agent Florence Clark-Davies in London, on Operation Watcher.” Operation Watcher was the code name for the bi-annual passive surveillance op over the Dursley residence in Surrey. “We had a bit of activity today, and I thought you should be notified immediately.”

“What happened?”

“When the operation recommenced yesterday, it was discovered that a home on Wisteria Walk a block away from the Target had come on the market. It already had an initial offer on it. An elderly woman had offered to pay the asking price in full, in cash. We immediately began a background check on her, but today, when she was supposed to arrive for closing with a bank check, she arrived to say she could not buy the house in cash, and the deal apparently fell through. We discovered through our background checks there was no way she could have had the assets to purchase the house in cash.”

“Were you able to do a full work up?”

“That’s just it, sir. There are some really strange holes in this woman’s background. For instance, she’s old enough to not have attended university, but we did find records for a public – sorry, you’d call it private, secondary school. It’s a boarding school in the North of England. Interestingly enough, the school never seems to have more than a thirty students at a time, and although they claim to be charitable finishing school, their budget is entirely made up of nearly untraceable private donations. In addition, there are no primary school records for her or any of the other students we were able to tie to the boarding school. Then, her deceased husband’s records are nearly as spotty. He’s listed as having died just three years ago, from a heart attack. He apparently had absolutely no publicly accessible employment records.”

“Name?”

“Arabella Figg, nee Filch. Seventy-two, widow. Supposedly born in London. That’s another thing – every single schoolmate of hers we could dig up had simply ‘London’ as place of birth.”

“Are you tailing her?”

“Yes, sir, we have an agent on her. She’s traveling by train back to London right now.”

“Keep me informed. Wait. What was the asking price on the house?”
“One hundred fifty-four thousand pounds, sir.”

Phil shuddered. “Acknowledged. Keep a sharp eye on the target, Agent. It sounds like it could be heating up. Coulson out.” His grandmother once told him that instincts were ways you knew something without really knowing. In this case, every instinct in Phil told him that the attempt to purchase the house and the attempt on Harry’s account were connected. This Figg woman had to be connected to Dumbledore. For whatever reason, the wizard thought he had control over Harry and Harry’s estate. At least at this point. Obviously the wizard assumed Harry still resided with the Dursleys. There were still several days left of Operation Watcher. With this activity, they may have something more to run with soon.

Clint Barton yawned widely, stretching his arms over his head and causing the young AS agent leading him through the London base to giggle. Clint was pretty beat. He’d spend seventy-two hours up a tree in Libya, with a parabolic mic pointed at the Libyan Defense Secretary’s office. He hadn’t even known why, just listened and recorded while the man had several meetings and a tryst with a general’s wife, then packed up and slipped out of the country, catching transport from Cairo to London. He’d get about four hours on the ground here, then hop another transport home, arriving early morning local time on August 1st.

He didn’t worry about the Libyan op. If he didn’t have to shoot someone, he never really worried about why SHIELD wanted someone bugged, or someone watched, or something stolen, or on one interesting occasion, something planted. It was only if SHIELD ordered him to take a life that Clint required every single nuance of reasoning laid out for his examination. If he was going to carry that red mark on his soul’s ledger, he wanted to know why.

All he worried about now was finding a bed for some shut eye before the flight. As they passed by Ops Command, he noticed a bunch of activity. Pausing to snoop, he asked his guide “What’s up with them?”

She glanced over and shrugged. “Some regular surveillance detail finally getting some action. It’s mostly above my clearance, but rumor has it some big-wig in New York ordered it.”

“Heh,” Clint grunted. He wondered whose op it was. Probably Hand. She was the type to get everyone’s panties in a bunch over some basic face-trace. He followed the young woman to a private room and thanked her politely before shooing her away. He only hesitated long enough to drop his gear, detach his holster, and kick off his boots before face-planting into the bed.

It felt like only seconds had passed before a loud thumping on the door woke him. Clint blearily rubbed his face and checked his watch. Two and a half hours. That’s barely a nap, he grumbled to himself, before rising to answer the door.

“Alright, alright! What is it?”

The Level Two blinked at his hostility. “I’m sorry sir, but you need to come to Ops Command immediately. Director Fury himself is requesting you.”

“Jeez. Alright, hang on.”
Moments later, Clint followed the kid – okay, the Level Two was maybe a year younger, but after seven years as a mercenary, all these clean cut baby agents seemed so damned young – back to Ops. The operation he’d seen early was still hustling, but instead of joining them, Clint was led to a private communications bay. Director Fury’s face was already up on the video conference, and Clint thought irreverently that the camera did nothing for the man.

“What’s up, Boss?”

The corner of Fury’s mouth twitched a moment. Clint mentally marked it as another win for him. “Barton, I’ll tell ya right now, you’re going to hate me for this.”

“Shit. I’m not headed home, am I?”

Shaking his head, Fury replied, “I’ve got you on a transport leaving in about forty-five minutes. They’re scrambling gear for you now.”

“What’s the mission?”

“There’s a mission laptop being loaded for you, briefing’s in it.” He hesitated, then continued, “This one’s a T.A. and E., Barton. No two ways around it. Everything you’ll need is in the laptop, and you’ll have satellite link ups to surveillance, traffic cams, you name it, you got it. This one’s gonna be tough. Barton, I need you to do everything you can to eliminate the target, but I also need you to be more careful than you’ve ever been before. This one’s a Priority Alpha threat.” Jeez, Clint had never heard of anyone being labeled a Priority Alpha threat outside of training. Sure, they covered that sort of thing, but purely theoretically. Fury’s over-sized face tilted forward towards the camera. “I know you got a good thing going here, Barton, with Phil and Harry and all of SHIELD. I need you to remember that.”

Clint blinked. “Sir, I’m always going to do my damnedest to come home, you know that. Will I have clearance to call the op if it looks like I wouldn’t?”

“Yes, absolutely. We can always take another run at this one. This is just the best shot we’ve had in a long time.”

Clint snorted. “Sounds like a holy grail, sir. Who’s the target, the Winter Soldier?” Clint thought Fury would be smart enough to know the mythical Russian assassin was just that, a myth.

“The target, Agent, is the Black Widow.”

Chapter End Notes

** Phil’s impression of S. Snape from the potions theory book will not be characteristic of Snape when we finally meet him. Just because someone is a good writer doesn’t always mean they’re a pleasant person to be around. However, the false impression that Phil, and later Harry, gets from the book DOES affect how they interact with Snape in the future.

*** Also, yes, did the math on the money. 5 GBP to Galleon, and the exchange rate of GBP to USD on 7/29/03 was 1.6247.
Phil had been preparing for an outing to Cauldron Court with Harry when Fury himself called to let Phil know that he’d redirected Clint onto another mission. The Director was suitably apologetic, but also unrepentantly snarky about it. While Phil’s Commanding Officer only told him as a courtesy, Phil’s old friend liked teasing him about his new boyfriend, and was to a certain extent genuinely sorry about messing up the little family’s plans for Harry’s birthday.

Instead of waiting for Clint to get home, Phil brought Harry into SHIELD for an impromptu party on his birthday, after a short run to Cauldron Court. Phil only stopped long enough in the magical shopping area to ask the Goblins to request an advanced copy of the children’s book about Harry – an official request from the Boy-Who-Lived’s guardian, provided the Goblins could do it quietly. The publication could potentially bring Harry back to the attention of the British wizarding community and although getting involved in it could bring unwanted attention to Phil and his guardianship, at the same time Phil couldn’t countenance letting Harry’s name be associated with something trashy or foolish. He knew that celebrities generally had a full time staff managing their image. He also knew from his own interest in the history of heroes, particularly Captain America in World War Two, that someone’s image could be manipulated. Captain Steven Rogers had had Howard Stark and the formidable machine of Stark Industries, plus the SSR and later SHIELD, to guard his legacy. Harry Potter apparently only had Phil. According to Kragan, publicists did not exist within the magical world, at least not as Phil knew them. The Goblins could and would act as agents, because whatever might be profitable to Harry would be profitable to them.

That chore completed, Phil made a quick run to the South Village, to a totally mundane but completely useful carving shop. There he picked up a few carving tools and some scrap stones to work with, including a lucky find of a fist sized hunk of white alabaster. His reading had taught him that rune magic didn’t need a wand, just the inherent magic of the carver and the right runes and materials for the purpose. Phil had reasonably decent whittling skills – most SHIELD agents did, came with the proficiency in knife-work – but wood was only recommended for practice in carving, not for practical applications of rune-magic.

Harry’s party consisted mainly of a gathering in a SHIELD cafeteria at the New York HQ. Spaghetti and cupcakes and a few presents were presented to the little boy, who bestowed his admirers with plenty of smiles and hugs. Fury didn’t attend – he was still in DC at the main headquarters, and was apparently handling Hawkeye’s mission personally. That he would take such direct interest made Phil very nervous about what exactly Fury had sent Hawkeye to do.

Budapest, capital of Hungary. Clint liked it. If he were still a criminal, Budapest would be a fantastic base. South enough to be temperate, western enough to be cosmopolitan, Mediterranean enough that no one ethnicity stood out, eastern enough to be convenient to the boiling pot of global conflicts, and with the sort of architecture that made setting up sniper nests ridiculously easy.

All those fancy buildings had so very many places to hide. The trick was to find the best spot early, pick off late-comers, and then wait. In this case, the intel SHIELD had discovered claimed...
that the infamous Black Widow would meet with potential buyers for some information involving supposedly ‘lost’ caches of Soviet weaponry. Rumor said the meet was on for today in the square below this fancy hotel on which Clint had set up a nest. He'd been in Budapest for four days, scoping the area. He was now three days late for Harry’s birthday, and frankly, he was ready to finish this op and go home.

Mainly because it had turned into amateur hour. He’d already darted several rival snipers, calling in SHIELD clean up to collect the unconscious competitors. While he figured the Interpol capture team would take it in stride once they’d been debriefed, the last one had been Mossad black-ops, and they were going to be pissed. But SHIELD didn’t want to share the honor, or glory, or whatever, of taking out the Black Widow. It would go to them or no one, which is why Clint was currently keeping an eye on two hulking KGB-type idiots at ground level. Good lord, they weren’t even subtle.

All they knew about the meet was that the Widow would be a woman, because all Red Room assassins were Black Widows, young women who were brainwashed, trained up, enhanced. Clint knew of exactly one escapee from their halls. So a big question today was, was this woman another escapee or was this some sort of weird Red Room political move? Word was that those in charge in Moscow these days loved their twisted little spy factory, so it wasn’t like those nut-jobs were hurting for budgetary needs, that they’d have to sell their own old munitions. On the other hand, it could be a ploy to bring a number of major players to one place, and then take them out. After all, given the rumors, the set-up, the location, and the implication that the Widow was acting alone, this felt more like a baited trap to Clint. But a trap for whom? Players like SHIELD, or someone else?

At the moment, Clint watched the square with one eye, keeping the other peeled for any additional interlopers. He had Fury himself on the comm today, though he didn’t expect any new intelligence or orders.

A flurry of moment off to the side caught his attention. An operative had subdued the two KGB goons. “Hey, tell whichever agent you had take down the two KGB losers thanks for me, would you?” Clint muttered into the comm.

“Repeat that, Hawkeye?”

“Just passing on my appreciation to the agent that took down the two goons loitering to the northeast of my position, sir.”

A beat of silence, then Fury replied “Hawkeye, you’re the only agent on the ground. All clean up teams are minimum four blocks out on standby.”

Clint turned full attention back to the northeast corner in time to see a slight figure come striding out of the shadows from where the bodies of the goons had been dumped. Obviously female, she wore a hooded coat, hood up, and carried a shoulder bag. She had a hand up, like she was on a cell phone. She crossed to the café directly north of Clint’s position, ordered a drink, and then took a seat at a café table as near to the center of the square as possible, in direct sunlight. She put both the cup and the phone down on the table, put the shoulder bag at her feet, and deliberately shrugged off the hood, the sunshine catching on her flame colored hair.

“…. Well shit,” Clint muttered.

“What was that, agent?”

Clint considered his options while staring at the woman below. Years ago, when he’d just begun...
his ‘career’, if you could call it that, not long after he’d left the circus, he’d accepted a job to steal some information from the highly secure office of a man with as much illegal business as legitimate. The fact that the office lay on the thirty seventh floor of a New York City skyscraper was no bar to Hawkeye, who’d just turned eighteen and was desperate at the time.

Fortunately, while the office and the building were reasonably secure, people tended to forget about basic infrastructure. So Clint had simply bullshit his way into the building, and on the twenty ninth floor, three stories below the ones controlled by his target, he’d accessed the elevator shafts through the ventilation system, climbed up, found the vents in the ceiling of the thirty seventh, and simply waited until just after two o’clock in the morning, at which point he removed a grate, dropped into the office, and began rifling through the target’s desk for the information he’d been sent to retrieve.

Unfortunately, secure also meant relatively sound proof, so he had no idea he had company until the office door was flung open, and the businessman stumbled into the office with a stunning blonde in his arms. They were practically attached at the lips, but instead of ducking, Clint stupidly froze in plain sight.

