Here, There Be Dragons

by Unadulterated

Summary

Thor isn’t the only Avenger not native to Earth. But when Tony unexpectedly starts showing symptoms of draconic magic, Clint understandably panics—after all, he thought he’d left everything having to do with his heritage behind three centuries ago…

Notes

So here's the revamp. Ta-da! If you're here from before, thank you for hanging with me. If you're new, welcome!

I won't promise a regular updating schedule. But I will promise that I'll write.

Titles of chapters refer to the POV of the chapter.
Clint

It’s a stark battlefield: black and white. It should be easier to tell who’s winning, but it’s been tug of war for hours. This isn’t even the first battle.

Phil moves his bishop four spaces diagonal. “Your move, Clint.”

“Pawn to E-5,” Clint says, his voice slightly muffled, but that’s what happens when a face is pressed against a table. The game would probably be going better if Clint could bring himself to look at it, but he’s so tired. This last week hasn’t been good for anyone. This last day is going to send him to an early grave. Which is ridiculous—he’s not even yet two millennia old.

Phil sighs, but Clint can hear him move the piece for him. “It’s been quite a day. Are you alright?”

Clint closes his eyes. “That’s still a question?” he asks tiredly.

“You know,” Phil says conversationally, “this isn’t the end of the world.”

Clint smiles sardonically to himself, one hand curling into a fist where it rests on his knee. Even Phil doesn’t get it. It’s enough to make the constant, low-burning rage flare up from time to time. “You say that. You don’t know.”

The response is a thoughtful hum, until Phil says, deliberately light, “And I wonder why it might be that I’m lacking in information.”

Clint pulls his head up—it feels like it weighs about a thousand pounds, even though he’s been wearing his human form constantly for going on two years, now—and sets his elbows on the table to rest his chin on his curled fists. “It’s been a shitty day,” he says flatly. “Happy now?”

“Happy isn’t the word I would use,” Phil murmurs, sliding his rook forward. “Your move.”

“You know I hate chess.” Clint stares straight at Phil, searching for something—an answer, anything—but Phil seems fascinated by the board. Or maybe simply underwhelmed by Clint’s frustration. “I’m just—” He breaks off. He’s not even sure how he intends to finish the sentence, but it’s better to keep quiet. God know Phil doesn’t deserve six centuries of his issues dished out.

“I know you think you’re alone,” Phil tells him quietly. Clint keeps his mouth shut with the knowledge that Phil can’t possibly understand to what extent that’s true. “But as of what happened in the kitchen today? You aren’t anymore.”

Clint laughs, loud, short, and hollow. “Yeah, right. I don’t care what mojo shit Stark got himself hit by,” he says. “He’s not, he’s just—” And again, Clint doesn’t know how to finish that sentence.

Phil narrows in on that, lifting his gaze from the board to look shrewdly at Clint. “Do you think he’s going to be okay?”

What does he even want? The truth? That Clint has no idea how Stark has survived this long with a curse in his blood, that it would be easier for everyone if he spontaneously combusted and Clint just disappeared?

He doesn’t answer, because there isn’t a good one to give. Everything’s so messed up.
He’s so tired.

“Is he going to survive?” Phil presses.

“Maybe,” Clint offers.

After a long, tense moment, Phil seems to sense he isn’t going to get anything else out of Clint and subsides. The tension in the air decreases and Phil sighs, looking away. “Don’t tell him I said this,” Phil finally says, “but for the record? I think Stark will make a fine dragon.”

Clint snorts. His eyes meet Phil’s and he smiles, his teeth just this side of too sharp for a human grin. “That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

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Clint.

He chose the name because he liked the way it sounds. The English word flint feels appropriately sharp on his tongue, but he’s never liked the quiet consonants, so he replaces the wispy ffff for k, the sound of steel striking and sparking and creating a fire.

K-lint. Clint.

He doesn’t choose that name until he comes to Earth, of course. But it’s the only one to use in telling the tale. The name he hatched with is something he left behind, even in his memories. He forged his new name to be human fire. Clint.

He doesn’t find the rest of himself so easily.

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Roughly Three Centuries Previously

The night is heavy and humid. That’s not unusual for this time of the season, especially since mother hates the humming of the humidity controls through the night, but despite the comforting silence, Clint lies awake itching out of his skin and scales even as his family sleeps soundly around him.

He’s awake for other reasons too, of course.

Softly, he rolls to his feet, cringing when his talons rasp against the metal edges of the cushioned nest. Can’t have that. He presses his wings close to his back and breathes until they merge, until he stands and he’s smaller, pink soft skin and a flat, expressive face.

They call this form humanoid, sometimes. Clint isn’t sure why, and apparently the name got hi-jacked by some up and coming species a while back. He hasn’t seen a human before, but he’s heard they look something like this form. Even though it’s their only form.
Clint can’t imagine trying to sleep in this fragile form every night. But he can’t imagine staying here, either.

Mother stirs as he reaches the mouth of their clan’s glass-windowed sleeping bay, wary of one of her hatchlings leaving the safe bounds of their home. [Son?] she queries, reaching out throughout their mental link, her huge, scaled body shifting uneasily at the back of the cave.

A long time ago, that link used to be warm sunshine and a safe embrace. Now Clint suppresses a shudder at the feeling of fingers scrambling for a hold on treacherous rocks. [Mother,] Clint returns obediently, if hesitantly. Anything to make her go back to sleep.

She’s still halfway in her dreams, anyway, by the feel of it. Her absent concern washes into him. *Awake/not sleeping, [Nightmares?]*

[Not tonight.] *Restless,* he sends, as close to the truth as he dares. [Going for a night flight. Love you.] He pushes *reassurance* at her, hoping, and soon enough, she settles back down. His eyes linger on her garnet scales, dulled with pain and grief, and holds his breath at the sudden onslaught of guilt and anger. He can’t believe he’s doing this. Only the insane leave their clan behind *willingly,* and yet here he is—but there’s nothing left to stay for.

Not anymore.

[Love you,] Mother sends, the thought a faint, sleepy whisper.

Clint steels himself against it and slips away from his home for the last time.

The balcony drops off from their sleeping bay and down to the dimly lit metal chasms between towering chrome buildings. He can’t see the bottom at this time of night, and even if he could, he would have no intention of touching down that far. He likes to be able to see the sky. He glances over at the Accipiter next to him, sleek and fast as a vehicle could be, but in the end decides to fly under his own power. He shrugs his wings out of his skin and steps with quiet, soft feet off the edge, letting himself fall and fly before the scales have even closed around his hands to turn them to talons.

The cool night air calms his anxiety, but the peace makes him question himself at the same time. *What is he doing?*

It’s not too late to go back and curl up next to his sisters. No one would know. He could pretend he’s fine.

He’s sick of pretending. And his clan-mates, of all people, should know better. They should be able to see. And if they can’t, that’s only proof that there isn’t anything worth going back to anymore.

No one guards the portal, if only because no one’s stupid enough to actually go through it. It’s impossible to get through without flying, and by the time a young fledgling is capable they’ve been thoroughly warned off. Clan bonds can’t bridge the gap.

Clint isn’t concerned about that. He’s almost—only almost, because he’s not completely insane—looking forward to it.

But he’s not alone when he touches down a mere few feet from the portal entrance, far from the safety of his clan’s sleeping bay.

On the upside, it’s Elder, the old jade dragon probably as old as the Disk itself. Her scales are grayed around the edges and Clint swears he can hear her bones creak every time she moves. She hardly ever even shifts to her other form anymore—old as she is, she finds it easier to balance with four
limbs on the ground, as she’d told Clint when he was young, wingless, wide-eyed and curious as a crow.

She’s the only thing that hasn’t changed in those intervening years. Clint certainly isn’t wide-eyed anymore. “You can’t stop me,” he snarls at her. No use denying his intentions—there’s no other reason he would be at the portal in the middle of the night, and besides, Elder has always had a supernatural sense of everything that goes on in the kingdom.

On the downside, if anyone is going to shame Clint into going back home to his shattered clan, it’s her.

“Hatchling, I wasn’t going to try,” Elder assures him. “I only mean to ensure you know you take a journey that leads to places across bridges your bond cannot span.”

Oh, he knows. “You call this thing a bond? I want it gone,” he growls.

Elder slowly shakes her head. Even her neck seems to creak when she moves. “There will come a day you might rethink that.” Clint crouches, like an outward defense will keep her words from hurting. He nearly protests—“But,” she continues, “I understand that day is not today.”

“Then get out of my way,” Clint insists. “I’m leaving before dawn. I have to.” The last comes out closer to a beg than he intends.

“Where will you go on Earth, with your appearance?” Elder questions. “You’re marked as a dragon.”

“I don’t care.” Even humans know to respect dragons, surely.

Elder folds her wings down onto her back and shifts into her other form, a creaky old woman with papery, yellowed skin covered with a faded olive ritual wrap, steel-gray hair, and jade eyes. She’s holding a golden chain in her hands, from which a pendant flashes with the Gems of the dragons. “Take this,” she says, her voice sad as the whisperings of crumbling parchment. “It will protect your true form from human eyes.”

Cautiously, Clint extends his neck. “And your eyes?” he questions.

She chuckles lowly. “Well, dragon eyes too.”

Clint folds his wings together to shift to humanoid and allows her to loop the necklace over his head. The amulet settles heavily on his chest. He can almost feel it all fade away, and he touches his face. The skin feels rougher, yet weaker, and the markings by his eyes are gone like they’d never existed. He pulls a lock of his hair in front of his face—it isn’t pale and streaked with amethyst. Instead, it’s the color of old wash water. “My eyes,” he says, suddenly worried.

“Brown,” Elder says gently.

Clint swallowed and ignored the sinking feeling in his gut, struggling to keep it from his bond. He can’t afford to alarm his mother before he’s already gone. But it hurts, in a blunt-and-rusty-knife kind of way, that he isn’t Amethyst by sight anymore. No one will understand that he epitomizes Trust. But this is what he asked for.

“It’s nearly dawn, hatchling,” Elder warns him. “Are you going?”

“I’m not a hatchling,” Clint snaps. He’s barely even a dragon anymore. He smoothes his new
dishwater hair back over his head nervously and reminds himself he still has his wings if he needs them. The amulet feels irrationally heavy.

Elder smiles slightly. “You’re young, I’m old. Do you really think it makes that much of a difference?”

“Sure it does,” Clint says. “I couldn’t leave without my wings.” His voice is trembling and he can’t take his eyes off the portal behind Elder. It’s so dark in there, distant stars and a vague glittering of gems the only light to be seen. He’s suddenly terrified.

“And now you have them. So use them.”

“I will,” Clint declares loudly, even though he doesn’t think Elder meant her words as a challenge. He takes a wary step closer to the portal.

Elder steps to the side, one moment humanoid and the next scaled, slinking wearily over to the rocks to watch him go. Clint draws his own scales around him, wings flaring out.

[Where’d you go?] Adrastea asks sleepily in his head. Clint can’t suppress a flinch. Apparently it translates through the bond, because Adrastea is far more alert as she asks, [Are you okay, brother?]

He has to leave. Now. [Goodbye.] He leaps off the ground and takes off through the portal.

[Brother!] Adrastea seems to sense that something is seriously wrong and pulls on the bond, pleading with him to come back. Not to do this. [Bro—]

The call shatters in the void and the sudden ringing silence makes Clint’s wings falter for a split second, but he determinedly brings himself back into rhythm. The bond was already mostly broken anyway. He just has to keep going. He just has to ignore how he feels, here in the dark sky.

For the first time, he’s alone.

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Ohio, 2002

Clint pulls the hood of his hoodie up over his head in a somewhat vain effort to hide from the rain. Luckily he isn’t freezing, seeing as it’s almost halfway through May. Still, he’s had more than his fair share of being wet and cold in the past few centuries, so he ducks through the doorway of one of his favorite diners.

There’s a man in a suit and black tie sitting in a booth in the corner, where Clint usually likes to sit. It’s a defensible position, where Clint can keep his back to a wall and still be able to watch everyone who walks into the diner.

The man is rather bland and average-looking, but Clint’s got a knack for faces that have followed him through more than one town. This guy is definitely the persistent type.

Clint does a quick check, but there doesn’t seem to be any of his goons waiting outside for Clint to turn around and get away as fast as possible. Maybe Mr. Monkey Suit assumes Clint will think there
are, so he’ll come in anyway. Or maybe it’s just a gamble.

The man meets Clint’s eyes and inclines his head slightly.

Clint’s getting a little bored of running. He might as well go take a look. If he doesn’t like what he sees, he’s got four shrike throwing knives on his person before he has to resort to anything that might expose him as anything other than human.

He nods to the friendly waitress who has alternately doted on him and hit on him for the past few months and saunters over to slide into the booth across from the Man in Black. “About time you found me. It’s been, what, two years?” Since the first time Clint had found these guys sniffing around the crime scene. Since this man’s bland face had become a recurring, unfriendly appearance.

“Something like that,” the man allows. “You’re a hard man to find.”

Clint snorts. That might be because I’m not actually a man. He kicks his leg up onto the seat next to the spook. “Well, you’ve found me.” He smirks a little. “So shoot.”

“That’s the idea,” the man says smoothly. Clint’s smirk vanishes. Has he misjudged this? Are they going to shoot him? He whips his head around to scan the restaurant, well aware he looks like a cornered animal in the gesture, but not relaxing until he’s sure he doesn’t see any (obvious) signs of guns.

Clint turns back and glares at the man, but he doesn’t seem fazed. “Your aim is impeccable,” he says, and Clint almost rolls his eyes at his own jumpiness. They meant that kind of shooting. Whatever.

“Every job we’ve been able to associate with you, the kill is clean and efficient. There’s hardly ever any evidence.”

“Yeah, well, that might be because I leave one bitty piece of evidence one time and I’ve got folks like you showing up. The tie’s a nice touch,” Clint snarks, nodding to the black silk. “No color allowed?”

“I find black hides bloodstains rather better than most other colors,” the man says evenly.

The corners of Clint’s mouth twist upwards. “You get blood on that, odds are you’re already dead.”

“No color allowed?”

“I find black hides bloodstains rather better than most other colors,” the man says evenly.

The corners of Clint’s mouth twist upwards. “You get blood on that, odds are you’re already dead.”

“Not quite. Most people don’t have your aim.”

“Nobody has my aim,” Clint says automatically, glancing around again, this time looking for more innocent tells. There aren’t many customers sitting near them, but even the ones who are either aren’t listening to their conversation at all or are plants, because there doesn’t seem to be much of a reaction from the young-faced teenaged boy or the middle-aged woman sitting at tables of their own nearby. The kid probably isn’t with the suits like this guy. Clint isn’t putting any bets on the woman.

“Exactly,” the man agrees. “That’s why we’d like to recruit you.”

“Really,” Clint muses, still eying the woman. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“The Strategic Homeland Intelligence, Enforcement and Logistics Division.”

Clint gives the spook another evaluation look. He doesn’t seem to have much facial expression one way or the other. “That is an acronym waiting to happen,” he says finally.

“Everyone who’s had to learn how to say that in one breath is certainly hoping so. Are you in, Mr. Barton?”
You have no idea what you're in for. The thought makes Clint smile. “You know my name”—or he thinks he does—“but I don’t seem to know yours. Rude.”

“I’m Agent Phil Coulson,” the spook—Agent Coulson—says. Pauses for a moment, then asks, “Well?”

Clint sighs, putting on a show of mock reluctance. “Well, you can’t possibly be any more boring than my life at the moment. I’ll give it a chance.”

Coulson graces him with a tiny, probably fake, smile. He’s going to be like all the other humans Clint’s tried associating with in the past few centuries: greedy and stupid. Not even worth Clint’s time. Nothing is; nothings enough to fill the emptiness where his bond used to be.

But it doesn’t really matter anymore, does it? Nothing much does.

“Thank you or your consideration,” Coulson says.

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SHIELD HQ, 2004

“What are you?”

Clint doesn’t bother straining against the handcuffs, or looking away from the light. It’s going to take him a while to see anything but a sunspot once the light is taken away, but it seems to have the desired unsettling affect on his interrogator.

He knows the only reason he doesn’t have a bullet in his brain is because Phil has an admirably level head in stressful situations, such as his asset suddenly exhibiting signs of shapeshifting that—coincidentally—he’d never told anyone about.

“I’m a dragon,” Clint says, then smiles, showing off his teeth. They’re a little too sharp. The amulet keeps his true form from showing through completely, but it’s easy after three centuries of practice to take off just a thin layer of the glamour and show some warning of his true nature.

“Allright,” Phil says steadily. Impressively, Clint can’t actually tell if Phil believes him or not. “What did you do to Agent Barton?”

“I am Agent Barton,” Clint sighs. That, Phil is definitely not going to believe. It’s almost disappointing, a betrayal by someone who—what, he trusted? Clint shakes himself internally. He trusts no one this side of the Dragon Disk, and no one back there, either. “Surprise?” he quips, a little mean.

“Very funny.”

Maybe a little proof, Clint considers. Probably not worth it, not enough to fix this, but he can try, can’t he? “You were the Agent who hired me. You were wearing a black tie at the time and claimed it was good for avoiding visible blood stains. You appealed to my pride and desire of a challenge and I took you up on it because I was bored and there wasn’t anything better to do.”
“Anyone could know that, especially if you captured Agent Barton and questioned him.”

Oh Tiamat, Clint thinks viciously. Nothing’s going to convince him. So why the hell is he even trying? Oh, right, because Clint went and got himself attached to some little human with an exaggerated sense of their importance on the planet. Clint has seen generations go by and could tell Phil (when did he become Phil? he asks himself viciously) that only a handful of humans are going to retain importance a hundred or so years from now.

“Then you might as well shoot me in the head,” Clint says sweetly. “Because nothing’s going to convince you.”

Phil—no, Coulson, he has no attachment to this stupid human—is silent for a long moment. “Why did you allow me to convince you to join SHIELD?” There’s a clanking sound that Clint just knows is a gun on the table, because he’s seen Phil (Coulson, oh hell, he gives up) do this when he’s extending an olive branch to the victim of the interrogation. I’m not hiding from you. I will shoot you if I have to. Cooperate, the gun stays where it is.

Clint closes his eyes. He’s got nothing left to lose, because for once in four hundred years he’s actually in a place where a human can kill him easily. “Because I was bored,” he says. Just like he’d told Phil in that diner a long time ago. “And hey, I figured, it ever comes to something like this? You can’t possibly let me down any more than I already have been. Go ahead. Pull the trigger, quit the games.”

There’s another long silence before Phil sighs. And the light switches off.

“I’m not so sure about the dragon thing,” he says wryly, as Clint tries to blink the residual glare out of his eyesight, “but I’ve only ever heard that mix of anger, self-deprecation and sass from Barton himself. So if you’re an impostor? Congratulations and feel free to kill me in my sleep.”

Finally, Phil’s face swims into focus. And Clint has no idea how to respond to that, especially when Phil’s so blank-faced and put-together. Like he hasn’t just figured out about a new species. “Last time I checked that’s not how SHIELD does things.”

“Yes, well, last time I checked I didn’t actually contact SHIELD about this little predicament before deciding to interrogate you.” Phil comes around the table and Clint swivels his head to stare at him. All he does is take out a set of keys and unlock the handcuffs, though.

Clint rubs his wrists, even though it hasn’t been long enough to chaff. “So what now?” he asks awkwardly. He’d kind of been expecting to die, and isn’t entirely sure he shouldn’t be disappointed that he’s still alive.

“Now, I hope you’ll explain your… magic, or illusions. Whatever the source of that little scare was.”

“I told you. I’m a dragon.”

Phil stares at him. Clint’s not always very good at reading faces—reptilian instincts, so sue him—but Phil’s being even more indecipherable than usual. “Alright,” he says neutrally.

Probably still kind of disbeliefing. Clint huffs, annoyed, but he has the inexplicable—and frustrating—desire to prove himself. So he crouches to give himself space and shrugs his wings out of his back, holding the shift there to keep the rest of his body recognizable. For once, Phil is recognizably flabbergasted, mouth actually dropping open a little as he takes a hasty step back, and Cling smirks to himself. “Believe me yet?”

“It’s not like I’ve got much of a choice,” Phil points out, frowning slightly.
Clint steels himself. “So. Is SHIELD still going to want me after you tell them?” It doesn’t matter, it’s just a group of ridiculous humans trying to postpone the inevitable death of their species. Clint has no reason to want to stick around.

“Tell them?” Phil asks, mock surprised. Or maybe actually surprised. “How? I don’t think there’s paperwork for this sort of thing.”

It’s Clint’s turn to stare, and he’s not imagining the vague smile on Phil’s face, almost mocking him. And he reluctantly lets himself accept that, just this once, maybe this human didn’t let him down so badly after all.

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New Mexico, 2010

Clint hears Phil approach before he sees him, but that’s mostly because of the rain. It’s pouring out here and has been for a while, but there’s no way Clint’s going inside. He’d probably end up ripping the head off some poor, unsuspecting junior agent.

“Someone’s in a foul mood,” Phil says, and sits down next to him.

Phil can’t have been outside for more than a minute or so, but he’s already soaking. “I hate the rain,” Clint says shortly.

“It certainly seems to have dampened your fiery personality.”

Clint gives him a flat look, but Phil’s face isn’t giving anything away. The junior agents are all terrified of the practically mythological Agent Coulson, but no one except Clint, Natasha, and Sitwell seem to realize how corny he can be. “You think you’re smooth, sir, but I’m pretty sure there’s a name for that, and it’s called cliche.”

“You’re too unique to be the victim of a cliche.” Phil side-eyes him, considering. “So, do you want to tell me about what happened with the Stark Incident?”

Clint suppresses a wince and glares harder out into the rain. “Can’t you let it go?”

“You looked like you were going to shoot the messenger. You almost did.” Clint opens his mouth. “With an exploding arrow,” Phil adds, his voice dry and unamused, and Clint closes his mouth again.

“You could have told me you sent Tasha to play with Stark,” Clint grumbles. Anything but the cold wash of fear from hearing a stranger tell him that his favorite human on this planet—save Phil—was that close to someone he wasn’t sure he shouldn’t be afraid of.

“I didn’t think I had to,” Phil says reasonably. “It’s not anything I thought would merit this kind of reaction.”

“It’s Stark,” Clint snaps, like that explains anything.
Phil turns his head and raises an eyebrow that Clint doesn’t even try to decipher. “And Natasha is a big girl. She can make her own choices.”

Clint scowls. “That’s not what I meant, Phil, and you know it.”

“Maybe, but I don’t know what you actually do mean.”

His fists clench together briefly, but he makes his fingers uncurl. To speak, or not to speak—“The Ten Rings,” he says softly.