Naturally, he was spotted. Unnaturally, the moment the man sucked in a breath to yell, the blonde woman produced a needle from somewhere and jabbed it into the man’s neck. He gasped, seized, and collapsed, dead in moments.

The woman and Clint stared at one another. Unnerved, Clint raised his hands. “Just here to lift some intel, honest!”

Her green eyes narrowed, and when she spoke, her voice was husky with just a hint of an accent. “Who hired you?”

“Kingpin.” Clint was willing to tell her whatever she wanted to know, just so he could make it out alive.

She walked towards him, her eyes making him feel like the prey in a snake’s stare. The file he needed was on the desk in front of him, and he knew he gave the game away when his eyes flicked from her to the file and back. She languidly lifted it up, a small smirk playing on her lips. She glanced at it briefly, and then gave Clint a thorough once over, taking in his homemade climbing harness and the dust on his clothing from the vents.

“You are a thief?”

“Yeah. Just… a thief. Not…” he nodded his head towards the cooling corpse.

She quirked an eyebrow. “Not an assassin? Like me?” He stammered, trying to find something to say that wouldn’t get him killed, but she chuckled before he found coherency. “They will think he had a heart attack. You’d better go now.” She dropped the file back on the desk, turned, and sashayed out of the room.

Well aware of how close he’d come to death, Clint snatched the file and made his escape through the vents. He delivered the intel, got paid, and beat a hasty retreat from New York.

Three weeks later, sitting at a bar in Miami, a woman slid into the seat next to him, ordered a Sex On The Beach, and gave him a challenging look. It was the blonde.

Thus began Clint’s relationship with the woman he knew as Natasha. He took her to be at least half a dozen years older than him, and light years more experienced in the world of high priced
crime. For whatever reason, she took him under her wing, and for the next eleven months taught him everything he needed to know to not only survive, but thrive. He found out about the Red Room from her. She said it was where she’d been trained as a spy, an operative, a mindless government asset, and where she’d escaped from only by killing all of her handlers and burning the facility to the ground behind her.

She taught him so much, and then vanished one day, leaving the nineteen year old Hawkeye to fend for himself. He’d been heartbroken at first, having convinced himself they were destined to be some sort of Bonnie and Clyde team forever… which come to think of it was probably why she abandoned him in the first place, to stop his clinging. He made some poor decisions without her, but survived. When he was twenty, he make his first contract hit, and only got through it by reminding himself of the cold hearted woman who’d taught him the art of the deal.

When he was twenty two, nursing an embedded and infected bullet wound, he took another contract hit, because he needed the money for underground medical care. He managed it, but spiraled into depression which left him broke, still sick, and nearly suicidal. He almost did it too, almost put a bullet into his head, until one day he woke up from a nightmare to find her sitting beside his bed, singing a lullaby in husky Russian. She stayed just three weeks that time, just long enough for him to heal up and get his head out of his ass.

“You were not meant for this, moy brat,” she whispered to him before she left.

“If you stayed, moya sestra....” He pleaded, but she shook her head.

“You are for the light and the skies, yastreb, and I am not. You must find a way to use your skills in the light.”

He hadn’t known what she meant, until later, when he began only accepting jobs that would take evil out of the world, rather than contribute to it. He’d always been more comfortable stealing from bad guys. The man he’d killed under SHIELD’s nose, he’d done it because he found out the pharmaceutical data he’d stolen for the man was being used to produce drugs that were turning children into addicts with one taste, then using those children in a pedophilia ring.

When he joined SHIELD, and met Phil and Harry, he understood what Tasha had meant about using his skills in the light. While it still bothered him to kill, at least with SHIELD he could trust that every other option had been exhausted.

But now SHIELD wanted him to shoot the woman he considered his sister. Frankly, the intelligence they’d had on her was pretty damning, and had it been any other face in the square below, Clint might have reported target acquisition and taken the shot when ordered. There hadn't been a picture of her in the file, just a physical description that was pretty vague. They didn’t know her eye color, and hair can be dyed, cut, covered, and altered. But to Clint’s eyes, there was no mistaking the curve of her cheek, the pout of her lips, or the tilt of her green eyes. Even from seven stories away, he knew her.

She looked tired. Oh, no different than she had when last he’d seen her, years ago. No older than she’s appeared when he first met her. But exhaustion hung about her, bruised the skin under her eyes. She sat tense, waiting. He could see she felt the sights of the gun on her, so why wasn’t she moving? Taking cover? Using any of the evasive tactics she’d taught him?

“Hawkeye to base.”

“This is base, Hawkeye, do you have the solution?”
“Target’s in sight. I….” He decided he had to take the chance. She’d pulled him from the darkness, practically shoving him into the light. He had to try to pull her out too. “Nick?”

“Transferring to private, hang on.” Two clicks, and then Fury’s voice returned. “What is it, Clint?”

“Listen, boss, she’s….. I know her.”

“What?”

“I know her. She’s the friend, my friend. The one I told you about.”

A heartbeat of silence, and then, “Are you telling me your frickin ‘big sister’ is the BLACK WIDOW?”

“I didn’t know, okay? Seriously, swear to god, I didn’t realize it was her. I didn’t know her as Black Widow, she didn’t use that handle when we were together. I just knew her as Natasha.” He took a deep breath. “Please. Nick. Don’t ask me to kill her.”

The silence stretched for a relatively long moment. In the square below, the woman took a hesitant sip of her coffee, looking around, appearing relaxed to the casual observer, but Clint could see she waited for the ambush. She’d set herself up. For what? Why?

“What’s the call, Hawkeye?” Fury finally asked.

“Let me go down. Let me talk to her. I’ve taken out the other snipers, no one else is set topside. She set herself up, and I have to know why. This is bigger than we think, it has to be.”

“Alright. But Hawk, if it looks like she’s going to turn on you, you better run like hell, you hear me? I am NOT going to go back to Coulson and tell him I let you get your ass killed.”

“Yes, sir. Breaking down, moving to ground level.”

It took only minutes for Clint to break down his rifle, storing it in the innocuous looking knapsack SHIELD had provided. He wasn’t using the bow for this op, because for all that SHIELD had wanted the credit, they had not wanted Hawkeye associated with it. Which had been a relief to Clint, but now that the game had been turned completely on its head, he rather wished he’d had the comfort of his bow.

He reached street level, pausing to put a sleeper hold on a guy with a dart gun. Clint dropped him behind a dumpster, called in a pick up, and then headed into the square. He acted as if he was looking for someone, casually, like meeting a friend.

He crossed to her table, waving when she spotted him. “Natalie! Hi! You made it.” He leaned in to brush his lips across her cheek, whispering, “Hostiles down.”

She stared up at him like she’d seen a ghost, but only for a moment before blank composure took over. “Of course I did, silly. Have a seat.”

For a moment, they stared at each other across the café table, before she slumped. “I never expected you, yastreb. But I suppose it’s fair.”

“What do you mean?”

She gave him a once over. “You look good. They are paying you well for this?”
He hesitated. She did look terrible. Exhausted, haunted. Twitchy. He suddenly realized that the set up was for her. She set it up, to arrange her own take down. “Moya sestra... what’s going on? Why... why would you do this?”

She sighed. “I’m tired, moy brat. So tired. It’s been a long time since I had my Hawk to watch over me.” Her lips quirked slightly at the reference to all the times he’d watched her back in dangerous situations. “I have... done so much wrong. My ledger is full of red. I think, perhaps, this is the only way.”

“No.” He practically hissed it, leaning towards her.

Her smile was fond and sad. “And yet here you are. The greatest marksman, to take down the terrible assassin.”

“No, Tasha. I mean, yeah, I was sent to kill you, but I didn’t know it was YOU.”

“And now that you know? Will you run from the contract, yastreb?”

“I didn’t take a contract. I’ve been here for hours, eliminating all other threats, because SHIELD wanted the target. But when I saw it was you, I asked, and they said I could come down.”

“SHIELD,” she breathed, surprised. “So you did find a place.”

“Yeah... and Nat? It’s great. Really great. Like, you should try it great.”

Surprise filled her face. “You... want me to come in? SHIELD wants me?”

“I want you. SHIELD will once they get to know you. Please? My boss, he said I could try, and I’m asking you, please, Natashenka, moya sestra, come in with me? Come in, try living in the light. Balance that ledger. Meet....” He blushed, but figured this would definitely pique her curiosity. “Meet my partner and our son.”

She heard everything implied in his phrasing. “Oh, Clint. Really? He must be something special.”

“Yeah. He kind of is.” He reached across the table, palm up, offering his hand. “Will you come in, Tasha? I swear to you, it’s good. It’s so good, I can’t even believe it some days.”

She looked around as if taking in the scenery. “I suppose... the one thing I have not tried is to be good.”

Clint grinned, reaching the last inch to squeeze her hand. “I’m so glad, you won’t regret it, really. I haven’t, not one bit. They’ll .... They can help, they DO help. SHIELD, I mean. Not just their people, but regular people too.”

“Very well, Clint, I’ve accepted the offer, you can stop with the sales pitch.” Her smile this time was a little more fond, and a little less sad, which Clint took as a victory. “Now, yastreb, you say you took down hostiles. All of them?”

“Some snipers - Interpol, Mossad, CIA, you know, that bunch - plus a dude with a dart gun who I didn’t ID. You took out the two Russian goons over there. What else are you expecting?”

She sat back, toying with her empty coffee. “Well, I wasn’t expecting to get out alive, let’s put it that way?”

At that moment, his comm clicked on. “Hawkeye, we have two suspicious vehicles closing in on
your location. Black SUVs, no plates.”

His face gave it away, and her smile went rueful. “Well, if you’ve already eliminated all the primary governments, what’s next, Clint?”

“Hawkeye, be advised that facial rec’ on one of the SUV passengers is tied to Al Qaeda.”

Clint rubbed a hand over his face. “… well, shit.”
“You broke Budapest!”

“Um, technically I think that bridge was outside the city limits…”

“Shut the fuck up, Barton. You. Broke. Budapest!”

“But…”

“NO. No. Now, not only do I have to justify this to the Council, but I’m gonna have to APOLOGIZE to the Prime Minster of Hungary, because you fucked up his precious city.”

Clint exchanged a glance with Natasha, where she stood next to his gurney in New York’s Medical wing, flanked by three STRIKE security agents. They were receiving their dressing-down from a secure SHIELD phone, held in the hands of a nervous Level Two. Everyone in the bay could hear it, and they were all politely ignoring the Director’s rant.

“What are you going to say?” Clint asked Fury via speakerphone.

Fury huffed. “I’m gonna tell that motherfucker that when I WANT his opinion on how SHIELD handles an Asset Extraction in a hostile scenario, I will fucking ASK for it! As for you, Miss Romanov, you will submit to every exam, medical and psychological, SHIELD can think of, to make sure there’s no remaining Soviet bugs in your brain. Until you are cleared, and I mean CRYSTAL, you are under lock down, no visitors other than Barton and the doctors. IF you are cleared, afterwards, you’ll undergo the same SHIELD evaluation and training that Barton did, he can fill you in. Barton, you are grounded, until such time as SHIELD determines that you have not brought a hostile combatant into our house.

In fact, here’s the deal I’m offering, limited time only: Miss Romanov? You fuck us over, and I will reinstate the Terminate order on you so fast, you will be lucky to have time to go dark. But I will ALSO boot Barton to the curb hard enough it’ll take DAYS before his ass isn’t sore. AND I’ll label him Hostile Asset, so no one from SHIELD will piss on him if he’s on fire, DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?”

“Yes, sir!” Barton snapped.

“Of course,” Natasha drawled, unimpressed with Fury’s posturing.

“Fine! Motherfucking broke Budapest, goddamn—“ The phone line clicked dead mid-curse. The Level Two beat a retreat as fast as he could.

Clint grinned at Natasha. “He’s happy. Really. I mean, yeah, he sounded pissed, but he’s actually really glad you’re here, Tasha.”

Natasha smiled serenely. “I’m sure. I look forward to getting to know your Director Fury, moy brat.”
“You’ll love him, seriously. What sucks is the lock down.” Clint ignored the medic fussing with bandages on his arm. Plenty of bruises and lacerations, but Triage on the SHIELD jet that picked them up outside of Budapest and brought them back to New York had already assessed, cleaned, and stitched Clint up, and naturally Tasha had come through with little more than minor bruises and dirt, hardly noticeable past her usual poise. It drove Clint nuts, sometimes, how she never seemed to lose her cool. “Lock down means I can’t introduce you to Phil or Harry until you’re cleared.”

She shrugged. “I’m actually pleased by that.”

“Really?”

“Dorogoy, SHIELD will push every button they can think of. If they clear me, then I know those… zhopy have left no triggers in my brain.”

“Well, there is that,” Clint laughed. He glanced at the STRIKE guys, but ignored them. The whole point of internal security was to be an intimidating but otherwise unacknowledged presence. “Still…”

“Clint, you will visit me when you can, while I am here. And once I am cleared, I will train, and I will see this home and this family you have made.”