Phil’s silence is far more significant this time. Clint had told him years ago the same excuse he’s been using on himself for why he stays on Earth: the Ten Rings, stolen from the dragons centuries ago, lost on Earth. Clint has still only found three of them. As far as he’s been able to tell, the humans that have them don’t yet know how to actually use them. He’s not looking forward to the idea of them figuring it out.

“The terrorist organization or…” Phil trails off, because they don’t use words for Clint’s secret when there are other people around.

Clint snorts. “Is there a difference? Look, if Stark was their prisoner for that long—“

“I thought we had this discussion already,” Phil cuts him off.

“Yeah, to disprove it!”

“So it’s been disproved.” Because Phil’s efficient and doesn’t see the point in poring over information a second time unless they’ve learned something new.

“Yes,” Clint agrees, then hesitates. “No.” Because Clint can’t even give him straight answers, anyway. He shakes his head. “It just gives me a hebejebes. It’s not like them to let anyone go.” And, if Stark has been somehow affected by the Rings, whether the people or the objects? He wants Tasha as far as possible from the potential fallout. Draconic magic has a nasty way of backfiring on unsuspecting users and victims. There were startling parallels to the recently discovered ‘Hulk,’ actually. Science and magic—two sides of the same coin that humans just loved to try and splinter in half.

“Would this be easier if you told her why you were worried?” Phil wonders.

Clint entertains the idea for a mere moment before flinching at the idea of her reaction. “No.”

“Then leave it,” Phil tells him flatly. “Stark isn’t going to bite her. Unless she wants him to.”

Clint scowls out at the horizon, or where it should be through all the rain. “Because that’s and image I definitely needed.”

“You’re welcome.” Phil cups his hand around his earpiece to hear it better in the rain; Clint’s ears deliver something about the hammer they’re guarding and fluctuating magnetic forces. When he concentrates, Clint can feel it, the happy pulsing of a tool with a purpose again. He doesn’t know why the humans think they can do anything to stop magic this strong. “Get your head in the game,” Phil says, “I’m going to need your eyes up high in t minus twenty. Natasha will be fine. You don’t have to stress about my clan.”

One word, and Clint’s halfway over the edge of his perch because he feels like he’s about to hit something. “She’s not my clan,” he snaps. “And neither are you.”
Phil doesn’t respond, but somehow his expression makes Clint think of Elder, looking unamused at a hatchling. Clint ducks his head and starts bringing himself into mission mode. Ten Rings and dragon magic can wait.

They always do.

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Helicarrier Medical Bay, 2012

“You know, there are reasons I have trust issues.”

Phil winces, but Clint can assume that’s from the pain of trying to shift up into a sitting position when your body’s that screwed up. Unable to help himself, Clint presses down on Phil’s shoulder (he’d told himself he wouldn’t touch this human again, wouldn’t mourn) to keep him from hurting himself. Phil subsides with a sigh. “And I assume I just gave you another one,” he says regretfully.

Clint shrugs carefully. “At least you’re aware of it.” He perches on the edge of the plastic seat, not entirely convinced he should be here. “Fury’s a lying liar.”

Phil huffs out part of a laugh before grimacing in pain and aborting that particular mission. Clint makes a mental note to intimidate the doctors into giving Phil more meds. “You only just noticed?” he asks wryly.

Every human’s a liar. “Reminded myself, yeah.”

“‘Lying liar,’ really? Those sound like Stark’s words.”

Clint tries not to slouch, but he really didn’t come here to talk about the ragtag team Fury threw together. Banner wasn’t kidding when he said they were a time bomb, and Clint’s not sure he wants to be inside the blast radius when it all explodes. “So sue me. The guy talks too much.”

They sit in silence for a moment. That’s fine by Clint; he came for visual assurance that Phil’s actually alive, not because he wanted a touchy-feely conversation. But humans have this pesky habit of needing to say things aloud when they want them heard, so a few minutes later, Phil says, “I’m glad you’re okay. When Loki had you…”

He doesn’t have to finish the sentence. Clint was afraid too, down in the deep, dark recesses of his subconscious that remained his own. But he’s still (justifiably) more than a little pissed at Phil’s reaction. “You decided it gave you permission to try and take on a god alone?” he says testily.

“I thought we were done for. I thought Loki had a dragon.” There’s that word, the one they never say aloud, and it makes Clint want to look over his shoulder even when he knows the cameras are turned off and they’re alone in the room. Phil gives him a look far sharper than it should be, this close to escaping death. “Did he?”

Clint rubs his face. “No. He didn’t.” And he thanks his lucky stars for that one. He’d thank Tiamat, but he’s pretty sure the goddess of the dragons left Earth with the rest of them centuries ago.
“How? It was pretty obvious you weren’t in control.”

“Oh, shooting the agents tipped you off? Who’d have thought,” Clint retorts. He realizes he’s snapping at an invalid and breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth. “Define control.”

“You weren’t calling the shots. As you’ve so elegantly pointed out.”

“That was a rhetorical question.” Clint purses his lips and tries to think of a way to explain this, but neatly. Where he doesn’t have to give Phil more than he’s comfortable with. “Okay. So, magic.”

Phil makes a skeptical expression. That or it’s a constipated one; Clint still isn’t great with the human nonverbal language tics.

“Well, the amulet makes me seem human, right? Not just visibly. And it was under my shirt, so Loki does his spear thing to my ‘heart,’” he taps his chest, right where the amulet is, right where Loki’s scepter hit, “and he pokes the amulet, which protected the dragon bits from him. This is a powerful piece of magic.” Clint didn’t even know how powerful—Elder was respected for a reason, and a good one. “So Loki only got me as a human.”

“But there wasn’t anything the dragon inside you could’ve done.”

It’s not a question, they way Phil says it, but it makes Clint’s hands tighten into fists until his nails are digging into his palms. It hurts, because there’s nothing Clint could have done, but if he had a clan, none of this would ever have happened.

“Hey.” Phil’s voice brings him back from the empty spaces inside his head. “I’m not trying to blame you. In fact, I commend you on your performance. We all came out on the other side—“

“You almost didn’t,” Clint reminds him. That’s not supposed to hurt, either, but Clint likes Phil more than he should. He’s more attached than he should ever have allowed himself.
“We all came out on the other side, Clint,” Phil reiterates firmly, “and that was at least in part because of you.”

Clint stares at Phil’s pale hands resting on the bedsheets and suppresses the urge to reach out and hold them. It’s not something he does, so he resists the urge, but he wants to be human for just a moment and pretend that Phil can tell him he’s okay with any kind of real authority. Earth could have died and it would have been on Clint’s head if it had.

“I’ve got some good news for you,” Phil tells him. Clint looks up from his hands to his face.

“Better than you being alive?”

Phil snorts, but again, the pain his body is in gives him pause again. Clint wants to wrap him up in his wings and not let him up until he’s healed and even the realization makes him want to run away, fly away and never look back.

He stays seated.

“That depends on your priorities, I suppose. You realize that you’ve officially been accepted as part of the Avengers Initiative?”

Clint’s eyes widen. “I was just filling in. Helping out. Because of the damage I caused.” And they’d allowed him his penance, which was nice of them, but he wasn’t one of them.

“None of that was your fault,” Phil says sternly, and Clint averts his eyes because if he doesn’t he’s going to end up rolling his eyes. The truth is right there, whether Phil likes it or not. “Maybe that’s why you decided to help, but you should know that you’re a permanent member of the Avengers.”

“Barring future screw ups,” Clint completes.

“Barring your personal request to not be on the Initiative.”

“Like I’d turn down a team?” A group of people that Clint contributes to and who contribute to Clint? Sounds pretty good.

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” It’s Clint’s turn to wince. You’re not my clan. In his own defense, Phil is about as close as a human’s ever gotten. But life won’t let that kind of delusion exist for longer than a few decades, so why bother pretending?

Phil’s staring at him again. Slowly, he says, “I don’t pretend to know anything about your culture, or about your clans. But I know that teamwork and trust are important to you.” Clint could cry, if he ever cried anymore—he was Amethyst. Amethyst was trust, the way Jade was wisdom, Sapphire was healing, and Obsidian was killing. “This is your team. It’s only waiting for you.”

Maybe the Avengers were a time bomb. Maybe there wasn’t a maybe about it. But bombs can be disarmed and people—fragile humans living frantic lives in a fraction of the time that Clint has—can change. Maybe the team who saved the world can become a team that Clint can trust. There was nothing else that resonated as deeply, for him.

And nothing that cut as deeply.

“A team, you say,” Clint murmurs, but he’s willing to give it a shot.
Just Outside New York City, 2012

Clint shoots the movement at the edge of the hallway, and an arrow sprouts from the chest of a man peering around the corner of the corridor. He’s not sure where Cap is, exactly, Natasha’s gone silent to take care of her foes on her own, and Hulk’s roar vibrates the presumably sound structure of the building. Clint eases his bowstring back from where he’d drawn it and reaches up to switch his comm to a private channel.

“You call this a team, sir?”

“Nuance,” Phil says, voice clipped, and this isn’t the time or place for this conversation, but Clint is beginning to wonder why he ever thought it was a good idea to go back with these crazies. “Get the guy on your ten o’clock.”

Clint can hear him. He fires without looking and there’s a gurgle of blood and the thud of a body hitting the floor. “Got him.”

“Good. Now get back on the community comms.”

“With my team?” Clint sneers.

“Yes, Agent, with your team.”

Clint rolls his eyes. “Sir yes sir,” he says sarcastically, and switches the channel again.

Stark’s AI, which is frankly reminiscent of Skynet and apparently named Jarvis, said that Tony was most likely in the basement—lots of cement, lots of doors in the way, but plenty of space, judging by the blueprints. Cognitively, Clint recognizes that he should tell Cap he’s at the elevator and ask for his orders. But he hates orders, has only been able to take them from Phil with any real consistency. The Battle of Manhattan was an outlier when he still wasn’t sure of his own judgment.

It’s a trust thing. And Clint knows all about trust.

“Going in,” is all he says into the comm, and Natasha will know what he means, Phil will know what he means, and Cap can ask one of them if he wants to know so badly. It’s petty, but Clint resents that they’re here. It’s Tony’s fault for getting kidnapped. Thor doesn’t have to be here. (Because he’s off-planet, the reasonable part of Clint’s brain reminds him. He’s started calling that reasonable voice Mini-Coulson in the privacy of his own mind.)

He pries open the elevator doors and jumps in with barely a thought, grabbing the cables and partial-shifting until his hands are covered in rough scales. Satisfied that he won’t end up skinning his hands, he lets himself slide down the cable. Two floors later, he lands on top of the elevator car and pries open the door that leads into the basement.

Natasha turns around and gives him a flat look that’s betrayed by the way her lips twitch. “Took you long enough.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters. His hands palms shift back to soft skin against his weapons. “You get them all?”
“Yes.” Natasha turns neatly and sashays over to the chair that Clint hadn’t noticed in his distraction. Stark’s tied to it, his head lolling over. Natasha cuts the rope and hauls him up with an arm under his armpits. “Barton, get over here. You’re the pack mule, here.”

Clint rolls his eyes. “And you’re the carrot, I presume?” But he takes Stark’s weight himself as requested.

He’s not actually unconscious, though. By the sharp scent Clint can detect from his breath, he’s extremely high. When he nuzzles Clint’s shoulder, it’s pretty obvious. “He’s been drugged,” he tells Natasha.

“Of course he has,” she sighs, then reaches up, presumably to switch on her comm. “We have Stark. We’re in the basement. Hostiles have been eliminated.”

“Stay there,” Cap instructs. “The elevator’s out. I’ll clear the stairwell for you and you can come back up.”