He grinned at her. SHIELD had become a home. It blew him away, how fast he’d settled in, and he hoped Tasha would feel the same. People in SHIELD were good people. Sure, there was your average dickhead here and there, but you had those in every group. When it mattered, when it counted, Clint had come to trust SHIELD. A lot of that had to do with Phil, some with Fury, and some with the folks in Medical. Even now, Clint thanked the medic politely for giving the all clear.

“Miss Romanov?” A doctor addressed her directly. “If you’re not in need of medical attention at this time, I can show you to your temporary quarters?”

Clint followed along as the doctor led Natasha, and her STRIKE shadows, to one of the quarantine rooms. They were a bit smaller than the barracks rooms Clint had first lived in at SHIELD, but not uncomfortable. There were a number of little things that made it obvious that they were designed for medical purposes, such as the one way laundry chute in the tiny en-suite bathroom that went straight into biohazard containers, the airtight seal on the door with the pass-through box, and the fact that they could be locked down from the outside. Because Tasha wasn’t sick, most of the biohazard protocols would be ignored, but the lock down protocols would definitely be in place. This would be Tasha’s ‘home’ until Psych decided that she wasn’t about to snap and betray or kill them all.

Tasha looked around the room, not a trace of her real opinion on her face, as always. “This is acceptable. Thank you.” Her seemingly sincere appreciation caused the doctor to blush. Tasha could win herself adherents wherever she went.

The doctor mumbled some sort of response and left. One of the STRIKE guys eyed him, and Clint knew that doc would never work with Tasha until she was cleared. SHIELD is willing to give second chances, even to the most dangerous woman in the world, but they’re not about to hand her minions.

Tasha sat gracefully at the chair next to the wall-mounted desk, nodding to the STRIKE guys as if dismissing her loyal guards. Clint flopped onto the twin bed with an exaggerated groan, flapping his wrist. “I’ll knock when I’m leaving,” he told the team, and they conceded, no doubt stationing themselves outside the door. “I don’t recommend trying to charm them,” Clint told Natasha once
they were alone. “As far as I can tell, Medical surgically removes their sense of humor once they get assigned to STRIKE.”

She rolled her eyes, well aware they were being watched, recorded, and categorized in the little room. “Don’t be stupid, milly. Since I have chosen to be here, I am not going to jeopardize my welcome, or your place.” Her sharp eyes took in everything in the room, including the few changes of clothing on shelves, extra towels and toiletries already placed in the bathroom, and the four cameras and three bugs. “I would hope, however, that SHIELD understands to exercise some discretion while I am… enjoying the hospitality here.”

Clint looked directly into the nearest camera. “She means no recording her in the shower, duh.”

They both smiled imagining the choking offence taken by whoever sat at the other end of the surveillance equipment.

Tasha rose and joined him on the bed, snuggling in comfortably, her back to his chest. He toyed with her red curls. She’d been blonde the entire first time they’d been together, and brunette when she’d shown up the second time, to save his soul.

“I like the red.”

She hummed agreeably. “As do I. I think I will keep it.” After a few companionable moments, she continued. “Tell me about your Phil.”

“We met when I was recruited..”

“No, not your history with him. Tell me about him?”

Clint hesitated; though his relationship with Phil Coulson wasn’t much of a secret, it still wasn’t a well-known fact throughout SHIELD. “Phil’s favorite pizza is this terrible faux pizza thing you can only get from Greek joints. Not New York style thin crust, and not Chicago deep-dish, but this weird bread-like stuff that has been frozen at least once, with the most non-offensive sauce you can imagine. It’s like… the most generic version of pizza ever, and Phil will literally walk past two far superior Italian places to get it. And then he eats it on a plate, with a fork and a knife, and salt! He will put salt on his pizza, Nat, even when it’s already got pepperoni on it!”

“He will have to worry about his blood pressure, I think.”

“That’s the thing, he’s like the calmest person ever. I swear to god, it’s like stress just doesn’t stick to him. I’ll be panicking, and he’s like all ‘oh my, that’s interesting’, and then he’ll just handle it.” He proceeded to tell her about one incident when Harry had gotten a scrape at the park, and Clint was all for rushing him to the hospital, and Phil just calmly cleaned the boy’s knee, applied band aids, and kissed it better.

They lay talking for about an hour. Their arrival in New York had happened very early, local time, though both had dozed on the plane. By now, the day shift at SHIELD, such as it was, were coming in, which meant that Phil would be in his office soon. Clint hadn’t called ahead since it was against operational protocols, but because of that he looked forward to surprising his partner with his return.

“I am tired now, Clint,” Natasha announced eventually. “I think I will sleep here.” That in and of itself was a major concession and Clint felt relief that she thought she could relax here. Perhaps it was the security of the room, or her decision to trust Clint’s faith in the agency, but if she could sleep for a while, then everything following would be much easier, for her and for SHIELD. “Go
and see your man.”

“I will, Tash. Sleep well.” He kissed her gently on her brow, and then went to the door, tapping to be let out.

Phil nudged the door to his office open and flicked on the light, but froze at the sight that greeted him. Smiling sleepily from the couch, Clint gave him a lazy wave.

“Hey,” he said, voice still thick from his nap.

Phil dropped his briefcase and crossed to the couch, kneeling so he could press close to Clint, burying his fingers in the man’s hair and pressing their lips together in an ardent kiss.

“Wow,” Clint chuckled. “Missed me?” He slipped his hands up under Phil’s suit jacket and onto his back.

“Very much,” Phil assured him. He quickly assessed Clint’s physical state: bruised, dirty, slightly under-slept, a trio of stitches along his hairline but no sign of concussion, a bandage for a more significant laceration on his arm. “You okay?”

“Fine. Wasn’t anything Triage couldn’t handle.”

Phil frowned. “You were pulled out hot?”

“Yeah. Um. If you hear anything about Budapest, just know we were totally outside the city limits, really.”

“We?”

Clint laughed nervously before wiggling around until he was sitting up. Phil relaxed back onto his heels, looking up at his boyfriend’s sheepish expression. “So, you know how SHIELD has this thing about bringing people in and making them part of the family?”

Phil accepted that Clint had brought in his ‘sister,’ or at least, the woman as good as. He even could live with the knowledge that she was also basically Clint’s Ex. He was professionally impressed that Agent Barton managed to turn the Black Widow into a SHIELD asset. He could have lived without a gorgeous redheaded woman who already had a history with Clint hanging around his boyfriend.

Clint visited her every other day. He spent his downtime reconnecting with Phil and Harry – despite being away for not even a full month, he felt a need to reassure them as much as himself about the solidity of his connection to them.
He’d been home two weeks after bringing in Natasha, when he stood in the living room, waiting for Phil to emerge from putting Harry to bed. They’d had a full evening as a family: playtime after day care, then a dinner cooked by Clint, and then a Disney movie. Bath and a short storytime followed before Harry was tucked in. Phil had shed the suit early on, and Clint spent most of the evening admiring the man’s physique in worn jeans and a faded tee-shirt.

Phil came out of Harry’s room and gave Clint a tired smile. He crossed the living area and stepped confidently into Clint’s arms, pressing his face into the side of Clint’s neck. “Asleep at last,” he muttered.

Clint hummed, enjoying the press of Phil’s warm body. Whatever observation he meant to make evidently fled, because whatever he meant to reply came out as, “I love you so much.”

Phil’s head came up, eyes wide, and a fraction of a second later Clint froze when he realized what he’d said, said for the very first time. “I – I…” he stammered, but then Phil grinned.

“I love you too, Clint,” Phil said softly.

Clint’s entire body relaxed at once. The inevitable kiss that followed progressed swiftly, and they adjourned to the bedroom. Naked and curled together, Clint whispered, “Never doubt it, okay? I’m gonna love you forever.”

Phil pulled him closer. “Likewise.”

It took seven weeks for Psych and Medical to clear Natasha. They found a few mental triggers which Natasha worked through, fortunately none of the particularly targeted to SHIELD or any member of its personnel. In the interest of health and full disclosure, she told her doctors outright about the menagerie of drugs she’d been subjected to prior to her initial defection from the Red Room, and what the solo detox she’d experienced had been like. They’d run a number of analyses on her, which led to Fury himself flying up from D.C. to visit, and while they’d met privately for several hours, no one besides Fury and Natasha knew what they discussed.

At last, Natasha was released from lockdown and assigned a bunk in the New York agent quarters, just like Clint had been. She joined the trainee groups, head held high even when they whispered behind her back.

The day Clint picked up Harry from day care and brought him back to meet Natasha, Phil waited with her at SHIELD. It wasn’t his office – his office level exceeded Natasha’s current security clearance, though that would likely change soon. Instead they were in a lower level conference room, with a large plate glass table, a large conference screen, and a cart to the side bearing a water pitcher and glasses.

They talked idly about current events. Phil was well aware that Natasha was assessing him. He expected a shovel speech any second. But before Natasha made her decision about him one way or another, Clint and Harry arrived.
“Hey, you two. Sorry it took so long.” Clint swung Harry up into his arms. “Harry, I want you to meet someone special. This is m---“

Before Clint could finish, Harry took one look at Natasha, and his eyes went wide, and his mouth opened up. The shriek of “MAMA!” that emerged would have surprised anyone, but when Natasha froze, startled, and not reacting as Harry reached for her, nearly throwing himself out of Clint’s arms, the howl of confused anguish Harry let out not only pierced their ears, but the accidental magic that flowed from him shattered every piece of glass in the room and fried every electronic device.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry, Dear Readers, for the delay in posting. I am in my final term of post-graduate work, and I have a final project due by the end of May. I managed to carve out enough time to get this chapter out, and I promise you more is to come -- I will not abandon this story -- but I beg you to bear with me. Graduation is the first week of June; I will be able to write regularly afterwards.
“Am I a bad parent?”

The leaden question fell from Phil’s mouth like dropping a sack of bricks. It had weighed him down ever since Harry’s spectacular outburst. Clint had whisked Harry away and after only a brief stop in Medical, had taken Harry home while Phil dealt with SHIELD and Agent Romanov, a clean- up crew, and incident debrief. Phil arrived home much later in the evening to hear Clint singing lullabies to the fretful little boy.

Now Harry slept at last, and as Clint emerged from his room, Phil couldn’t help but voice the question that haunted him all afternoon. He remembered what Doctor Strange had told him, but that was so long ago now, and maybe Phil wasn’t doing something to fulfill Harry’s needs? Phil himself had mostly grown up in a single parent home, but it had been his mother, not his father. At least Harry had two parents that loved him, shouldn’t that be enough? Was a mother really so vital?

“Aw, Phil, no.” Clint joined him on the couch, close enough to press their hips together. He wrapped an reassuring arm around Phil’s shoulders. “You’re a good dad. A great one. The best. And I know from crappy dads, okay?” Phil nodded. “He’s got you and me and all of SHIELD, there’s nothing wrong for him, alright? He just… he got triggered, you know how it goes.”

“Triggered?”

“Well, sure. Kid’s been living with trauma half his life, right? Short life, but still. I figure Lily Potter must have been a red head, and that did it.”

Phil turned to Clint. “What are you talking about?”

Clint frowned a bit. “You didn’t notice? I mean, took me a sec, because yeah, Harry knows plenty of women, so it couldn’t be just the fact that Tasha’s a woman. That’s when I realized, he doesn’t know ANY redheads. Hill, the doc, the staff at daycare – not a redhead in the bunch. Plus, although Harry couldn’t have seen it, Tasha has green eyes. That usually goes with red hair, right? Harry’s got green eyes. And hey, I just thought of this: The Potters don’t have green eyes, right? I mean, Theo’s got hazel eyes, and Eudora’s got dark brown eyes. So Harry didn’t get his eyes from the Potter side, probably. Which means Mom had ‘em. So Lily Potter had to have been a green eyed red head, and gee, Tasha fits that description to a tee. Harry was triggered by seeing a redhead woman.”

Phil stared. “Clint…. You’re brilliant.”

“You would have figured it out eventually.”

“Not as fast. Not as thoroughly.”

Clint shrugged, but Phil could see the color on his ears. He still sometimes turned bashful when complemented on his intelligence. Harry wasn’t the only one in this family with trauma to overcome.

“We’ll have to call Doctor Roberts,” Phil commented. Doctor Roberts was the SHIELD
psychiatrist with child psychology experience.

“Already did,” Clint admitted. “He suggested desensitization therapy, which, you know, convenient since Tasha’s gonna be around.”

Phil beamed at Clint. “You are the best.”

Color crept across Clint’s cheeks. “I try.”

“You succeed.” Phil kissed Clint warmly, slipping his arms around Clint’s waist. His boyfriend’s clever analysis had completely relieved Phil’s worries. Letting the kiss end, he closed his eyes and pressed his face to Clint’s neck. Clint rubbed his cheek against Phil’s hair. “We’re so lucky to have you in our lives, Clint.”

Clint huffed a short laugh, but didn’t respond. His shrink had him working on accepting compliments without deflection. Instead, he blew a raspberry against Phil’s forehead, causing Phil to jerk back with a laugh of his own. Clint grinned at him.

“Dork.”

“Kettle.”

“Ha. Did Harry manage to eat dinner?”

“Leftovers, but yeah, about half a serving of chicken parmesan.” Clint’s eyes narrowed. “What about you? Since we didn’t do lunch, did you grab anything?”

“Oh, no. Didn’t have time.”

Clint rolled his eyes and stood, pulling Phil up behind him and leading him into the kitchen. “I can’t believe I’m the sensible, responsible one in this relationship.”

Just prior to midnight, Harry woke up from a nightmare, crying out “Daddy! Daddy!” Phil quickly jumped out of bed, waving off Clint and hurrying to Harry.

Harry reached for Phil as soon as he saw him, and Phil cuddled him close, taking a seat on the edge of Harry’s bed.

“Shh, sweetheart. You’re okay, you’re safe.” Phil soothed his son as best he could. Eventually Harry’s sobs slowed. “Bad dream?”

Harry nodded against his chest.

“You want to tell me about it?”


So Harry remembered his mother and her attacker. Phil left the idea that Director Fury was ‘granpa’ go for the time being, and that Harry lumped his stuffed dog into his family along with Maria Hill and Jasper Sitwell, and just addressed the root issue.
“That bad man is long gone and far away, baby. He can’t get you.”

“Didn’t get me. Gonna get everybody else.”

A shiver ran down Phil’s spine though he tried to cover it by rocking Harry. Doctor Strange had called Harry a Child of Destiny, and was sure that the dark wizard who murdered Harry’s biological parents was still alive in some form. This three year old boy already understood his own magical protection and his family’s vulnerability, and to a certain extent, his destiny.

“He’s not getting anybody, baby. You’re safe here, I’m safe, Papa is safe. Everybody is safe, baby.” Phil spoke as soothingly as he could, and his tone plus the rocking lulled Harry back to sleep.

A few days later, they tried introducing Harry to Natasha again. This time Phil picked him up from day care. When he arrived at SHIELD, Clint waited for them in the doorway to the new conference room. He gave Phil a bright and mischievous grin.

Natasha stood when they entered, and Phil could see why Clint seemed so delighted. The woman had changed her hair color, darkening the red to a black cherry hue. It made her green eyes stand out even more, and accented her creamy complexion dramatically.

In fact, she bore even more resemblance to Harry now, since in the right sunlight, Harry’s nearly black hair could reflect auburn highlights.

Harry always stared a little at strangers, and maybe he associated the other day with her still, because he shrunk back a little against Phil’s chest, drawing Padfoot a bit closer. Harry had never been inclined to suck his thumb – Phil hoped that was by natural inclination and not something the Dursleys had any involvement in discouraging – but he seemed to pick the oddest times to turn shy, and that came out as a tendency to hide. Right now, if he’d been standing, he probably would have hidden behind Phil’s legs.

“Hey, Harry-bear,” Clint said kindly. “This is my sister, Tasha. She’s gonna be your auntie.”

Natasha Romanov, the Black Widow, the scourge of intelligence agencies around the world, shot Clint such an exasperated look of annoyance that Phil started laughing. Fortunately, his laughter made Harry relax, as did Clint’s grin. Harry looked at Natasha, who arranged a pleasant smile on her face.

“Tante?” he asked.

Natasha’s face didn’t flicker, but Phil knew she had to be surprised at the German.

“Das ist richtig,” she answered.

Harry wiggled a little to show he wanted down. Phil set him on his feet. Harry regarded Natasha for long moment, and then went to her. “Auf, tante?” he asked with both arms raised, Padfoot flopping from one hand.
For a moment, to Phil’s everlasting surprise, an expression of utter terror flickered across Natasha Romanov’s face. But it was quickly suppressed, and she bent and lifted Harry up as requested, settling him awkwardly on one hip.

That close, Harry’s emerald stare could be unnerving, but the Black Widow held his gaze gamely, until at last the little boy said, “Okay,” and rested his head on her shoulder.

Clint said something in Russian, and Natasha answered a little sharply. Harry’s head came up.

“Nicht Deutsch?”

“Russisch. Russian.”

Harry’s eyes got big. “More?”

At Natasha’s confusion, Phil answered, “Yes baby, there are more languages than English, Spanish, and German. Lots more.”

“Maybe Tetya Tasha will teach you,” Clint added, which got a smile from Phil and Harry, and another half-hearted glare from Natasha.

“Teetuh?” Harry asked.

“Tetya.” She gently corrected his pronunciation. “It means Aunt,” Natasha answered him, her husky voice softening a little. The longer she held Harry in her arms, the more charmed by him Phil could see her becoming.

“Tetya Tasha,” Harry decided with all the gravitas of a three year old before resting his head against her shoulder again.

“So, what do you think?” Clint asked Natasha later, his casual tone not quite as convincing as he’d hoped. But with his nerves he couldn’t help it. She’d met Phil before as Agent Coulson, and they hadn’t really gotten past preliminary getting to know each other idle chit-chat the first time Clint brought Harry to meet her. This time, after introducing her to Harry, they’d spent a few hours together, having lunch in a SHIELD cafeteria and wandering around the areas that were both safe for Harry and within Natasha’s security clearance. Clint couldn’t decide which he was more nervous about, that Phil and Harry wouldn’t like Natasha, or that she wouldn’t approve of them.

Now, as he walked her back to her temporary quarters, he figured he had just about all the family cliché nerves he’d missed out on all these years. This had to be like bringing the boyfriend home for the first time, only with so much more pressure, given Harry, and Natasha’s uncertain temper and deadly skillset. Not that he thought she’d harm anyone. But if she didn’t like Phil….

“Are you happy?” she asked, throwing him out of his speculations. He blinked.

“Yeah, Tash. I’m … I think I’m the happiest I’ve ever been.”

A small smirk curled her lips. “Then I like them. And I am glad for you. I will be Aunt Tasha, I suppose. But at some point you must teach Harry not to be so trusting.”
Clint sighed. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. Just…. At his age, I already got it, you know?” Natasha nodded gravely. He’d told her long ago about his abusive father and the fear that ruled his childhood. “I just want him to be…. Free I guess. For as long as possible.”

At her door, she rested a hand on his arm, and leaned up to press a kiss to his cheek. “I will help. Both with the protecting, and the teaching.”

“Thanks, Tash.” He gave her a quick hug, which she allowed before nodding good night and leaving him alone in the hall.

In the month that followed, Natasha settled into her roles as SHIELD agent and Harry’s aunt with only a few hiccups, and those mostly on the SHIELD side. A few posturing idiots were taught swift and not-too-brutal lessons in the workout rooms. Tutors were brought in to rectify some gaps in Natasha’s education, just as they had for Clint’s. Every once in a while, some sort of surprising hole in her knowledge, or a Red Room implanted point of view would trip them all up, such as her belief that the moon landings were staged, although she certainly wasn’t alone in that one, Phil knew. What interested Phil more was the way she talked about the moon landings – like she’d witnessed the broadcasts first hand. He wasn’t read in on her full file, and though he expected to be eventually, given his role as AIC and her likely assignment as a field specialist, he didn’t want to push her or Fury too soon. Trust had to be earned, and Phil hadn’t had the opportunity yet.

He did, however, get the chance to offer Natasha his trust sooner than he expected. After some discussions with Fury, and another trip to Cauldron Court for intelligence on wizarding international travel, it was decided that Phil should take a trip to London to do some preliminary recon on the British wizarding world, concurrent with the bi-annual active surveillance operation on the Dursleys.

Despite his interest in testing the theoretical ability of Gringotts to bend space, Phil made his travel arrangements the mundane way through SHIELD. He’d be heading out on October 26th, and if all went well, he’d be home on the 2nd of November. Clint had already taken Harry shopping for a Halloween costume, and they’d planned to take him not only around SHIELD’s lowest clearance areas, a common arrangement for SHIELD families coordinated by Agent Services, but also to a mall for public events. Because Phil would no longer be available, Natasha gamely agreed to accompany Clint and Harry to the mall for trick or treating. Phil hoped someone planned to grab the security footage. Harry had selected a cowboy costume from the Disney store – the character was featured in two of Harry’s favorite videos. Clint considered cobbling together an approximation of the coordinating spaceman character, but Natasha said if he dressed up too, he was on his own. Phil merely observed that Natasha would certainly constitute appropriate backup if anything untoward were to happen, which not only convinced Clint to forego a costume for himself, but also earned Phil a few points from Natasha for the trust implied in his comment.

On the 26th Phil bid his small family goodbye and boarded a commercial flight to London. Business class, at least. SHIELD preferred to move agents under the radar, and there were no convenient military flights this time. In his suit, briefcase in hand, Phil blended into the crowd of business and upper-class passengers. His seatmate was a fellow ‘business traveler’ who politely ignored Phil in favor of first his laptop, then his New York Times, and then the backside of his eyelids.
Diplomatic credentials got him through Heathrow with a minimum of hassle, even with it being the small hours of the morning, to be met by a SHIELD driver. In fact, it was the same driver that took Phil to Surrey 18 months before.

“Agent Coulson, sir. Welcome back.”

“Thank you, Agent?”

“Davies, sir.”

“Any relation to Agent Clark-Davies?”

The man smiled. “My wife, sir.”

After a swift trip to SHIELD London, Phil settled into his temp quarters. Phil had put in nearly a full day at work prior to the flight, and his body’s clock already thought it was after midnight. Since London’s morning would come far too soon, Phil went to sleep, uncomfortably alone.

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Phil stood on the sidewalk of Charing Cross Road. He’d expected the target location to be closer to the famous bookshop area. A rundown pub? It seemed logical, but he realized the area near Leicester Square was becoming gentrified. Instead, the ‘famous’ Leaky Cauldron stood much further along, where the road narrowed, and older buildings cast the entire thoroughfare into shadow.

“Agent Davies? What do you see across the way there?”

Agent Davies frowned. “Empty storefront, sir.”

Phil nodded. “Thank you, agent. Please wait here. I’m not sure how long I will be.”

“Yes, sir.”

Phil left the other man behind as he crossed the road and walked up to the blackened wooden door. He spared a glance at the squeak of the sign above, depicting a witch stirring a cauldron. He didn’t have an earpiece in, nor a radio or cellular phone. He had only his Berretta, knives, wit, and one black wooden wand previously owned by Dorea Black Potter.

With a single fortifying breath, Phil pulled open the door.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't kill me for the cliffhanger. I promise it won't take 3 months for the next chapter, in which again, we have big plot-forwarding action.
As a note, I'm giving Natasha more of a comics background/history, but an MCU personality. Lots of people seem to want a more grave Black Widow, but I like the teasing and the sass we've seen on film ("I'm here to pick up a fossil...")
Chapter Summary

Phil Coulson visits Diagon Alley. Clint Barton visits Halloween madness. Natasha Romanov visits the everyday world of non-operatives and wonders what the heck is wrong with these people.

Chapter Notes

Ah dear readers. Thank you so much for bearing with me. I have been forced to Adult so hard since graduation last June, I can barely keep my head above water. Real Life! it's not for the faint-hearted. Thank you all for forgiving me for leaving Phil standing outside the Leaky for these many months. I hope this chapter begins to make up for my terrible lapse.

Phil pushed through the heavy oak doorway of The Leaky Cauldron and into a Dickens novel. He expected something of a sense of displacement, but nothing so completely out of time. It looked as if no one in the British Wizarding world had realized the 20th Century had gone by. The room had the standard dark wood Phil expected from every BBC production ever depicting a Victorian Pub. The candles and wall-sconces were at least charmed to be smokeless. The furniture was hand turned and heavy. The bar was devoid of stools.

The people at least were normal in appearance, for the most part. All eyes had turned to Phil the moment he entered, but since he'd been wise enough to wear a coordinating over robe with his suit, he appeared suitably wizarding that most patrons returned to their own business within moments. A trio of men in traditional robes seemed to be holding a business meeting at one table. A young couple dressed casually with an infant in a magical height-chair sat at another table. In the far corner, a woman who was either incredibly aged, or perhaps a genuine ‘crone’, spooned up some sort of soup or stew, carefully keeping the ends of her babushka out of the bowl. All of these people glanced up at Phil as he entered, but immediately returned to their own interests.

The only exceptions were the two men at the bar. The proprietor behind the bar wore an outfit straight out of the past, complete with long vest and sleeve garters. He was balding with ridiculous muttonchops, and a bulbous nose. The man in front of the bar caught Phil’s attention by posture alone. He looked young, possibly no older than Clint, and held himself like someone who knew how to fight, and gave Phil an assessing look similar to the one Phil gave him, but reflexively, if out of unhappy habit. It intrigued Phil – he knew the wizarding world had its own version of police officers, and Britain’s civil war was barely past. Could this man be an off-duty Auror? A former combatant? He had light brown hair and pale skin, and his clothing seemed to be wizarding-casual, an open robe over what appeared to be a regular shirt and sweater, and basic trousers.

Phil made his way over to the bar, immediately deciding that the best approach would be Blatant
Tourist. “Good morning,” he said politely to the bartender, not even trying to mask his American accent. “Can I get a butterbeer?”