“Roger that,” Natasha says, and she’s in work mode, so it’s probably not even a pun. Then she turns the mic off and rolls her eyes. “Feel like defending Stark up two flights of stairs while carrying his deadweight?”

“Can’t be any harder than Ontario,” Clint shrugs.

Stark giggles into his shoulder. “Can I buy Canada? It’s cold. It’s too hot in here.”

Clint and Natasha share a look, something along the lines of why and how did we get roped into this? Clint is sure that he doesn’t remember.

“As long as we’re not caught in the crossfire,” Natasha tells Stark indulgently. She jerks her head toward the stairwell. “Let’s get out of here.”

Jarvis insists on Tony going straight to the tower to let the drugs go through his system. Never ones to push a most likely sentient AI, SHIELD allows it after a cursory vitals check to ensure he won’t die in the meantime. Cap volunteers to drop him off. Fury sends Nat with him and tells Clint to take a break.

“I’m not fragile,” he snarls—quietly—to Phil as he stalks out of the room. “I don’t need a break.”

“That’s not the question.” Phil doesn’t look at him. When he’s walking, he rarely looks at the people he’s talking to, but Clint can’t stop watching. “The question is, are you going to follow orders?”

Clint doesn’t go to his quarters. For one, they’re too cramped for comfort in the limited space of the helicarrier, and for two, Phil’s office has a couch.

When the reach Phil’s office, though, Clint doesn’t get to the couch before he turns around and levels an unamused look at Phil. “Really.”

“Give it time,” Phil says placidly.

“This is not a clan,” Clint says lowly, voice almost a growl. “It’s not even a team.”
“I never promised you a clan,” Phil retorts, raising an eyebrow and staring at him shrewdly. “You made it very obvious that was something I couldn’t give you.”

Clint cringes inside but doesn’t let it show on his face; he’s not sure Phil doesn’t see it anyway. But he doesn’t have a clan. He doesn’t know why pretending he does should make it any better.

“But it will be a team,” Phil promises. “Not now. But someday.”

“Don’t promise me something you can’t deliver,” Clint says quietly.

Phil’s staring at him again, but Clint can’t take it anymore, so he looks away. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he says levelly. “Out of curiosity, if you want a clan so badly, why haven’t you gone to find one?”

Clint turns around and walks out the door. He tells himself that it’s because Phil doesn’t deserve to know. He tells himself it’s nothing a human could understand.

But more than anything, Clint is afraid. What if he no longer knows how to trust?
Tony

“It’s been brought to our attention,” Fury says, fingers steepled under his chin, “that individual members of this Initiative are liabilities.”

Tony sits up straighter, actually placing his feet on the floor for a steadier indignant posture. “We just went over this,” he protests. “You are not kicking me off this team. Nuke, anyone?” Tony looks in askance around at the rest of the team—if you can call it that. Cap isn’t looking at him, probably so he doesn’t end up glaring, Natasha’s ignoring him, Barton looks pissed (so no change) and Bruce is fidgety. No help from the peanut gallery, by the looks of it.

“If you would let me finish.” Fury glares at him, waiting for Tony to interject, but Tony rolls his hand magnanimously to let him continue. Fury rolls his eye. “By which we mean, when you’re out alone you have this tendency to catch yourselves between a rock and a hard place and not ask for backup.” That’s an unimpressed look in Barton’s direction, and Tony makes a mental note not to touch that with a ten-foot pole. “Or get yourselves into situations where you can’t personally call for backup, as Stark’s recent kidnapping has proved.”

Now everyone’s looking at Tony. Usually, that’s not a problem, really, but he’s really not sure anyone except Bruce here even likes him. “Okay, that was like a week ago,” Tony protests, tipping his chair onto its back legs. “Ancient history, outlier, should not have been counted in the statistic.”

He’s ignored. That’s becoming alarmingly par for the course, these days. “SHIELD is mandating that your quarters will now be with each other. There are a few options for this, the first of which is SHIELD housing.”

Tony actually laughs before he realizes that Fury isn’t joking. “What? No. That’s, just, no. Not doing it, nope. I bet you guys have roaches and stuff, I’m not dying of septic for team unity.”

“You don’t get septic from roaches,” Cap says, his face composed and despairing at the same time, like Tony is everything that’s wrong with the twenty-first century.

Tony adheres more to ideology that he’s everything right with it, too. “You get the idea,” Tony argues. “No septic. No bugs.”

“I doubt that they have bugs,” Bruce puts in, then seems to realize that he’s actually said something out loud in front of other people and shrinks into his chair. “Health codes and such,” he adds under his breath.

“You’re going to have to deal with SHIELD’s housing if you want to stay on the team, Stark. Unless you have another idea?” Fury has far too powerful a glare for a man with only one eye to glare with, in Tony’s not-so-humble opinion.

“I own, like, ten properties that would be better suited for hosting a bunch of superheroes,” Tony scoffs, waving a hand dismissively. “You can’t just cram awesomeness into your little sardine rooms.”

Fury smiles. That’s never a good sign. “Thank you, Stark, for volunteering.”

Tony’s chair thuds back down onto all four legs and he sits up straight. “What? I didn’t volunteer. That was just, I was saying, hey, I’ve got—” Tony considers. “Actually, okay, I can kind of see where you got the volunteering thing from, but also no. That was not an offer.”
“Take our lodging or supply your own for the team, Stark.” Fury’s eye was gleaming with smugness and Tony cannot believe he’s been backed into this corner.

He glances around at the team. Bruce will be fine. He’ll be fun. Thor would be his second choice, but he’s still off world. Tony doesn’t have great confidence of his ability to get along with the others: Captain Goody-Two-Shoes and two master assassins predisposed against him. In his defense, he was dying when he met Natasha. “I’m pretty sure this counts as blackmail.” But the mere thought of living in SHIELD designed/funded quarters makes him cringe.

And it’s not like he doesn’t have the money.

“Oh my god, fine,” he groans, tips his chair back again, and will forever blame Natasha—he didn’t see it, but he knows it was her—for kicking the chair and sending him falling backwards, landing with a crash and an extremely undignified shriek.

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“Pepper, help,” Tony mutters into his phone. “I still don’t know if this is bravery or stupidity.”

“With you, there usually isn’t a difference,” she replies sweetly. “Now tell me you haven’t locked them outside.”

“Well.” Tony considers the surveillance screen showing feed from one of the cameras in the lobby. “They’re not outside.”

“Tony.”

“Don’t lecture me, Pep.” Tony lets out a gusty sigh. “Why did I think this was a good idea?”

“You said something about pest control at the time,” Pepper says drily.

“Not helpful.”

On screen, Natasha is arguing with the receptionist. Tony didn’t exactly tell her that the Avengers were coming by, which Pepper would probably say was mean, but that would imply accepting that he’s somehow ended up playing host to four ill-adjusted superheroes, not counting himself. Bruce, Tony likes. Bruce, Tony can handle. But Barton’s already giving the camera the stink-eye like he knows Tony is watching them and Tony doesn’t know how to deal with people he actually has to work with. That’s supposed to be Pepper’s job.

“Anthony Edward Stark,” Pepper says, “go out there—“

“I said they’re not outside—“

“—and invite them in or so help me I will schedule you a meeting every day this week.”

Tony grimaces, because Pepper would actually do it. “Yuck. Fine. Will that be all, Miss Potts?”

“That will be all, Mr. Stark.”

Tony hangs up on her before she has a chance to hang up on him. Immature, yes, but he never pretended to be a responsible adult. Then he stares at the screen Barton’s glaring at him through for
another moment before rolling his eyes. “J, let ’em up. Obviously there were just some wires crossed, right?”

“Of course, sir.” And Jarvis is judging him—he does that a lot for a computer—but at least he does what Tony tells him to, so he can’t complain that much.

Abruptly, his skin feels baked on like he’s just walked through an oven. Tony sucks in a breath and grips the workshop table, holding his breath until the feeling passes and he doesn’t feel like he’s going to spontaneously combust. Slowly, he relaxes his grip and takes a few shaky breaths, closing his eyes. “And look into those heat flashes. That’s, what, eight?”

He rubs at his chest gingerly, trying not to trigger another one. It’s probably a flashback thing. Tony might deny it, but he knows he’s not exactly the picture of pristine mental health. Ever since the cave, where they’d branded him with that ring like he was some kind of animal, he’s had moments like these, a burning sensation stealing all the breath from his lungs.

As long as it doesn’t happen in front of the Avengers, Tony can deal with it. He looks down at himself: grease-smudged ACDC shirt and jeans that were ragged before he’d invented the Iron Man suit. It’s fine for a first domestic impression, he reasons—if they are going to live with him, they can’t expect an Armani suit every day.

He experiences another cringing moment of doubt. But he shakes it off. He can put on an act for a team of superheroes. He’s done it for a lot less.

Tony goes up to the communal area he’s set up to wait. Jarvis’s murmured warning gives him just enough time to put on his usual sophisticated airs before the elevator opens and the team steps in.

A tiny piece of Tony’s mind can’t help but think oh God, all four of them at once, but they’re not ganging up on him. He knows that. If he can convince his flighty subconscious of that, even better. And maybe making them all wait in the foyer wasn’t the best idea. Barton certainly doesn’t look happy. Then again, the only time Tony’s seen him smile was with an arrow pointed at Loki’s face.

Tony knows how to deal with people who don’t like him, though. If they can’t appreciate his awesomeness? He’ll baffle them with bullshit.

He spreads his arms dramatically. Maybe he should have worn a suit for this. “Welcome to my humble abode.”

Roger’s eyebrows scrunch together and Natasha raises an neatly manicured eyebrow. It’s Bruce who’s mouth twitched into a kind of smile. There’s a reason Tony likes him best.

“This is the communal floor. Kitchen that way, awesome TV and gaming system that way. Gym’s up a floor, has a shooting range and such. You just left the public elevator, which doesn’t go up any higher, but this handy-dandy private elevator over here will get you everywhere else you need to go.”

None of the Avengers seem to want to move from their little clump in front of the public elevator. Tony flicks his wrist toward the private one. “Coming, anyone?”

Natasha strides forward and doesn’t even look at Tony on her way to the elevator. Tony doesn’t let his smile falter. “Jarvis, door.”

The others are similarly stoic. Bruce’s eyes keep flicking from person to person and then the wall. The elevator doesn’t seem big enough for the five of them even though Tony knows for a fact that it can comfortably hold eight Thor-sized people.
For once, he understands what Bruce meant when he called them a time-bomb. He kind of wonders what on earth Fury thought they’d be able to do.

“Okay, so each of you gets a floor.”

“A whole floor?” Rogers blurts. “Isn’t that a little…” Tony waits for something vaguely incriminating, but after struggling for a word for a moment, Rogers simply says, “much?”

Tony stares at him like he doesn’t know the meaning of it. “Um. No?”

“Right, floors, can we just get this over with?” Barton snaps.

Tony is obviously outnumbered by crazy people here. “I’m not trying to draw this out, you know. But since someone apparently rolled off the wrong side of the bed this morning, your floor first. Got that, J?”

“Yes, sir.”

Everyone but Natasha jumps and Tony smothers and victorious smirk. “Oh, that’s Jarvis. He’s my AI. You need anything, just ask him.”

The elevator door slides open and Barton’s out the door before Tony has time to announce that it’s his floor. “Later, losers,” Barton says, bored, and disappears into the bathroom.

Jarvis closes the door. “Does he hate us all or just me?” Tony wonders aloud.

“That’s his resting face,” Natasha says.