The man nodded. “Of course. Welcome to the Leaky Cauldron.” A twitch of his wand sent a mug flying from the rack to a spigot which immediately dispensed a golden brew. Phil’s advance research in New York had taught him that butterbeer, a small beer common throughout England, would be readily available everywhere, and appropriate to order before lunch if not also ordering a meal. He also knew it wasn’t nearly as common in the US, where wizards generally preferred either soft drinks like ginger ale or root beer if not ordering alcohol. “Visiting?” the bartender asked as he passed Phil the mug.

“For the first time, actually,” Phil answered amiably. He raised the mug both to the bartender and the young man still standing there. “I had the opportunity to do some business in London, and decided to take the day for some sight-seeing. I figured I’d get the whole experience.”

“Nice to know that folks are willing to visit. I’m Tom, and this is my pub.” The bartender extended his wand hand, which Phil shook equably. “And if you need it, we’ve got vacancies.”

“Phil Coulson, nice to meet you.” Phil turned to the young man with an open smile, inviting introduction.

Up close, Phil could see his posture had relaxed as Phil had initiated friendly conversation. Phil could also see the traceries of scars across the man’s skin, faint silvery lines that seemed to cover him entirely. Thinking of Harry’s fading scar, Phil wondered if there were some curses that magic simply couldn’t heal entirely. Even the man’s hands were scarred, though he extended one for a handshake without hesitation.

“Remus Lupin,” he introduced himself. He had an educated accent, more refined than Tom’s.

“Pleasure.” Phil took a deep drink of the butter beer.

“So what sort of business brings a man back from the Colonies, Mr. Coulson?” asked Tom.

“Family interest, primarily.” Both British wizards nodded at this. “I learned last spring that my distant cousin and her husband had, well, in the unpleasantness…” Phil alluded to the wizarding upheavals and both British wizards nodded solemnly. “I’ve taken it upon myself to keep an eye on the estate for the sake of their child.”

“That’s good of you,” Tom commented. “Nice to see families stand up for one another.”

Lupin had taken a long drink of his ale at Phil’s words, looking a bit stricken. “We lost too many.”

“That we did, lad, that we did,” Tom replied sympathetically.

Phil raised his mug, giving Tom a moment to select a drink himself before intoning, “To absent friends.” The two men echoed him. “At any rate, I had the opportunity to come to London to see to some things, so I took it. I do need to visit the bank, but having never visited Diagon Alley before, I decided to take the scenic route, as it were.”

“Ah, took a Portkey in to the Ministry then? It’s a decent walk through Muggle streets from there.”

“I don’t mind walking,” Phil answered mildly.

“London’s a nice city, even for wizards,” Lupin pointed out. “I imagine New York to be
“Well, New York is really several cities. The neighborhoods really have their own personalities. And Cauldron Court, well, it’s as modern as can be.”

“You might find Diagon to be a bit traditional, then,” Lupin said.

“I like history. It’ll be worth the experience.” Phil finished his butterbeer with a large swallow – far too sweet for his tastes, Clint probably would love it. “After all, I’ve had a butterbeer at the Cauldron, and now I’m off to Gringotts. Getting the full tour, so to speak.”

Tom smiled and toasted him at that, pleased with the flattery. Lupin nodded as well. “I’m headed into the Alley myself, I can show you the brick.”

“I’d appreciate it.” Brick? Phil accompanied the wizard through the bar and out a back door that anywhere else would lead to an alley full of dumpsters. Here it was a small quiet courtyard enclosed in brick walls. Lupin drew his wand and tapped three times on one particular miscolored brick about chest high.

The wall shuddered, and then to Phil’s amazed delight, the bricks all moved, shouldering one another aside until they formed an archway much like the iron one in Cauldron Court.

“Welcome to Diagon Alley,” Lupin said softly, as if presenting.

Again, Phil noticed how it seemed that Wizarding Britain had missed the 20th Century entirely. At least in Cauldron Court, the bustling modern air of New York City could still be felt. Here, three and four story buildings still bearing Tudor architectural style leaned over a crooked brick thoroughfare.

“Gringotts is straight down, you can’t miss it,” Lupin indicated the direction. “I’d say stay out of Knockturn Alley, but you seem capable of handling yourself, Mr. Coulson.”

Ah, so Lupin had recognized combat readiness in someone else, Phil realized. That was interesting.

“Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Lupin. I have to ask.. Auror?”

Lupin’s jaw worked a moment, and Phil realized he’d miss-stepped somehow. “No, but …”

“Ah, veteran then. My apologies.” Phil gave a slight bow of concession, a more wizardingmanners gesture than he’d previously shown. “We had none of that conflict in North America, you know. I hadn’t even known my cousin was magical before discovering she’d died.”

Lupin shot him a sideways glance at the subtle implication that Phil was muggleborn, and that his deceased relative had been too. It gave Phil a chance to gauge what side Lupin had fought on.

The wizard said, “Too many good wizards and witches were murdered, just because of an accident of birth. To be honest, Mr. Coulson, there aren’t really enough wizards that we can afford to exclude children who have magic, no matter the circumstances of their birth.”

“I had wondered,” Phil said, taking the opportunity, “if somehow all of Wizarding Britain had been wiped out! It surprised me to find out no one on her husband’s side of the family could step up.”

Lupin eyed Phil again, clearly trying to figure out who Phil was purportedly related to. “Entire families were wiped out in a night, at the worst of it.”

Phil made an appropriate sympathetic face. “It was tragic. Thank goodness it’s over.”
Lupin’s face, if anything, got even more depressed. “At what cost, though?” He shook himself, and then made his own bow to Phil. “I’m afraid I have to be about my own business, Mr. Coulson, but it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise.” Phil nodded and watched the wizard walk away. Lupin had known Potters, at the least. Phil could tell. His final reaction to Phil’s allusion of how the conflict had ended was telling. Lupin also appeared to be in the right age range, he must have been a schoolmate.

Phil made his way down the Alley, noting the bookstore Kragan had written about still had a poster about “Harry Potter Books” in the window, though a smaller rider had been added indicating the publication was delayed. The early version Kragan had obtained and sent to Phil for review had been utterly ridiculous, portraying the adventures of a super-wizard in the person of a three year old. Phil though it sensationalist trash, and not really appropriate for children anyway. He had Gringotts send a scathing injunction, demanding substantial rewrites as well as a percentage of the profit, or they could remove any and all allusion to Harry Potter from the product. Because it was handled entirely through Gringotts on behalf of the Estate, Phil hadn’t had to reveal himself as Harry’s Guardian just yet.

One thing Phil did notice was that unlike Cauldron Court, the population of Diagon Alley skewed much older. Phil knew most of their children went to boarding schools, primarily Hogwarts, where Harry would be expected to go in time, so he didn’t expect to see adolescents at this time of year. But the vast majority of shopkeepers and shoppers seemed to be much older. Their civil war had clearly taken a toll on the population. When he did see someone between the ages of 20 and 40, they almost always had a very small child with them.

Phil visited Gringotts only long enough to exchange some few British pounds for galleons, which he could simply spend in Cauldron Court later, a make-shift errand only necessary to keep up the cover story of having business in the Alley. Mostly he wandered a bit, utilizing the role of tourist to map the area.

In the end, he slipped back through the Leaky Cauldron and out into regular London after about five hours, with a better understanding of the hide-bound nature of Wizarding Britain. He rejoined the ever patient Agent Davies and headed back to SHIELD’s London HQ.

The mall seethed with harried parents and sugared-up children. Clint kept a sharp eye on the treats dropped into Harry’s sack. Fortunately Harry didn’t seem to have any allergies, but Clint would end up confiscating quite a bit anyway.

The din of the crowd was nearly overwhelming this Halloween evening. Harry had done his SHIELD trick or treating earlier in the afternoon, going office to office in safe departments like Finance and Human Resources like other children of SHIELD agents. There, Clint could trust the home-baked treats offered up to grinning kids were safe. Here at the mall, he’d have to be a bit more circumspect with what he allowed Harry to consume. Plus he’d have to justify his decisions to Phil once he got back from the London mission, since the last thing Clint wanted to do is let his partner come home to an over-sugared sick kid. Fortunately a few of the stores were offering small simple toys rather than candy.
When the fifth salesperson smiled at Natasha and observed “Your son is so cute!” Clint noted the slight tightening around Tasha’s eyes even as she demurred and accepted the compliment, while Harry reached for Clint to be picked up, showing off his latest prize.

“Let’s take a break,” Clint suggested, directing them to a play area. He took Harry’s bag of candy and hat, and sent him off to play with the other kids clambering over simple structures while he and Natasha found a spot on the surrounding benches. After a moment, he leaned over to her. “What’s the matter?”

Anyone who didn’t know Tasha – which basically meant, anyone not Clint – wouldn’t see the frustration on her face. She hissed out a breath and muttered “They’re so unobservant!”

“Who?”

“All these people. Every one, they see the hair and the eyes and they assume. They do not see that Harry reaches for you, not me, they ignore his behavior, his tells. How are they so blind?”

“Aw Tash, are you angry on my behalf?” Clint teased. She shot him an annoyed glance. “Seriously, I’m not bothered that everyone thinks he’s your baby.”

“I am not angry, I just… How can they be so foolish?”

“Hey, not everyone goes through life wired like us, on alert.” He sat back and took a hard look at her. “They don’t have to be constantly watching out, because their lives aren’t under threat all the time. You’re not used to relaxing, are you?” She gave him a wide-eyed, for her, look. “Really, Tash, when was the last time you just kicked back and relaxed. Was it when we were together?” He cocked his head. “Was it even then? Have you every fully relaxed?”

“I…” For a moment, an expression of absolute confusion crossed her face. “I can’t recall.” She gave a slight shake, and then collected herself, glancing around even then to verify no one took advantage of her momentary lapse in attentiveness. Even in a crowded mall, on an innocuous holiday like Halloween, Natasha kept watch.

Clint made a face. “Okay, you should try to learn how to relax. SHIELD has your back. Off mission, you can kick back, take up a hobby or something. Find something that interests you. Like… I dunno, knitting.”

She gave him a look of complete disgust. “Knitting.”

“Hey, big pointy needles, right. Dual purpose.”

She snorted. “You cannot be serious.”

“Hey.” He draped an arm around her shoulders. “Part of being good is getting to feel good, right?”

She let him cuddle her a bit before shrugging him off. “I will try.”

“Awesome. Hey, let’s get outta here. Kid’s got enough sugar to last him a week, and Phil will kill me if I let it get out of hand. We’ll go home and order Chinese and watch Disney. Sound good?” Tasha’s clearance had increased to the point where she could spend the night off base, and she occasionally slept on their couch.

“Sounds like a plan.” They collected Harry and headed home.
Early on the morning of November first, Phil reported to the Operations Control hub at HQ. The face trace had begun for Privet Drive on the 30th, and they hadn't had any hits yet. The original plan was to give it another day before calling the op until next July.

But after only twenty minutes, something in Phil's instincts had him shifting the system. "Get me a mobile unit, I want to move ops control to site," he ordered. Within fifteen minutes, he climbed into a van painted as if a plumbing service company and they headed to Surrey.

He wouldn't have been able to express it, but he had an itch, a hunch. He had two agents in the back with him, watching the various feeds around the neighborhood while a third local agent drove. They arrived on site in an hour, and parked two blocks away from the target.

The night before had been Halloween, and there were a few signs that the neighborhood had celebrated, a few candy wrappers, a tree festooned with toilet paper. For the most part, the pulse of the neighborhood continued unchanged from previous days. Since it was also a Saturday, a few people moved around the area, tending to their landscaping or just enjoying a day off.

Not long after lunch, Mrs. Petunia Dursley emerged from Number Four with a bassinet, taking to the street to parade her obese offspring around in the mild autumn air. Phil managed to refrain from sneering at the woman on his monitor. It was unfortunate that the Dursleys constituted unreliable contacts. Still, the operation kept an attentive eye on her.

"Sir?" One of the agents drew his attention. "I have an unknown."

"Where?"

"Edge of the park, by those bushes."

Phil adjusted his view on the monitor. A man stood at the edge of the park that bordered a cross street. He was partially obscured by a tree.

"Can we get a better view?" Phil asked.

"No sir, sorry, that's the only camera at that angle."

"Where did he come from?"

"I don't know sir. He just... appeared." The agent seemed distressed that she couldn't answer Phil's question, but that only made Phil more certain they finally had a hit. Only a wizard could appear out of nowhere.

"I'm going for a walk. All eyes on, people." Phil stood and adjusted his jacket. He was armed, and in addition, he had the wand tucked under his forearm sheath. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to pretend to use it, but it might be useful to have handy.

"Sir, there's no backup on standby."
“I won’t need it. Just going to take a look.” Phil peeked out of the van, and once he was sure it was clear, he stepped out and started the easy walk towards the park.

He quickly noticed he was behind Petunia Dursley, which was fortunate – she wasn’t likely to spot him. Not that he would have expected to be recognized. Still, it allowed him to meander easily and make note of who acknowledged her and who didn’t. She strolled on the side of the street opposite the park, and didn’t seem likely to cross to it. As she continued, Phil slowed, watching for the unknown man.