That doesn’t answer his question, but Tony gets the idea that pursuing that train of thought would not be the best idea that he’s ever had, so he drops it. The other three are much more polite about accepting their floors, even if Rogers still seems a little bemused at having that much space all to himself. It’s probably a forties’ thing.

Bruce is last. He gives Tony a slightly desperate look across the elevator threshold. “I’d say good luck,” he says, fiddling with his glasses, “but I don’t think I’m going to have any to spare.”

Two hours later, Tony sits and stares blankly. Machines, he would already have figured out down to the last spark and code. People aren’t nearly as easy. “I’m going to be putting out so many fires,” he realizes, and sighs.

Dummy perks up.

“No. Not that kind. Put that down!”

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“Aren’t those my chicken nuggets?” Rogers asks suspiciously.

Barton blinks slowly at him, smirking slightly in a way that could never be misconstrued as innocent. “Oh? I didn’t realize. Congrats on figuring out fast food, grandpa, but you might want to put your name on the container next time.” And then he pops another chicken nugget into his mouth.
Natasha shoots her partner in crime a flat look that he seems to take pleasure in ignoring. She rolls her eyes and kicks back, setting her feet on the table, which should really be against the rules if Tony ever gets around to establishing any. She’s sharpening her throwing knives, each rasp of metal making Tony’s nerves twitch. Bruce is drinking his daily soothing cup of tea and he still looks like it’s making him twitchier by the second.

“We had restaurants in the forties too,” Rogers snaps, and Tony suppresses a sigh through sheer force of will. It’s way to early for this; he hasn’t even had his fourth cup of coffee yet.

Barton’s placating hum has just enough skepticism in it to make Rogers grit his teeth. It there’s one thing to be said about Robin Hood, it’s that he knows exactly how to get under people’s skin. And seems to enjoy doing so.

Despite the writhing tension of the situation, Tony’s a little tempted to ask for lessons.

Another rasp of Natasha sharpening her knives makes him think twice.

“I suppose you figured out the frozen yogurt, too?” Barton asks, too casual.

Rogers crosses his arms and stares him down. It was probably enough to make the Howling Commandos confess whatever stupid thing they’d done most recently, but Barton was made of sterner stuff. “I didn’t buy any frozen yogurt.”

Barton rolls his eyes. “It’s the stuff that looks like ice-cream. Mint, right?”

Bruce puts one hand down on the table and says, deceptively calm: “That was my frozen yogurt.”

There’s a split-second of a hitch in the rhythm of Natasha’s knife sharpening and Barton’s eyes widen. Rogers does not look amused. Tony downs his coffee as fast as he can; he’d rather get out of here before shit hits the fan.

“We’ll just all put our names on things in the future,” Rogers says.

He’s in Captain Mode, which kind of makes Tony want to sketch a salute and make a smart-ass comment, but as of now the tension of the room isn’t focused on him and Afghanistan finally got it through his head that a loaded gun pointed in your direction might actually hurt you.

“And we’ll all eat what’s ours, not—“ Rogers stiffens as there’s another rasp of steel on whetstone. “Will you quit it with the knives?” he hisses at Natasha.

She eyes him lazily, like a snake waiting to strike. “I was under the impression this kitchen was a communal area, Captain.”

Rogers purses his lips, shaking his head minutely, and storms out of the room. Barton slinks out past Tony, obviously hoping to clear Bruce’s blast zone while he’s distracted, but he needn’t have bothered. Bruce stands, taking big, deep breaths. “I’m just going to,” he begins, then apparently decides that no one left in here actually needs to know, and simply leaves the room.

Natasha stays where she sits, drawing the whetstone across her knife in even strokes.

Tony leans his head back on a cupboard. “Seriously, though, that’s really annoying.”

She raises an eyebrow at him and allows herself to smirk, now that the danger’s cleared the area. “Communal area, Stark.”
Something expensive-sounding crashes the next room over and Tony winces. Probably the French vase that Pepper had thought was a good idea to put in the TV room. There’s no roar, so Tony assumes it’s Rogers. So much for All-American Anger Management.

“Oh my god,” Tony mutters, staring at the door like it’s kicked him. That vase was more than a hundred grand. Not that he cares, really, but Pepper will sigh at him. Pepper’s sigh has made the Board vote unanimously, once. “We’re like frat boys. But without the drunken bonding.”

“Or any bonding,” Barton snarks from behind him.

Tony jumps about a foot and narrowly avoids having a heart attack as he spins around. Barton is perched on top of the refrigerator, like a completely insane person, or possibly like he actually thinks he’s a bird. Tony isn’t ruling the second one out. “What’re you so mopey about?” Tony snaps, frustrated at being startled. “You had mint frozen yogurt. And you’ve got your hot spy girlfriend!” He waves a hand toward Natasha, in case Barton hasn’t noticed.

Natasha gives Tony a glare that promises slow and agonizing death. She glances appraisingly at her knives and Tony realizes with a foreboding jolt that she’s only just finished sharpening them. Barton snorts and they look at each other and do that creepy spy thing where they communicate by either eyebrows or osmosis—Tony hasn’t been able to acquire enough experimental data to figure out which—and Barton says, “And you have your science bro. Doesn’t mean me and Nat want to be here.”

Tony scowls. It’s not like it’s his fault the whole boy band is here, but he’s not letting his tower get insulted. “Excuse you. My place is top notch habitation.”

That earns him a smirk from Natasha. “Sure. Just not for cohabitation.” And there’s that look again—from both assassins, he’s being double-teamed, this is so not fair—like Tony’s amusing but ultimately has no importance in either of their eyes.

Tony takes a breath to retort, but finds he can’t. It’s probably safer not to argue with a lady holding razor-sharp knives, anyway. “You may be on to something there.”

“I’m always on to something,” Natasha sniffs, stands fluidly, and glides out of the room.

Tony tries to look at Barton subtly, out of the corner of his eye. He’s a hundred percent sure he notices anyway, but it’s the thought that counts. He’s completely still, a sniper in his nest (on top of the refrigerator, the common sense in Tony’s brain shrieks, but he’s good at shushing that voice by now, and some people in this tower don’t seem to have heard of social niceties anyway). Just pretending that Tony doesn’t exist.

Tony would protest, but that stupid brand on his chest and the fresher tattoo bits that his most recent kidnapper so thoughtfully added are itching again, and he can’t help but think it’s safer to stay ignored.

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“It probably got lost in transit,” Tony says dismissively, “I mean, bureaucracy, right?” He’s walking fast, like he thinks he might be able to somehow subtly leave Agent Phil in the next room while he escapes to the fridge to convince his stomach that no, a three-hour meeting isn’t actually going to starve him to death.
But Agent’s fast. And he makes keeping up seem like he’s expending even less effort than Tony is, which is just plain unacceptable. He also seems to have taken vague offense to Tony’s last comment, which is weird in and of itself until Tony catches on that, in some weird way, Agent is both the person who gets to kill people and the one who writes it up, so if that’s not super-spy bureaucracy, nothing is.

“Which is why I’m here, as I’ve said, Mr. Stark. Eliminate the middleman—“

“Excuse me? What did they teach you about shooting the messenger in super-spy school?”

Tony’s pretty sure the prickling on his neck is Agent’s glare, but ultimately, he doesn’t respond to Tony’s quip. Depressingly, Tony’s getting used to this blatant disregard of his genius. “As you’ve proved, you turn any need for paperwork into a well-organized nightmare, so I can’t help but think that coming to get it myself might at least reduce it to a mid-level migraine.”

He pretends to think, tapping his chin even as he scans the kitchen. Rogers is by the toaster and Barton is on top of the fridge again, but they’re not talking to each other and they’re the only ones in the kitchen, so as long as Tony pretends like they’re not there it’s possible that nothing will explode. “Well, no one’s ever called me well-organized before,” Tony concedes, edging past Rogers to the fridge. Barton stares down impassively like a gargoyle guarding a decaying castle. Technically, Tony can open the door without disturbing him. Theoretically. Ignore Barton, he tells himself, you don’t see him he doesn’t see you—

That’s when the heat wave hits.

Tony makes a abortive grab for the counter behind him, but it’s too far away, and as the sensation of burning heat turns his knees to jelly, the world tilts and he finds himself painfully on the floor. He can see dust bunnies under the refrigerator and the jam stain on the bottom of a cabinet where he’d fumbled the jar in search of a midnight snack a few weeks ago, but he isn’t seeing either—he can’t see anything, inside his self-contained hellfire and brimstone. Even breathing hurts, like the air is feeding the flames, and he tries to hold his breath as best he can, acutely aware of the humiliating whimpering he was making.

Sounds of alarm that he couldn’t parse drift around him and somebody’s feet shuffle past his line of sight. A hand touches his shoulder and he cringes away; the hand is much cooler than his own skin, but it paradoxically burns him all the worse for it.

The flat, stagnant coolness of the fridge door has Tony scrambling to press himself against it, though. The very last sane thought in his head flits around in a panic: the heat waves don’t last long. They never last this long, it should be gone—

“Stark.” Barton’s voice cuts through the haze of heat with the precision of a knife. Blindly, Tony looks toward him.

Words: definitely not English, and they don’t sound like they’re particularly polite words, either. A hand touches his forehead, but this one doesn’t burn. Tony pushes into it pathetically. Please make it stop, let someone take it away.

Holding his breath becomes too much and Tony risks breathing again, but it makes the inside of his throat burn like the pits of hell. Ow ow ow why me why me???

“Breathe.”

Tony actually kind of laughs at that brilliant suggestion of Barton’s. Yeah, no.
“Tony, I know it hurts, *you have to breathe*. Trust me, okay, just—one big breath.”

Nope. Tony holds his breath, swaying a little as black speckles his vision. No breaths here, not for Tony Stark. Not when it invites fire in for a cup of tea in his lungs.

Barton sucker-punches him. All the air left in Tony leaves him in a rush of air and his body reflexively pulls in a fresh breath of air. Bad, that was bad—Barton’s playing dirty.

“You have to breathe,” Barton snarls in his ear. “Deep breath. Come on, Stark!”

It occurs to Tony that Barton is a bone fide crazy person and is not going to stop until he is obeyed. Tony feels like he might as well just curl up and die on the spot, but, curling in on himself in instinctive self-defense, Tony sucks in a breath as deep as he can stand.

He can’t help but give a pained little cough, and ow.

“That’s it. Breathe, cough. *Do it.*”

Worn down, Tony obeys. Breathe in (*pain*) give weak coughs like he’s trying to clear his throat. The roof of his mouth and his tongue start to tingle.

“Get out of the way!”

Tony wonders for a hysterical moment how Barton expects him to move, but then he manages to truly cough. Something like phlegm, but at the same time not like phlegm at all, is propelled from his mouth and the cupboards under the counter catch fire. Someone yelps and someone else swears. That feels a *lot* better.

“Again,” Barton says, and this time, Tony doesn’t argue, keeps sucking in air and coughing up whatever flammable hazard has clogged him up until he’s exhausted and half the kitchen is on fire and finally, *finally*, Tony feels like his body is his own again. Shaking, sweaty, and frazzled, but his.

“Your body temperature has returned to an acceptable ninety-eight point six degrees Fahrenheit,” Jarvis announces from on high, his voice every inch the measured computer in a way that means someone is about to be on the wrong side of a cyber attack, or possibly a death ray if Jarvis can figure out how to go Skynet fast enough.

That voice is never a good sign. Tony rouses himself enough to glance around the room to try to gage the situation.