As he hoped, the man emerged from the shadows as Dursley went by. When he stepped into full light, Phil smiled to himself. Phil quickly crossed the street and approached the man, who watched Petunia Dursley with a puzzled expression, as if he thought he knew her but couldn’t be sure.

When he got close enough, Phil cleared his throat. “Excuse me? Mr. Lupin?”

Remus Lupin jumped and spun, startled. “I – Mr. Coulson?”

“Fancy meeting you here.”

“I – I’m sorry, I didn’t… that is to say…”

Phil waved off the man’s terrible attempt to generate an excuse. “You are both right and wrong.”

“What?”

“You’re right, that is Lily Potter’s sister.”

Lupin slumped. “Of course, you’re with Dumbledore. Look, he had to know I’d come check on Harry. I mean, Lily always said Petunia hated her, hated magic, I just wanted to make sure Harry was alright.” He gave Phil a crooked smile. “At least someone competent like you IS watching out for Harry. I was afraid the Headmaster would have left him with Petunia unsupervised.”

Phil hummed a little. “Actually, that’s where you’re wrong.”

“I’m wrong?”

“Dumbledore did leave Harry with Petunia unsupervised. Fortunately, Harry’s not here any longer.”

Lupin stared in surprise then glanced back at the Dursley woman. Then he slumped. “There’s a ward then? I tripped it?”

“No, Mr. Lupin. As I said yesterday, I’ve taken it upon myself to watch over my late cousin’s family estate.” Phil watched the understanding dawn on Lupin’s face.

“Your… your cousin was… Lily? YOU have Harry?” Something like relief colored Lupin’s voice.

“Perhaps you’d like to join me for a drink, Mr. Lupin? I think we have a great deal to talk about.”
I will not make any promises about updates (since that's never worked out for me in the past!), but only assure you that I have never ever forgotten our little family, and I do always intend to continue.
Clint Barton knew he had abandonment issues. Hell, his abandonment issues had abandonment issues of their own! When Phil’s mission ended up getting extended several extra days, Clint started feeling that sick, jumpy feeling in his chest, but fortunately this time he recognized it for what it was, and instead of allowing the paranoia to get out of hand, he called his SHIELD therapist.

She made time for him quickly and praised him warmly for the decision. “It’s good that you were able to recognize what you were feeling and take productive action.”

“Yeah, but what if…”

“What if what?”

“What if he really is doing the slow fade?”

The doc narrowed her eyes. “Tell me, does Phil seem like the kind of person who’d walk out on a child?”

Clint flinched. During their sessions, when discussing Clint’s personal issues, the doc always referred to Phil as Phil. Their relationship wasn’t about SHIELD, but she had to know the man professionally, know what kind of person Agent Coulson was. Yet she kept the focus on Clint, and Clint’s perception of the relationship.

“Naw, he’d never abandon Harry.”

“So, knowing that, you can be certain he’ll return. Now, does Phil seem like the kind of person who’d walk out on a partner?”

Clint squirmed a little in his seat. “No.”

“So even if he was thinking about ending your relationship, he’d probably talk to you?”

“Er… yeah.”
“Have you spoken to Phil since he went away?”

“A little. He tries to check in about the time Harry’d be going to bed.”

“And what does he say?”

“Well, y’know, he can’t talk about the mission.” She eyes him, and Clint caves a little. “He says he misses us and loves us. Both of us.”

“Is Phil prone to lying?”

“Hell no.” The doc sits back and lets him stew in the pot of his own making. “Alright, alright. I get it -- there’s no basis for what I’m feeling, doesn’t mean I don’t still feel it!”

“I know, Clint, and that’s fine. Feelings are frequently irrational. But, the point is that you have the ability to remind yourself that they are irrational, that you really have no reason for feeling this way, and that’ll help you get past those feelings. “

“Yeah, I get it….. I just… you know.” They’d talked a lot about his childhood and his issues in the past. Clint genuinely tried to make therapy work, listening to the doc and trying to do as she suggested, just like he followed the advice of the medical doctors and dentists and all the other health personnel SHIELD used to keep their people healthy and even-keeled.

“I know. And I suggest that you discuss these feelings with Phil, if for no other reason to verify that he is not ‘fading out’ on you, as you put it.”

Clint cringed. “Yeah, but what if he IS?”

She sighed, but before she could work around his latest crisis of confidence, his cellular phone rang.

SHIELD issued cellular phones to most agents, square little things called Blackberries which would also send him messages and meeting alerts and stuff. Some of the juniors in the tech departments were already calling them “crack-berries” after crack cocaine, because of the way the senior agents seemed to become immediately addicted to their usage. Clint hated the thing; a poor typist on the best of days, he felt like he couldn’t help but mash several letters for every one he tried to pick, he had no idea what half the little images were or most of what the thing could do. But he did rather like not being chained to a desk, because the thing let him get phone calls and emails anywhere he was.

It also let him see what phone number was calling him, and because SHIELD operations could mobilize in minutes, he was allowed to keep it on during his therapy sessions. This time, however, it wasn’t Ops Command calling him. It was Harry’s day care.

He immediately answered. “Hello?”

“Mr. Barton?”

“Yes.”

“This is Mrs. Wells down at the day care.” Ever since he started living with Phil and Harry full time, Phil had put him down as an additional emergency contact, so Clint was not surprised to be called, only to get a call at all – lately Harry had no issues with day care. “There’s been an incident involving Harry.”
Mrs. Wells looked like a motherly sort, a little on the older side, a little on the rounder side, sort of the fairytale ideal of a kindly grandmother. She was also a former Operations Security Administration agent for SHIELD who’d started her career as a CIA code breaker, and that was a large part of why this particular day care, which she opened after retiring from SHIELD and still ran, was the most popular with agents who lived with their families in Manhattan.

Suffice it to say, Mrs. Wells had the experience to generally not be thrown by what Clint would call “weird shit”. Besides the children of SHIELD agents, of whom there actually weren’t that many, the day care’s security systems also pleased judges, ambassadors, and many other families where someone had a risky or high profile job, when the kids could become targets.

Mrs. Wells had let him know that this wasn’t a medical emergency, but he wasn’t about to waste time if Harry needed him. He went straight from the therapist’s office to the motor pool, and bet a junior driver he couldn’t make it to the day care in 10 minutes.

Kid made it 8.83 minutes. He didn’t even use the siren. Twenty bucks well spent in Clint’s opinion.

A total of 27 minutes had passed between Clint disconnecting from Mrs. Wells’ call to his striding into her office at the day care. Mrs. Wells sat in an easy chair by the wall, Harry sullenly pouting and obviously refusing to communicate from a loveseat. Clint was relieved to see they were nowhere near the big desk – Mrs. Wells didn’t believe in ‘keeping discipline’ like the school teachers Clint remembered from his own childhood. Instead, she tried to get kids to articulate the reasons behind their misbehavior.

“Hey champ,” Clint said, and Harry just about launched himself into Clint’s arms. He wasn’t crying, but he was clearly upset, and Clint looked to Mrs. Wells for context while Harry buried his face against Clint’s neck.

“Apparently there was something of an altercation on the playground. Harry was walking on the balance beam --” The balance beam was six feet of well sanded four by four that stood on 2 inch feet. Harry could very well have been turning cartwheels on it, what with the gymnastics Clint had already taught him. “--when another child came up to him. I haven’t heard all the details yet, but the confrontation ended with Brittany on the ground, Harry shouting at her and…. Here Mrs. Wells hesitated, and gamely finished, “Brittany’s hair had turned a rather unfortunate shade of, well, green.”

Clint blinked. “What color is it usually?”

“Blonde.”

“I see. Nobody actually hurt?”

Mrs. Wells pressed her lips. “I imagine Brittany’s… um, backside.. might be a bit bruised, but nothing else.”
“So… This is because of the green?”

“Because Brittany is currently hysterical in the nurse’s office, while Harry refuses to explain what happened.”

“I thought you said she was only bruised?”

Mrs. Wells cleared her throat a little. “The child is… somewhat given to… dramatics.”

“She’s acting up to get Harry in more trouble,” Clint spat, and Mrs. Wells had the good grace to blush.

“Yes, but we recognize that. I had hoped Harry would be willing to tell us what happened more clearly if you were here.” She squared her shoulders and said, “In regards to the green, well, I understand that agents, and by extension occasionally their families, are sometimes exposed to unusual situations and compounds? It so happens, Brittany’s father is a SHIELD lab technician.” Which was a subtle way of saying that everyone involved understood that if it actually was caused by Harry, how it happened was probably classified. Plus, even Clint has heard of blonde hair turning green from pools and things. Plausible deniability.

“Okay.” Clint sat and arranged Harry in his lap. Harry hung his head, but after a few nudges, turned his face up to meet Clint’s small smile. “Hey chick, you wanna tell me what happened?”

Harry shook his head. “C’mon….” Clint whispered conspiratorily. “I won’t be mad, Daddy won’t be mad.”

Harry’s head came up and he stared into Clint’s eyes. When he saw that Clint meant it he said, “I was just playing. I wasn’t even gonna tumble. Then Brittany comes up and she’s got Jeanie and Beth, and she says I haveta get down. And I say, I’m not done playing yet, and she says that… that….” And he sniffled a little. “That freaks without real families have to make way for good kids with real families.”

Clint’s eyes snapped to Mrs. Wells, who looked grim yet unsurprised at the bullying.

Harry went on. “So I said I have a family just like her, and she said no, she heard her daddy say that you and Daddy were just taking care of me ‘cause SHIELD said you had to! And that I’m a freak or ‘sperament or something, and I shouldn’t be ‘round normal kids. Then she tried ta push me off the beam. So I pushed her back. I was mad! She was saying bad stuff!” And then Harry was crying into Clint’s chest, but it was angry, frustrated tears.

“Shhh, chick, c’mon, you know that’s not true. Your daddy and I love you very much, we want you, we’re a family, the three of us,” Clint cuddled Harry close. “You’re our wonderful little boy! You’re not a freak or an experiment – you’re perfect.”

Clint glared as Mrs. Wells over Harry’s head. “I assume you’ll be addressing Brittany’s bullying with HER parents?” He’d also be reporting the lack of ops-sec in her home as well – SHIELD agents are not supposed to gossip.

“Yes, of course. I’m very sorry, Harry, that Brittany said such mean things, and we will get her to stop doing that.” Mrs. Wells patted Harry lightly on the back as he calmed. “And I know she pushed you first, but you know you should not have pushed her back.”

Harry made a face. “How come? I was on the beam, she wasn’t. She didn’t fall that far.”

Clint struggled to keep the smirk off his face while Mrs. Wells tried to explain. To be honest, she didn’t do that great of a job even in Clint’s opinion, and the skepticism on Harry’s face as she
spoke meant they'd probably have to discuss this at home after all. Personally, Clint saw no problem with pushing back if pushed, but he figured Phil might have a more conservative view.

When Harry neatly countered all of Mrs. Wells’ points about violence and decorum, primarily with the fair point that ‘she started it’, and was reduced to using gender roles by asserting that boys should not hit girls, Harry burst out “But that’s not fair!” He squirmed out of Clint’s lap and stood in front of Mrs. Wells full of indignation. “Brittany pushes and pinches and says mean things to everyone! She made Carrie cry yesterday! And we can’t push her back?” He put his little hands on his hips, and suddenly Clint had a vision of Phil’s vintage Captain America poster. “That’s not right! She doesn’t get to be mean and get away with it just because she’s a girl!”

In the ringing moment of silence that followed, Clint observed mildly, “He’s got you there.” Mrs. Wells’ mouth moved a moment, but when nothing came out, Clint stood. “Well, I assume you’ll address the girl’s chronic bullying with her parents. I’ll certainly be looking into her dad’s op-sec failures. When Phil gets back, we’ll see if Harry will continue here, or find another day care instead. In the meantime, I’ll be keeping Harry home with me.” He lifted Harry onto his hip, giving him a little hug. “Oh, and let me know what happens with the green? I’m curious.”

He walked out of the office with Harry in his arms, feeling like they’d both been channeling Phil, and like this was the most grown-up thing he’d ever done in his life. Harry wrapped both arms around his neck.

“Okay, let’s get your stuff and go home, chick. I think we’ve both had enough of this place for today.”

Harry nodded against his shoulder. After they collected Harry’s jacket and backpack and lunch box, Clint hailed a cab to get home.

“Hawk?”

“Yes chick?”

Harry looked up at him, green eyes still wet. “You’re my daddy too, right?”

Clint pulled him as close as the taxi seatbelts would allow. “You bet I am, Harry.” He swallowed hard around the lump of emotion in his throat. “Forever.”

As luck would have it, just to complete the emotional rollercoaster of the day, not long after lunch, Clint got a message on his Blackberry from Phil, indicating he was already en route to come home, and would be arriving that evening.

The news lit Harry up with joy. They both got down when their little family was apart. Phil had assured Clint in the past that he and Harry felt down when Clint was away on missions, but for some reason, Clint felt worse this time, even though Phil hadn’t been away nearly as long as Clint had been before.

Although Phil wouldn’t get home until nearly Harry’s bedtime, Clint decided to make their traditional ‘celebration’dinner of spaghetti and meatballs, with salad and garlic bread, all things
that would keep for Phil.

As it worked out, Phil got back even earlier than hoped, since he did his preliminary mission report on the flight. It wasn’t long after 6pm when he opened the door.

“Hey? Anybody home?”

“DADDY!” Harry’s shriek rang through the apartment and Phil only just managed to drop his bag and coat before getting tackled. Phil mock-groaned as he lifted Harry into his embrace.

“Oh, I think you’ve gotten bigger! Too big! Who is this big kid?” Clint chuckled at his antics.

“I’m me!” Harry managed to get both arms and both legs around Phil, tangling up his suit jacket and kicking his shoulder holster.

“Oh, you’re Harry. But I’m sure there were two people waiting here for me.”

“Papa is making spaghetti.”

Clint froze with the tasting spoon halfway to his mouth. Harry had called him Clint or Hawkeye or Hawkguy or Hawk before… but never…

“He is, is he? Is this a special night?”

“Yes! You are home, and we are family.”

Phil carried Harry into the kitchen, eyeing Clint curiously. “We certainly are a family.” He set Harry down. “Go wash your hands – it looks like I’m just in time for dinner.” When Harry scampered away, Phil stepped up to Clint, who finally snapped out of his shock and set down the spoon. Phil slid warm hands around Clint’s ribs and drew him in for an ardent kiss. “Hey there, Papa.”

Clint laughed nervously. “He didn’t… I mean, that’s the first time he…”

“Okay. Is that a problem?”

“No! I mean, I just… I’m not…”

“The hell you’re not. You are just as much as I am.” He kissed Clint again. “I missed you.”

Clint suppressed a flinch. “Missed you too.”

“You want tell me what this is about?”

“Later,” Clint gave Phil a crooked smile as Harry tromped back into the room.

After dinner, and a little playtime and stories, and caving on bedtime for another story because he’d been gone, Phil finally drew the door to Harry’s room mostly closed and joined Clint in cleaning up the kitchen.

“So, how did the mission go?” Clint asked, trying to stave off the discussion of family for a bit, hoping instead to talk Phil around it. He knew he should tell Phil about his insecurities, but figured they could work up to that.

Phil’s eyes lit up. Given they were Harry’s parents, by SHIELD's definitions, he didn’t have to
hold back on anything about Operation Watcher or the visit to Diagon Alley. He eagerly told Clint all about the visit, the tavern and the alley, and especially about the wizard he’d befriended, Remus Lupin. He talked as they did the dishes.

Phil described the man’s physical carriage, how he moved like a fighter. How he came across as well educated, which boded well for Hogwarts’ curriculum. He described their conversations, how he led Lupin into realizing he’d adopted Harry and why, and especially the careful conversation where Phil managed to question, and cast doubt, on Dumbledore’s actions and motivations in placing Harry with Petunia Dursley in the first place. He talked about Lupin’s loyalty to Dumbledore, and how Phil suspected there was something deeper there than simply fondness for a beloved educator.

“Okay, that’s kinda creepy, right? I mean, that’s like, serious loyalty. Like… me n Tasha, you n Fury type loyalty,” Clint observed, passing Phil a plate to dry.

“Yes, I was surprised. Which means there’s something more to Lupin, something I haven’t gotten to yet.” Phil sounded intrigued. Clint grumbled a little.

“Like what? And if he WAS this big friend of James Potter, how come he wasn’t around for Harry?”

Phil frowned slightly. “From what I understand, he’d actually been overseas that Halloween, didn’t get back until several days later. Then he got very vague about the time line, talking about his grieving process. And he claimed that first he tried to get information through something called the WOO, which I found out later is the Wizarding Orphan Office – which consists of one old witch who’s always out to tea – “

“Not exactly CPS, huh?” Clint went to put the garlic bread in the refrigerator.

“Not remotely. From what I gathered, most wizard orphans are taken in by distant family members, which was the justification for leaving Harry with Petunia – as Lily Potter’s sister, she was the closest living relative, so no one thought it odd, OR thought to check in on him, at least until Lupin got involved.”

“But he didn’t, not really, not in time,” Clint pointed out.

“Right. Eventually he went to Dumbledore, who evidently gave him a runaround for several months, before finally conceding that he’d placed Harry with Petunia. Then Dumbledore wouldn’t tell Lupin where that was.”

“This Dumbledore is a real piece of work, isn’t he?”

Phil sighed. “I get the impression that Lupin didn’t think it was suspicious. He wrote off all of Dumbledore’s motivations as protecting, not neglecting, Harry. Even though he admitted he knew that Lily and her sister had been estranged. Evidently they’d been drifting apart for years, and their parents’ fatal car crash just before Lily graduated from Hogwarts did in their relationship entirely.”

Clint winced at that. “Yeah, I get that. So how did Lupin end up tailing Petunia if he didn’t know where she lived?”

Phil smiled. “He’s smart. He essentially went out and educated himself on, well, basic spy-craft. Learned how to negotiate public records, located Petunia’s married name that way, and eventually tracked her down.”
Suddenly the expression on Phil’s face, of amusement and admiration, set Clint off. “Smart, huh? How smart?” He set to scrubbing out the sauce pot with more than necessary force.

“Well, I don’t know, but certainly clever enough to immerse himself in essentially a foreign culture and find a target on little more than a name.” Phil paused, and added, “He didn’t have any idea of electronic surveillance, though, which is how we spotted him on the street. It’s like wizards have no sense of technology. But outside of that… he’d make a good SHIELD agent.”

Clint sneered. “Oh would he?”

“Clint?”

Clint turned and just barely restrained himself from shoving the wet pot into Phil’s hands. “So he’s a fighter, he’s smart, he’s educated, he’s a wizard. I suppose you’ll be telling me he’s good looking too.”


“Well, should I be? I mean, this guy has everything going for him that’s fascinated you about this wizarding stuff for months. Now you say you want him in SHIELD….”

“Clint!” Phil set aside pot and towel to grab Clint’s shoulders. “I am NOT interested in Remus Lupin that way! For one thing, he’s straight.”

“How do you know?”

“My gay-dar is better than yours.”

Clint growled. “Oh, go to hell.”

“Seriously, he’s just an interesting potential asset. And we have leverage over him. I’m telling you all about him so that you and I, as Harry’s parents and as SHIELD agents, can decide if we want to give this man access to Harry!”

“Parents?”

“Yes. Look, Lupin is potentially a huge asset for SHIELD, if we can convince him to transfer his loyalty to Harry and us, and by extension the Division. He’s a fully educated wizard. He’s also Harry’s only link to his biological parents, and potentially a skilled tutor. And Harry is Lupin’s only remaining link to his lost friends.” Phil inched closer, letting his hands slide over Clint’s shoulders and down the blades to his back. “But he’s also potentially a threat – if his loyalty isn’t to Harry and us, he has the ability to snatch Harry and teleport away magically, and we’d never find him again.” Clint could not stop the full body shudder that wracked him at the thought of losing Harry. Phil embraced him fully. “Any decision made from now on effects Harry directly. I wouldn’t dare make that decision without you, Clint. You are Harry’s father too, his Papa,” Clint could hear the smile in Phil’s voice, “And you have as much to say about what happens next as I do.”

“I… I was afraid…” Clint admitted in a small voice, leaning into Phil’s body. “There’s nothing, nothing legal, that makes us, makes me…” He shook his head and pressed his face into the crook of Phil’s neck, much like Harry had done to him that day in distress. “I don’t want to lose you or Harry.”

Phil hugged him tightly. “I love you, Clint. Harry loves you. Maybe…. If it’ll help, do you want a cohabitation agreement? And if you want to adopt Harry legally too, I’d be all for that.”
Clint jerked back to stare Phil in the face. “You mean it? You’d let me adopt Harry? For real?”

“We already ARE a real family, Clint. I know.. I know you’ve haven’t had a lot of good experiences with family, but trust me, this is it. This is what it’s supposed to look like.”

“I.. Phil…”

Phil smirked. “Say yes.” They’d talked about issues like marriage before, early in their relationship, as Clint educated himself and overcame factors in his own internalized homophobia. “We can run up to Vermont*?”

Finally Clint laughed. “We don’t have to do that. But…. If you’re really okay with it, I’d like to adopt Harry.”

“Of course.” Phil kissed him, deeply and intently, before adding, “But you should keep Vermont in mind.”

Clint leaned back a touch to take in Phil’s expression fully. “You mean that. You’d do that.”

“Clint….you don’t… Of course I mean that! Clint, I want to keep you. For as long as I can, for as long as you want to be kept. Harry wants to keep you forever. We both want you here, with us, always. And…” He paused, a slightly silly and dumbfounded smile crossing his face. “No one has ever been jealous over me before. It’s amazing, to know that you want me that much! I’m… overwhelmed. I can’t… You are…” He yanked Clint in for a bruising kiss, then muttered against Clint’s lips, “You are the most amazing person I’ve ever been with and if you want to get Harry and get in the car right this minute, I will drive us all up to Vermont and we’ll hit a clerk’s office first thing tomorrow!”

Clint started laughing. “Oh my god, you sound like a rom-com.” He kissed Phil again and again. “We don’t have to run to Vermont, I trust you, I do, I just get… I get nervous, and then I get paranoid.”

Phil’s hands started wandering. “Tell me what to do so you’re not nervous anymore?”

Clint left a trail of kisses along Phil’s jaw, back to his ear, and whispered, “Just keep reminding me.”

Chapter End Notes

*In November of 2003, the nearest state to NYC that had any sort of legal standing for same sex couples was Vermont with their controversial “Civil Unions”. In fact, this particular chapter takes place just days before the Nov 18th 2003 decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Court that denying marriage rights to same-sex couples violated the state constitution. Because of that ruling, in May of 2004 Massachusetts became the first US state to issue regular marriage licenses to same-sex couples. I know this history well because I’m from Vermont, my father was in the state legislature during the civil union vote, and I have lived in Massachusetts since 1995. Also yes, by the end of 2003, Blackberries were pretty common amongst higher up corporate executives and government officials. I envision SHIELD issuing them (with better than standard security) to anyone who might need to be called in at a moment’s notice, like field operatives.
Oh, and little miss Brittany’s loose-lipped daddy will play a minor role later on....
Two days after Phil returned from London, after debriefing, learning about the day care incident and starting an op sec inquiry on the girl’s father, and researching alternate secure day cares, after Phil thought they were steady, Clint suddenly said “I want us to talk.”

Phil had rather thought they’d settled things that night.

“It’s just … sometimes….,” Clint whispered against Phil’s shoulder.

After they’d made love with startling intensity, with hands and lips and bare, flushed skin, with muttered vows of devotion and gasps of pleasure, as quietly as they could to not disturb the sleeping child in the apartment, and yet ferociously loud with emotion.

And Clint didn’t have to finish the sentence. Phil knew. They’d talked about their lives, their pasts, their similar loneliness until they’d come together. Sometimes, I’m afraid, Clint didn’t have to say, because it was only natural. Men with nothing to lose have nothing to fear. But since coming in from the cold, Clint has found Phil, and Harry, and this family, and SHIELD, and the righteous work they do, even Natasha now in the fold. Suddenly, he has everything he’d ever wanted, and so he had everything to lose.

“I know,” Phil whispered back. “Me too.”

But he nodded. “Okay. After bedtime?”

“Alright.”

Clint had spent most of the day at SHIELD while Phil kept Harry with him in his office, with occasional visits from Sitwell or outings with Hill. Phil knew Clint has a mission coming up, and probably most of his day was geared towards preparing for that but… oh.

Clint had seen his therapist in Psych today.

They got Harry down to bed and dinner cleaned up, and then Phil followed Clint to the living room where they both settled on the couch. After a moment of silence, Clint shifted so he was half-facing Phil, and reached out to take one hand.

“I owe you an apology,” Clint started, and when Phil shook his head, Clint squeezed his hand. “Yes, I do, a real one. Sex… sex doesn’t count.” He insisted with a small blush. “Just lemme get through this, okay?”

Phil sighed. “Okay.”

Clearing his throat a little, Clint went on. “I shouldn’t have attacked you because I was jealous. And really, it’s not that I was jealous, I mean, I really do trust you! I just… I am insecure sometimes, and my brain starts convincing me of things that aren’t true. You’ve never ever given me any reason to NOT trust you, but my brain got away from me when you didn’t come home on time and even though I know why you were talking about that wizard guy, I just…. He dropped his head in shame. “I shouldn’t take out my insecurities on you, they have nothing to do with you, and I’m sorry.”
“You’re forgiven!” Phil insisted immediately. “Clint, I … If that’s the case, then I owe you an apology too.”

“For what?” Clint looked up, startled.

“You could say I reinforced your insecurity by reacting positively to your jealousy, misplaced or not. I mean, I was… well, frankly, I really liked it.”

“You LIKED it?”