Rogers is white as a sheet, and is staring at Tony like he’s some kind of alien species. Agent doesn’t look at Tony, or Barton, or even Rogers; instead his gaze flicks about the various pieces of flaming furniture as if to make sure the sprinklers put all the fires out. So far, they’re doing a pretty good job. Which is how it occurs to Tony that, while he may not be suffering a heat wave of *whatever* hellish source anymore, he is soaked, shivering, and leaning heavily on Barton.

The leaning is kind of embarrassing in its own right, but Barton is only holding his elbow, a single point of established firm contact, and Tony doesn’t want to move. Ever. The anchor is, for a moment, the only thing that ensures him that he’s not just a ghost hanging about his burnt husk of a body until the grim reaper comes for him, or whatever the process is for that. He should probably ask Thor next time he’s Earth-side; he seems like he would know.

Natasha appears in the doorway, rather concerned if her expression is anything to go by. She takes one look around the kitchen and looks like she wished she hadn’t come.”Do I want to know what
just happened?” she asks. Her tone hints heavily that she probably doesn’t.

“That,” Agent says, finally eyeing Tony up and down and shooting Barton a look that Tony wishes he could read, “is a very good question.”

Barton almost looks guilty. Which is about when Tony connects flaming furniture to whatever came out of his mouth and comes up with—he can’t believe it took him so long—breathing fire.

Tony does not giggle. He chuckles, just up an octave. Although he will admit he hiccups. And he can’t find a good way to deny how he quietly slips from consciousness and faints into Barton’s arms.

—§§§—

Tony wakes up on the couch in the living room. He tries not to guess who carried him there, because he definitely didn’t get there by his own power.

“It’s complicated.” Barton is saying. Tony’s not sure to whom, and he’s not quite willing to check yet. “Really complicated. It’d be easier to explain once Stark wakes up.”

Hey, that’s him. “M’awake?” Tony mumbles. It’s more of a question than anything, and he carefully slits open an eye to make sure no one’s glaring at him before letting himself actually try to fight his way into consciousness.

Something heavy and soft drops onto him. Tony stares in bewilderment at the blanket heaped on his legs and hips for a long moment before realizing it must have come from somewhere. Carefully, wary of an incoming headache or God forbid another heat wave, Tony looked over to see Agent standing impassively.

Which didn’t make any more sense, really. “This is a blanket,” Tony says suspiciously, plucking at the woolly coverlet emphatically.

“Yes, it is.” If Agent didn’t sound so agreeable, Tony might think he was being mocked. “You were shivering.”

Well, in that case… Tony kicks and wiggles and snuggles until he’s wrapped up in the blanket up to his chin. By the time he’s satisfied and looks up, he sees the rest of his team staring at him with varying degrees of amusement and worry. Tony pokes a hand out by his head to make a regal gesture. “Go on.” He probably looks more like a munchkin than a monarch, but he’s dealt with enough trauma today that no one can begrudge him a little bit of pathetic behavior.

“I’d say he’s awake,” Natasha says diffidently. She gives Barton a small smile that seems oddly sharp, considering its target. “You can explain now.”

Barton tenses slightly. Interesting. “It’s really hard to explain.”

Bruce snorts. He’s not making eye contact with anyone and his breaths are carefully measured. He’s cleans his glasses in exact, slow movements, a calming routine. “I’d at least like an assurance that Tony’s okay now.”

Barton hesitates.
“Oh shit,” Tony thinks. Hesitation is rarely a good sign business or one night stands and it doesn’t seem to get any better with superheroes.

“Last time I checked,” Rogers says, “A hundred and seven fever is fatal. What happened here? How can he be okay?”

“Define okay,” Barton says, just as Tony interjects, alarmed: “Fever?”

“Sir, your internal temperature reached one hundred nine point one degrees Fahrenheit,” Jarvis recited from the ceiling. “I don’t know how you are still alive, much less speaking to us now.”

The silence is deafening as everyone in the room takes that in. Tony curls into the blanket a little bit more. “What,” he bursts out, finally. “But—that’s never happened in a heat wave before.”

Barton’s gaze cuts to Tony, sharp and piercing. “This has happened before?”

Aaaaand now everyone’s staring at Tony again. He kind of wishes for a stage, because then at least this would be normal. “Uh. Kind of? Not like this. They just come and go, really fast. Just a minute, not a whole—whatever, with the, the breathing fire.”

The words breathing fire sit heavily in the atmosphere of the room. Tony swallows and tries to breathe normally under the pressure.

“How long has this been happening?” Barton demands.

“Uh,” since the kidnapping, “two weeks? Maybe closer to three?” His knuckles are white under the blanket.

“When did it start?” Barton persists.

Oh, fine. “After the kidnapping.”

“You didn’t mention that in the debriefing,” Agent says, folding his arms and looking at Tony critically. “Or in the report you didn’t send.”

Tony makes a face at Agent, but Barton seems prepared to ignore anyone else as he’s grilling Tony. “Did they brand you?”

“What?” Tony recoils. How does he know about that? “No. I mean, they—that happened back in Afghanistan—“

“Afghanistan?” Barton looks like he’s just swallowed a bug and, if it were anyone else, Tony might say he almost looked afraid. But his is Hawkeye, so he must be reading things wrong. “Four years ago? How the hell are you still alive?”

Tony tenses and narrows his eyes. Deliberately slow and clear, he says, “Because I beat them and I killed them.” He shudders inside at the reminder, but he swallows and just tries to keep himself braced on the couch as the emotion clogs his throat. Calm down, it’s okay, it’s over, you won. You survived.

The silence in the room has turned stiff and awkward. Barton doesn’t quite look him in the eye when he belatedly says, “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then why don’t you tell us what you meant?” Bruce suggests, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Barton gets the fortitude to meet Tony’s eyes again, and Tony tells himself not to look away. Not for
this. Mentioning Afghanistan meant war, frankly, and he didn’t like losing battles.

“Can I see your brand?” Clint asks.

Tony smiles a little, at that. Funny. No. “Well, that’s a little private—“ he explains.

“Let me guess,” Barton cuts in. “You got branded by a ring, I guess in Afghanistan, and when you got kidnapped a few weeks ago they branded a dot inside that circle and little wings on either side of it.” He folds his arms like he’s daring Tony to argue.

“Tattooed it,” Tony corrects automatically, because he’d been pissed when he came down from the drugs his kidnappers gave him and found his first tattoo under the influence since the age of twenty-three. A moment later he wonders if he should have said it, but—wings. That’s what they are. Now that it had been said, Tony could easily picture the marks as wings. “How did you know that?” he asks neutrally.

“Oh—“ Agent bites off a curse. Natasha’s gaze flicks back and forth between Agent and Barton’s grim face like she’s trying to figure out something only vaguely pieced together.

Tony knows the feeling. “What’s going on?”

Barton sighs, looks at the floor, then brings his chin up proudly to meet gazes with Tony. “Do you believe in dragons?”

“Not if I can help it,” Tony says reflexively, because they’re really cool in books, but he’s had to fight giant robots to save a city and robots are even cooler, so he’d rather they just didn’t exist if the alternative is getting fried into a crispy treat for a fantasy reptile.

“What else do you know that can breathe fire?”

“Breathe—“ Barton’s statement actually processes and Tony puts two and two together. “No. Absolutely not, I’m not—I—“ Tony giggles a little hysterically, because this is just ridiculous.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. They, what, symbolically turned me into a dragon? Why, some kind of object lesson?”

“I don’t know it’s for an object lesson. But I know it’s not symbolic.” Barton pulls of his shirt and crouches, rolling his shoulders twice, and huge, purple reptilian wings unfurl. They almost touch the ceiling; they probably would, if Barton stretched them as far as they can go.

Barton smirks at him. “Welcome to the club. Exclusive membership.”

Something in Tony’s brain just decides to stop working, because nope, just—no. He just stares for all of five seconds, and then he sits up (painfully) and stands up (excruciatingly), drawing his blanket around him like a king’s cape. “I am going to bed,” he announces. “Obviously I’m high. I’m going to wake up tomorrow and this is all going to be a really bad trip.” And he starts toward the elevator.

Barton makes an incredulous sound halfway between a snort and sigh, reaching out to catch Tony’s shoulder. “Stark, you can’t think—"

“DON’T.” Tony spins around, smacking Barton’s hand away, tense as a wire and twice as likely to snap. Barton freezes, eyes locking with Tony’s but he doesn’t move when Tony takes another step backward, so he doesn’t care how intensely Barton is staring. “Don’t tell me what I can’t think,” he says, quieter.

He’s through the the threshold and the elevator’s closed before anyone can make another move.
Tony closes his eyes and leans against the wall, trying to convince his trembling legs to hold the rest of his body up at least until he gets to his room. Sleep, that’s all, no thinking about—whatever. Absolutely no thinking allowed.

Because, for maybe the fifth time in his life, Tony doesn’t know how to respond, and he doesn’t know the answers.

—§§§—

Tony wakes up blearily for the second time in the span of six hours and glares at Barton, who’s staring at him from the doorway of his bedroom. “Jarvis, why did you let him in?”

“He brought coffee,” Jarvis says. “I thought that may be an acceptable sacrifice.”

Barton raises the mug in his hands a little, as if to say, see, for you. Tony doesn’t trust it.

But it’s coffee.

“Fine. State your name and business,” he grumbles, mostly sarcastic, making grabby hands for the coffee.

Barton walks forward and holds it out to him. “Clint Barton, here to make sure you don’t die horribly in the next two months.”

Tony pauses, cup inches from his mouth, and gives Barton a horrified look. Barton blinks at him, like he doesn’t see what was wrong with what he’d just said. “You don’t tell a man that before his morning coffee!” Tony sputters, and starts chugging the scalding drink, because obviously he needs to wake up fast.

“Figured I’d do it before you kick me out,” Barton shrugs, then eyes Tony suspiciously as he perches on the edge of the bedside table. It’s tempting, Tony has to admit, but the more he remembers, the more he knows, with a horrible sinking feeling in his gut, that the fire in the kitchen hadn’t been a trip. Dying horribly sounds, well, horrible, so Tony thinks he might be able to stick out a couple minutes of weirdness for the sake of not dying.

“Start talking before I change my mind,” Tony suggests.

Barton nods once, then twice; opens his mouth, closes it again, and finally settles on, “Can I see the brand?”

Tony sends him a flat glare and resists the urge to fall back onto his bed and cover up his face with his pillow. “You’re not convincing me.”

Barton scowls. “Look, I just want to make sure it was done right so you might actually have a chance at surviving—”

“I just burned up half the kitchen!” Tony exploded. He thumps the coffee mug down on the bedside table next to Barton before he’s tempted to throw it at something, or someone. “I’d say whatever magical mojo it is was done pretty accurately.”

“Close enough to give you symptoms doesn’t necessarily mean close enough to change you safely,”
Barton says darkly.

Tony stares at him. “You actually believe that I’m going to turn into a dragon because of a tattoo.” The thought is ridiculous enough that Tony can’t stand to stay sitting. He pushes himself off the bed and begins to pace.

“You do realize I am a dragon, right?” Barton asks, eyes tracking his movements. “You didn’t miss the wings?”

“Yeah, purple, real manly,” Tony says sarcastically.

“Amethyst,” Barton corrects him stiffly.

Tony shoots him an incredulous glance and rolls his eyes. “Because that’s so much better. So, what, this happened to you, too?”

“No. I’m Dragonborn. Which is—well, what it sounds like.”

“And I’m, what, Dragon-transformed?”

“Dragonmade.”

“Close enough.” Tony stops pacing and looks at Barton. He’s pulled his feet up and is perched on Tony’s bedside table like he owns it—perched like a bird of prey, Tony thinks. Or reptile of prey. He’ll admit that it kind of does explain the refrigerator thing. “You really think I could die.”

“There’s a reason there hasn’t been any Dragonmade on Earth for several centuries. That’s—“ Barton hesitates. Tony hates it when he does that, because he never seems to be remembering, oh, hey, it’s not actually as bad as I thought, never mind. It’s always whoops, it’s even worse, sorry. “That’s one of the reasons, anyway.”

“It’s not because people don’t get branded, is it,” Tony says, stomach sinking. Barton shakes his head, unapologetic, and Tony tries to keep his breathing level. He can’t afford to flip out. “So they’re branded,” he says, voice only mostly steady, “and they die. Because it was done wrong.”

“That’s one of the reasons.”

It’s good enough for Tony. Reluctantly, he pulls his shirt over his head and faces Barton.

The arc reactor is enough of a scar that he doesn’t like showing it to people, even besides the fact that it was once pulled out of his chest by someone he’d thought he could trust. It’s just—not exactly appealing to most people. And even beside that, there’s the brand only about two inches above the reactor, a sign of skin charred by a white-hot ring that even now makes him break out in cold sweat, sometimes, when he sees a plain wedding band.

Oh, and the body art. Let’s not forget that humiliation.

Barton doesn’t try to get any closer, which is good, because Tony might actually punch him if he tried to touch the brand. But his stare makes Tony want to hide anyway, for the slow seconds that he scrutinizes the brand, and then nods. “It’s done right.”

Tony lets go of a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding and puts his shirt back on. “Oh good, I’m not going to die.”

Barton’s doing that careful avoidance of his gaze that generally means the same thing as hesitation.
“Right,” Tony says, swallowing. “That was only one of the reasons.”

“The other main reason,” Barton says, halting words obviously chosen carefully, “is that the dragons left Earth a long time ago. And a Dragonmade needs another dragon that’s fledged—already has their wings, I mean—in order to survive the transformation process.”

“Okay. And you’re here. Problem solved.” Tony paused. “There’s a catch, isn’t there.”

“There’s a catch,” Barton agrees.

Tony groans. The only other alternative is yelling, and his throat still kind of hurts from the fire. So he just swears quietly until he can take hearing whatever’s next, and then asks, “So what’s the catch?”

“I’m—I’m trying to put it in a way you’d understand,” Barton says, staring intently at the ceiling. “It’s not something humans have. Not really.”

Something clicks together in Tony’s head. “You’re Dragonborn, aren’t you? You’ve never been human.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Barton grumbles, and Tony takes a moment to search his thoughts on the matter. He’s not sure he cares. He’s just overwhelmed in general, and, surprise: the one other person on this team he thought was a regular human being is—not.

“Oh, Barton says. “It’s—I guess the closest thing you have to it is family? But even that—family of choice, maybe.”

Tony spreads his hands. “You mean friends?” he suggests, a little incredulous.

“No,” Barton sighs. “We call it clan. It’s a closer bond than either of those. It’s a connection you need to be able to lean on when your body and mind are strained in the transformation.”

“Right.” Tony’s sure that his disbelief comes through in his voice. He just doesn’t really care.

“You’re not going to like the next part,” Barton warns him, sounding tired.

Tony snorts. “Like I’ve liked any of this? Catch of the catch, of course there is. So, go ahead, just—rip it off like a bandaid, get it over with.”

“It’s a telepathic bond.”

Tony’s expression freezes. There’s no way he heard that right. Then his brain rewinds about ten seconds and yep, that’s exactly what Barton said.

He sits down on the floor and puts his head in his hands. There’s no way he heard that right. Then his brain rewinds about ten seconds and yep, that’s exactly what Barton said.

He sits down on the floor and puts his head in his hands. There’s only so much of this anyone can take, even if they’re a world-renowned genius and superhero. Maybe especially then. “Get out.”

“Look—“

“Get out.” Tony can’t make himself look at Barton, even to glare; his skin is crawling. “My mind is my own.”

The silence doesn’t last long. Barton’s footsteps move toward the door, then pause just before the threshold. “You know, Stark,” he says, “I didn’t ask for this either.”

The door closes behind him. Tony doesn’t look up.
Tony turns down Bruce’s offer of food and lays on the floor of his room for what’s probably almost an hour. Just thinking, and wondering, and idly composing his own obituary in his head. At least he updated his will fairly recently, what with the whole palladium poisoning and all, but still: dying again. Not fun.

Well. Dying or handing over the wellbeing of his mind to someone else. Barton, of all people.

It’s not that Barton isn’t a good guy. He probably is, the same way Rogers is or Bruce is or (probably) even Natasha is. He just—doesn’t like Tony. And lots of people don’t like Tony, he’s used to that. But sharing his head with someone who doesn’t like him? That’s just asking for psychological issues even greater than he already has.

And then he thinks: issues, or dead? Surviving Afghanistan gave him issues, some of which are only just now coming to light, apparently. But would he rather have died?

Well, no.

Submitting to this telepathic bond thing with Barton is asking for trouble. And it’s probably going to end horribly, because that’s what happens when Tony opens up to people. But would he rather die?

Well… no.

Sometimes, Tony hates it when his brain is rational.

“Jarvis, where’s Barton?” He crosses his fingers and prays that he’s sleeping, or eating, or with someone else, or otherwise just not able to be interrupted at the moment. Not that that usually stops Tony, but plausible deniability and all that.

“He appears to be moping in the shooting range,” Jarvis replies.

“Practicing his bow, right, obviously he can’t be interrupted at the moment,” Tony rambles, “so I’m just going to stay here and keep my brain to myself. Sounds good.”

“He’s only staring, actually.”

Tony sighs. There goes his excuse. “Fine.”

He drags his feet on the way to the range, but once he’s decided on a course of action, Tony can’t seem to find it in himself to sit still for any length of time. It only takes him about ten minutes at a stretch to get there, but he stares at the door for another minute or two before he can’t take it anymore and goes inside.

True to Jarvis’s word, Barton’s sitting on the floor and staring at the wall. Well, glaring at it hard enough that Tony’s half surprised it doesn’t catch fire. Then again, if Barton wanted to burn something, he could probably breathe fire on it. Being a dragon and all. Tony shakes his head to dispel the thought; his life has suddenly gotten extremely strange.

Barton turns his head and sees him before Tony even announces his presence. But that could just be the spy training. Tony crosses his arms and tries not to look as worried as he feels.
“You’ve completely turned my life around in less than twenty-four hours,” Tony says flatly. “I almost feel like I should congratulate you. And it’s because—someone did… this to me. And, I’m, I’m not human anymore?” Tony shrugs, trying to rid himself of the crawling panic that’s been threatening him ever since the incident in the kitchen. “I’m freaking out. Sorry, not sorry, it’s a thing. But I don’t want to die. So, fine, I’ll do this thing. I guess. Just—don’t mess with my head any more than you have to, deal?”

Slowly, not taking his eyes off of Tony, Barton stands. “I’m not trying to hurt you,” he says.

“Yeah, well, someone already did.” Tony snaps. Barton actually winces, which in and of itself kind of makes Tony want to go bury himself in a hole. Whoops. Said too much. He doesn’t want pity. He tries taking a breath, expelling the emotions along with it, but everything’s still a tight knot in his chest, wrapped around his heart. “So what do I have to do for this Vulcan mind-meld?”

“It’s not—“ Barton shakes his head, apparently giving up on proper terminology, and continues, “We’ll need physical contact. That should make it easier.”

Tony stares at him. “Okay. So, I know most people don’t seem to think I have any standards except upright and breathing, but really?”

Barton blinks, not seeming to understand for a moment, but then his face becomes a magnificent tableau of horror. He makes a sound of disgust and presses his hands to his eyes as his shoulders slump. “Ew. I wish I could bleach my brain,” he complains. “No, that’s not what I was saying at all. Like, a hug. Maybe.”

“Oh.” And yeah, that’s a lot better, less gross. “So, more Care Bear, less—“

“Do not finish that sentence,” Barton growls at him.

Tony puts his hands up in mock surrender. “Fine. Okay. We just…” Hesitantly, he spreads his arms. “And ta-da, telepathy?”

“Yeah.” Barton doesn’t look much more convinced than Tony feels.

He doubts this could be more awkward if they tried. They’re standing at least two feet apart and Tony, for one, isn’t particularly inclined to get any closer. Hugging has never been something Tony does, and it looks like Barton feels largely the same way. Don’t be a teddy bear, he tells himself. “Bro hug?” he suggests tentatively.

Barton nods, looking relieved at the suggestion. “Bro hug.”

They step forward at the same time, kind of bump shoulders and pat each other on the back, then awkwardly stay there. “Try not to think,” Barton says.

“Geniuses always think.”

“Well, try not to. And close your eyes.”

Don’t think, close your eyes. One of those is easy. Tony rests his forehead on Barton’s shoulder, closes his eyes, and tries to empty his brain. It’s kind of like cleaning out a desk: he gets all the big stuff out and laying on the floor fairly quickly, but he’s left chasing around all the crap in the corners of the drawers that he doesn’t remember putting in there for ten more minutes. Not to mention the elephant in the room: don’t think, so someone else can break into his mind.
Tony hates his life.

Something utterly foreign brushes against Tony’s consciousness and he flinches, hard. Barton’s arms tense around him, keeping him from jerking away, and Tony is suddenly, horribly aware that Barton could snap him in half if he so chose.

“Don’t think,” Barton growls at him again.

“That’s like not breathing,” Tony hisses back, which, huh, that’s an idea. He holds his breath, concentrates on that, and waits for the next contact. He knows what it feels like, now, and he’s determined not to flinch.

He still does, but he just squeezes his eyes shut tighter and breathes once through his nose before holding his breath again. The next time, the foreign consciousness—Barton’s, it must be—dives in, swimming around in his thoughts. Tony can feel it dipping between days of memories, before it turns and twists into the places in Tony’s mind that he has no words for, because there are no words there. The middle of him, the core—

“Oh god,” he whispers into Barton’s shoulder. Barton’s arm grips his back tighter.

—to where Tony hides all his fears and his longings and secrets, the things he never even thinks aloud. Suddenly terrified, Tony jerks away from the presence, throwing it back into his conscious mind. Tony cries out as it hits the metaphysical walls of his mind and something breaks as Barton’s mind disappears from his own; something shatters, Tony’s ears pop, and the structural integrity of his consciousness is reduced to that of a lean-to in a hurricane.

Tony goes boneless in the sudden onslaught of pain, unable to even think. The world goes dark; he hears (feels) someone call his name, but he’s already too far gone.
So I've been working on NaNoWriMo (still on target!!) and stalled on my original novel for a bit, so I got around to finishing this chapter earlier than I thought I would.

Also, I'd apologize for the length but I'd suppose that should be a bonus? Ugh, these guys just wouldn't stop talking, sorry not sorry. Enjoy!

And thanks to my brother and to AprilJoy for being awesome and motivating me to actually write this.

Please let him not be dead, Clint thinks fervently.

On the upside, Stark’s nose is bleeding sluggishly. If it had stopped? Clint might be a little more worried. He crouches next to where Stark has collapsed, shaking his head to try to dissipate his own suddenly crushing headache. That… didn’t go well.

The pulse in Stark’s neck is strong, though, and Clint breathes a sigh of relief. That would have been… awkward.

Part of him is almost impressed with how badly that went. Three centuries without a clan bond and this is the first taste of a second chance? He might think that Tiamat’s just screwing with him, if he didn’t know by now that no god of anyone, much less of dragons, is looking down on him.