“Babe…” Now it was Phil squirming and admitting the hard things. “Not one of my previous relationships ended because I wanted it to.”

Clint tilted his head in thought. “You mean, you were always dumped?”

“Yes, basically. It was always ‘it’s not working for me, Phil’ or ‘we’re not clicking’ or once, ‘I met someone better’.”

“That asshole!”

Phil shrugged while still smirking at Clint’s instant support. “You… your reaction was to start a fight to KEEP me …. And I want to keep you, so it was kind of a good talk? From my point of view? Only you weren’t coming from a good place to begin with, so I’m sorry if I reinforced the bad by reacting positively.”

Clint sighed. “I forgive you.” He leaned forward until he could tuck his face against Phil’s neck. Phil wrapped his free arm around Clint’s back. “I love you,” Clint insisted softly.

“I love you too.”

“I hate talking.”

Phil chuckled at the whine in Clint’s voice. “I know, but it’s necessary.”

“Ugh.”

For a few minutes they just enjoyed the other’s proximity. Then Phil poked Clint lightly. “About the other stuff.”

Clint lifted his head. “Other stuff?”

“Vermont? Adoption? Cohabitation agreement?”

“Oh!”

Phil shifted a little. “I want you to know that I do want those things. With you. But… I want us to get there together? I mean, if you’re not ready, I can wait. Honestly I’m not a hundred percent sure I am ready, except that I know you should adopt Harry because two parents are better – with our jobs, it’s safer for him to have two legal guardians. But in terms of US…. You and me…. I do want… I mean, I do…”

Clint grinned. “Getting ahead of yourself, Phil.”

Phil poked him in retaliation. “You know what I mean.”

Clint grinned wider. “I do.”
Phil huffed, but then Clint pounced, and kissed him, and soon they were mock-wrestling on the couch, shifting until they were stretched out together. Eventually, Clint leaned back far enough to say, “I agree. I don’t know if we’re there just yet, but we’re getting there, and we can take our time for now. But yes, eventually, I can see us getting married. I mean, unioned. Whatever. But I’m willing to adopt Harry tomorrow. And it’s not like SHIELD doesn’t do everything their own way anyway. We’re totally a family to them, and that’s all that really matters. If something happens to me…” He shook his head at the expression in Phil’s face at the thought. “It’s more likely to be me and you know it. If something happens, you’re already on all my paperwork, and SHIELD doesn’t care about state laws, they’ll make it work if they have to. But we can stay together now and stick together in the future, and when WE decide together we wanna make it a legal thing outside of SHIELD, then we will.”

Phil pulled him down for a deep kiss. Long minutes later, he whispered, “You are so fucking smart.”

Clint laughed out loud.

Several days later, when they heard the news that Massachusetts would begin issuing marriage licenses for same-sex couples next year, Clint grinned and Phil blushed.

Director Fury gave full control of Operation Witchcraft to Agent Coulson. Agent Coulson promptly adjusted the operational goals to include the cultivation of an asset code-named ‘Veteran’, real identity redacted per SHIELD Ops Sec policy. A line item was added to the budget to cover establishing stable communications with the asset.

“What ARE our goals here, boss?” Phil asked. “Intelligence gathering aside, are we assuming there’s some kind of threat? Are we developing a threat response plan or are we developing a support plan?” Phil referenced the two standard operating procedures SHIELD generally used. A threat response plan meant they were watching a hot spot, expecting violence of some sort to break out, and would react within parameters built from the intelligence previously gathered. A support plan was based on what SHIELD could offer to the nation in question. The mission Phil had been on when he met Harry and Clint was due to a support plan – offering better intelligence systems and rapid response support to a country that might need the help against a threat the nation was “unprepared to handle” – meaning the usual weird science dangers for which SHIELD existed to address. Either way, SHIELD gathered intelligence and developed tactical plans, however the support method tended to be far more cooperative.

Fury drummed his fingers on the desk. They were meeting in his office in New York. The Director had secure offices in all major SHIELD locations and Fury himself swept for bugs and surveillance before every meeting, a necessary precaution since he moved back and forth from New York to DC frequently.

“I want to know. Isn’t that goal enough? There are people out there with abilities we have no idea how to counter, what to expect from them. People who can teleport. People who can convert matter with the wave of a STICK. And we don’t know how they do that. And I. Don’t. Know. Enough! About them to predict how SHIELD would have to respond to something like an attack
OR a disaster. What do they need? What are they missing? What would they want? If it comes down to us versus them, how many of them are there? Assuming they’re in every nation in the world, if it comes down to USA versus Russia, would they take those sides or present a third front unified amongst themselves?” Fury’s rant continued. “What about the bankers? They’re economically tied to both sides – where would they land? Can we make allies of them at all? Are they totally all xenophobes like our early analysis suggested, or can we find a way to be useful enough to THEM that they’d cooperate with US? What portion of the world population do they really represent? Have we even statistically included them? What if there’s an extra billion people on this planet and we didn’t realize? And if so, how are they managing their resources in such a way as to NOT impact global resources? And if they have a way, would they be willing to share it? Quietly of course,” Fury waved away Phil’s unspoken reminder of the Wizarding World’s global secrecy policy. “If they can convert matter, can they turn salt water into fresh? Can they capture carbon emissions and turn them into, I don’t know, helium? And where does the energy come from to do any of it?” He flung his hands in the air, exasperated by the lack of answers to his questions.

Phil frowned. “These are big questions, boss. That kind of analysis on countries we cooperate with still takes years to work out.”

“I know. Fortunately, we HAVE years. We just need better access.”

“So I get a pen-pal.”

“Exactly!”

Phil made a note. “I believe I can bypass trans-Atlantic communication issues by using the bank. I’m sure for a small extra fee they’d be willing to include personal correspondence with their out mail.” The Gringotts account Phil had opened for himself was used by SHIELD for any expenses Phil incurred pursuing their goals. Phil made it very clear that he would not ever dip into Harry’s inherited assets for SHIELD’s purposes. Fury completely agreed and didn’t argue with that position. Thanks to Gringotts’ connections, SHIELD simply transferred a budgetary amount to an associated non-magical bank, and Phil drew drafts on that account via Gringotts when in Cauldron Court, or Diagon Alley. Since wizards didn’t have telecommunications, it seemed they still used good old fashioned letter writing for the majority of their communication. There was something called a “floo” which required a fireplace; however, Phil’s apartment did not boast a fireplace, so he would be forced to practice his penmanship.

They debated how much intel Phil should provide to the asset, but in the end, Phil – with Clint’s agreement – chose to use as much real information as he could. After all, ‘Veteran’ had been friends with Harry’s parents, had known enough to seek out the Dursleys, and so there only so much obfuscation Phil could use in relation to Harry. As long as he left out their exact locations, Clint’s last name, Harry’s school, any sort of specific information, Phil could write as honestly as he would any other friend.

He would not admit to the involvement of Doctor Strange, however. Not long after registering his home as a magical residence, Phil had taken out a subscription to the local wizarding daily newspaper. It appeared on the same window sill the bank’s birds used every morning, generally before either Phil or Clint woke, which was frankly impressive given their early mornings. About a month ago, something odd had happened in Hong Kong, and the wizarding paper had covered it, along with a rather scathing op-ed about the Sorcerer Supreme. Clearly the good doctor was not popular amongst the wizarding world, as he’d admitted himself. The fact that the man straddled both worlds and yet would not cooperate with SHIELD was an ongoing complaint from Fury.
(Phil found it very interesting that the British wizarding daily paper – which he also received regularly, though bundled by week, through another carefully negotiated agreement with Gringotts – didn’t mention the events in Hong Kong at all. On the other hand, the British *Daily Prophet* made a rag like the *Daily Bugle* look like the *New York Times* in comparison.)

Instead, Phil would keep to the fiction of being a distant relative of Lily Potter’s, who’d last seen his cousin so long ago that neither had confirmed their magical skills. He’d already established most of this legend while talking to Lupin in Surrey, and in London. Now it was only a matter of building rapport and connection, and hopefully bending the wizard away from a strictly wizarding point of world-view.

The holidays came with their traditional levels of stress and insanity. Harry was thoroughly spoiled, and yet still as sweetly natured as any parent could wish. Phil and Clint took Harry to see the Rockefeller Christmas tree, to peer into all the shop windows, and to skate in Central Park. Natasha captured a wonderful picture Christmas morning, of Phil and Clint and Harry all sitting on the floor in front of their Christmas tree, smiling together, which Phil had duplicated and sent to ‘Veteran’ with his New Year’s greetings.

For Christmas, the asset had sent a number of wizarding photographs to Harry of his parents as school children and young adults, which were absolutely fascinating. Unlike paintings, they didn’t speak, but rather only moved, repeating a few moments in time over and over again. The most recent photo showed James and Lily Potter holding a barely 2 month old Harry during the first flakes of winter. Phil made sure to explain to Harry what he was seeing, his biological mother and father, before carefully storing the photos in an acid-free album on a shelf.

Lily Evans Potter was a lovely woman. She had the peaches and cream complexion of a natural redhead, with the smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks, and long naturally ginger hair. She didn’t have the perfect looks of someone like Natasha, but her eyes stood out – a startling bright near-emerald green, so very rare, exactly the same color and shape of the eyes that shone in Harry’s face.

Of additional interest to Phil were the photos of the quartet of boys at Hogwarts. Remus Lupin, James Potter, the alleged murderer Sirius Black, and the alleged victim Peter Pettigrew. Potter and Black seemed especially close, competitively mugging for the camera while Pettigrew laughed and Lupin rolled his eyes. The two even looked similar – dark haired with aristocratic features, between the heights of the other two boys, though Potter had the slightest advantage. Potter had hazel eyes and Black a disconcerting light grey, and Black wore his hair longer. Potter’s hair had the same wild tousled growth that Harry’s exhibited, so Phil guessed that was an inherited Potter trait. By contrast to the two central figures, Lupin and Pettigrew looked incidental. Phil noted Lupin still exhibited a number of scars on his face – maybe the result of a childhood illness and not the wizarding civil war, as Phil had originally thought? The fourth boy was the shortest, having blonde hair and watery blue eyes, with all the body language of a born follower. Phil wondered where he found the courage to chase down Black, even though clearly Black was the more vicious.

That is, assuming the story of the events around Black’s arrest were true.

Agent Coulson during his investigations had inquired of the British Ministry about the trial transcript of Sirius Black’s conviction. He’d cast himself as doing research for a book. Oddly, he received no response. Further investigation revealed that the Wizarding World had nothing like
the Freedom of Information Act – the ability to access official records was completely capricious, based on if the individual handling the request thought it was worth the effort. SHIELD made a note that could the asset Veteran be fully brought into the fold, perhaps sending him to personally request the trial records would be more effective, although with the caveat that the asset could be considered compromised in this area.

As manager of Harry’s inheritance, Phil finally allowed the children’s books to be published. He ensured they’d edited out any specific references to his son – the main character was still a boy named Harry Potter, but there was no mention of Voldemort, of the ridiculous ‘Boy Who Lived’ moniker, or of his scar. Phil had conceded on the character surname since advertising had already occurred, but the official title of the book dropped the name “Potter” and was simply named “Harry and the Golden Unicorn”; the new plot was a far more child-appropriate tale of the dream-like adventures of a small boy, involving a devoted house elf guardian and an unrealistically clever pet cat. No mention of parents, though. There was just enough vagueness to the setting that if the umbrella label of “Harry Potter Books” were forgotten, the resemblance to his son could be considered coincidental. The first book hit Diagon Alley shelves just in time for Christmas, and did so well that even Kragan smiled. A second book was due out by Easter. Phil had responded noncommittally to a suggestion from the publisher to produce tie-in toys. His inner child had been somewhat delighted with the idea of action figures, but he knew logically that it would create too much attention on and expectations about Harry when he went to school.

Both Phil and Clint still did missions for SHIELD, carefully planning and trading off timing so that one of them was always with Harry. Harry actually did return to Mrs. Wells’ pre-school program; the SHIELD investigation into the father of Harry’s nemesis, Brittany, turned up more than just gossiping despite his NDAs – the man also had removed items from the SHIELD labs against all protocols and security clearances. His claims of ‘tinkering at home’ did him no good, and in the end SHIELD lowered his clearances, tied him up tight with further non-disclosure regulations, and transferred him to a bio-lab in Wisconsin. That last was the final straw – his wife, a promising Assistant District Attorney, refused to relocate with him. Instead she filed for divorce and moved to another part of Manhattan, transferring Brittany to a different pre-school program. Phil was quite smug about the whole thing.

In fact, the lack of injuries coupled with a successful mission record, a positive resolution to Harry’s pre-school issues, and the re-affirmation of his commitment with Clint made Phil feel nearly optimistic about 2004. The first few months flew by with something resembling normalcy.

It took until mid-April for it all to change.

Chapter End Notes

HI EVERYBODY! Happy New Year! Thanks for sticking it out -- I received your notes & encouragement with pleasure. This chapter was a beast of Writer's Block for me, but I've managed to rev up to the next major plot point, so hopefully the Muse will get over the wall and you won't have to wait 2 years for the next chapter!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!