Clint rolls his shoulders and takes a slow breath, focusing his mind back on the actual, immediate problem at hand. Alive he may be, but Stark’s not in a good spot. Pulse is steady, but who knows how the inside of his head is doing—

Wait. “Jarvis?” Clint asks carefully, remembering how Jarvis had known Stark’s temperatures. Sure, it’s kind of shady, in a Skynet kind of way, but it can be useful. “Can you check Stark’s brainwaves for me?”

There’s a pause of maybe three seconds before Jarvis replies, “Sir’s vital signs read as though he were conscious.”

Which he obviously isn’t. Clint curses under his breath. Stark was probably well and active in his own head, but he’d seen people get stuck in a clan bond before, erasing the outside world for hours until they gradually emerged. Except—Stark doesn’t have a bond, still.

Carefully, very aware that he’s treading somewhere he’s already been forced out of once, Clint puts his hands on either side of Stark’s head and tries to meet Stark’s consciousness.

Ow. Clint winces in sympathy and no small amount of guilt. Several of the protective shields of Stark’s mind have shattered, leaving his consciousness working—but only to rebuild the walls. Clint might leave him to it, but it’s not going to help, much. Not without someone else to help hold the shape while it’s psychically fused together again. The best he can do is draw Stark back out of his head and makes sure he wakes up every morning, until he can—
Well. *Fix this*, but he’s not quite sure how just yet.

He sends a pulse through to Stark’s mind; it reverberates on pieces of shields like mirrors. Under him, Stark’s body briefly seizes and his head jerks to the side. Clint pings his mind again, just to be sure. “Wake up,” he whispers.

Stark groans loudly and his eyes flutter open. His eyes aren’t quite focused, the pupils are slitted, and they’re drawn to Clint, staring at him in that uncanny way no one’s looked at him in years. Clint’s eyes flick downwards despite himself. At least Stark’s eyes are still his regular brown. The transformation isn’t going too quickly, so there’s still a chance of saving him. Even if he failed *miserably* this time.

He tries to brush it off and shakes Stark’s shoulder. “Come on, up and at ‘em.”

Stark squeezes his eyes shut in some remnant of pain and opens them again with a plaintive sigh. “*Ow,*” Stark says. His pupils are back to normal, and Clint lets himself relax a notch. “That… didn’t work, did it.”

It’s an insufficient way of putting it, but Clint doesn’t know a better way of saying it. Not one without curses older than the human race and unrecognizable even by SHIELD linguist standards. “No, it didn’t.”

Stark props himself up on his elbow and scoffs: the tilt of the head, side to side, the ironic little smile, the huff of breath. He’s taking this better than Clint might have hoped. There’s no way it wasn’t extremely painful. Then again, the nightlight in his chest testified that Stark could stand up to a hell of a lot more pain than the average human, or even the average dragon.

“So, magical solution’s a no-go?” Stark says. “Why am I not surprised?”

It hits somewhere around Clint’s gut: Stark didn’t believe him. Stark had no faith, walking into this, that things were going to get better, and no hope—*no trust.*

*Stark doesn’t trust me.*

In an instant, Clint recognizes where he is: Stark’s home, Stark’s room, Stark’s space, everywhere Clint doesn’t belong and isn’t welcome. He keeps himself from pulling his wings out and crouching under them, but not by much. *Acting. Act for the fledgling, acting is good.* Clint tries on a brittle smile. “Yeah. Sorry, I was—*just hoping you’d be the one to trust me as a dragon.* “I’ll figure something out.”

Clint stands, the slightest bit unsteady on his feet. Stark struggles upward a little, blinking at him, still clearly dazed, but Clint needs to leave now. He needs some air.

And it’s not like Stark trusts him, so Stark can’t possibly *need* him. So leaving doesn’t matter. Here, or gone, or nowhere—

Out in the hallway, Clint lets himself lean against the door for ten seconds that turns into fifteen, thirty, a minute.

“Mr. Barton,” Jarvis asks, voice mechanized to sound concerned, “are you alright?”

He’s not anymore messed up than he has been the past three centuries. It’s not as though he’s *lost* anything—just one more hope gone. But he’s used to that by now. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he lies through his teeth.
But he’s standing alone in a hallway with the massive weight of nothing bearing down on his shoulders and he has no one to share it with. No one he can trust.

There is one person who still trusts him, though.

“Where’s Coulson?” he asks Jarvis.

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Clint knows that something about him must look like a wreck, because when he bursts into Phil’s temporary quarters at Stark Tower, he looks up and sets his pen down before Clint says a word.

“What’s wrong?”

Clint snorts and beelines to one of the cushy couches that Stark has oh-so-thoughtfully put in just about every room of the tower. He’s sure there’s one in the workshop, somewhere, and he’s just as sure that Stark has spent many an exhausted night on it. He flops on this couch and stares up at the ceiling, like maybe that will make it easier to sound like he doesn’t care.

“Nothing’s changed, so I’m not exactly sure that anything’s wrong,” Clint says. After all, maybe it was meant to be like this.

And it’s when his brain starts pulling out the fatalistic notions that he knows he’s really kind of screwed.

“Something was wrong a few hours ago. Are the same things still wrong, or is it something else?” Phil’s voice is measured, even, and Clint can hear his chair being pushed out, can hear his voice coming a little closer. It makes Clint want to push him away, snarl, just force him to keep his distance, but he’s alienated enough people today, probably, so he bites his tongue, tries really hard, and somehow manages to keep his mouth shut.

Phil is far too patient for his own good, and doesn’t speak as the storm rages on in Clint’s mind. Just perches on the edge of the couch cushion—as well as he can, with something this squishy—and waits.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Clint admits softly.

Phil nods and considers that. That’s one thing Clint loves about talking to Phil: maybe he’ll never understand. Hell, Clint’s practically counting on the fact that he won’t. But he’ll try. “You know quite a bit more than the rest of us,” he says.

“I still don’t know everything.” Clint props himself on his elbows, sinking into the cushion a little more, to look at Phil and gauge his reaction. “I don’t even know enough.” His jaw tightens. “I’m not sure I can save Stark.”

Phil shoots him a quizzical glance. “You helped him breathe fire well enough.”

Okay, observation is good, eye contact, not so much. Clint thumps his head back down to glare at the ceiling again. “Well, that’s not the end of it. He needs a clan before he gets his wings, otherwise he’s going to die a painful and lonely death, and guess what? Recent attempt at the clan bond was about as helpful as putting a ticking grenade in a shoebox.”
“Maybe you didn’t think it through—“

“There’s nothing to think through!” Clint bursts out. “I have to do this, or he dies. He has to do this, or he dies. There aren’t any other options, because if you haven’t noticed, there aren’t any other dragons!”

Phil waits for his outburst and lets Clint’s breathing go even again before speaking. “I understand that. What I meant was, maybe you didn’t think the implications through.”

“What do the implications matter?”

Clint might be staring at the ceiling, but even at the bottom of his vision he can see Phil give him the look—the one that makes Clint feel exactly how young he is to his kin, a scant four centuries past his fledging ceremony. “I can assure you that all Stark could think about. It’s how he operates. And, not to bring Freud into this, but how do you think his family was like when he was young? I have pieces of the picture, and it’s not a pretty one. If he even understands what a clan bond is, more than family—would you be surprised if he had reservations?”

Laying out on the couch doesn’t seem comfortable anymore. Clint shifts in his seat, drawing his legs up until he can rest an arm over his knees. Casually. He is not huddling in on himself. “Clans are what dragons need, though. If he gives it a chance, those reservations wouldn’t matter.”

“If you had been happy with your clan, you wouldn’t even be on earth, Clint.”

Clint whips his head over and glares. “It’s not like that. It—it was broken. Clans aren’t supposed to be like that—“

“And neither are families. But it happens.” Phil sighs and stands, pausing to ruffle Clint’s hair in a gesture he barely tolerates. “From what I understand, you dearly want a clan—but I’m not blind. It scares you too.”

Clint’s throat clogs with the automatic panic of being found out, but he stubbornly folds his arms and clears his throat. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“That’s absolutely fine,” Phil says, and walks back over to his desk. With all the work Clint had interrupted him from. Clint glares at the carpet because there’s no mirror to glare at himself. “You need to take your mind off of Stark. Do something else.”

Phil is brilliant. This is why Clint goes to him for help, even if Phil tricks him talking into stuff like feelings. “Yeah,” he says, relieved. “Well, I suck at sitting around doing nothing—uh, coffee run? Or, I guess I could just go do some archery, you really can’t ever practice enough.” He stands, relaxed with a new focus, but Phil’s voice stops him.

“I meant you should go talk to Natasha. She’s not happy with you and you need to sort this out before she poisons you.”

Clint takes it all back. Phil is a horrible person and his advice is terrible.

—§§§—

Natasha, according to popular SHIELD information, is a little like her mother country: a riddle,
wrapped in a mystery, hidden in an enigma. To most, she just doesn’t make sense.

The one beautiful thing about not working with the same instincts as everyone around him is that Clint has a strange—but useful—tendency to be able to guess where she is at a given moment. Which is why he doesn’t search for her in the gym, the firing range, or her own quarters. He goes straight to his own.

She’s sitting on his bed, fiddling with the heads of some of his arrows, the pieces of snapped arrow shafts—at least five arrows, Clint’s brain mourns, and he tells it to shut up. This is fair. Although, looking at the little piece of razor-sharp metal being twirled between her fingers, he’s not sure Phil was exactly right: she doesn’t seem like she’s about to wait to poison him when she can gut him instead.

Honesty is the best policy. Especially now that his secret’s out. “I’m not going to apologize,” he says. “Because I’d make the same decision a second time around.”

Natasha eyes him, unhappy, but not actively murderous. Like a rattlesnake, warning not to come nearer, but not willing to strike quite yet. Of all the humans he’s met, Natasha was the easiest to fall in love with. She’s like him, even if she doesn’t know it—a predator. Their eyes like snake eyes, seeing soft underbellies and striking before the victim knows to run.

He stares at her for a moment, and she stares back. Then he smirks, just a little. “I will apologize, though, for thinking you needed to be—protected from this, or whatever.” Maybe when they’d first met. Maybe before Natasha had found the predator inside him and dug deeper instead of turning away.

“The day I need you to protect me, I’ll give myself up for dead,” she says, but her body is a lazy spiral of coiled tendons instead of a wire about to snap, so Clint dares to approach.

He sits on the edge of the bed. It’s a coin toss whether Natasha wants him any closer, and being out of easy knife range might improve his chances. Slightly. It’s about then that Clint realizes he doesn’t know where to start. “Phil thought I should come talk to you,” he says, because she probably knows anyway. He’s not the type to really fix the problems he sees building. “Before you decided to poison me.”

Natasha smirks. “Don’t be ridiculous. I wouldn’t poison you, that’s too conspicuous.”

“How do you get more subtle than poison?” Clint wants to know.

Natasha raises her eyebrows enigmatically. “Redirection.”

Clint isn’t even going to ask—this secret stuff is her expertise, not his.

But then the banter is over and Natasha waits for him to convince her. He just doesn’t know how. Being a dragon doesn’t matter in this world, where he’s blended in for so long. What he is doesn’t mean a thing. No one even knows he’s Amethyst. No one knows he is their trust.

If he can even call himself that anymore.

In the shadows he’s been hiding himself in, there is no trust, or there’s only a precious little of it. He can’t ask Natasha to trust him blindly, not when he’s lied to her. Not unless… he takes that leap of faith first. But even then, he couldn’t make her see what it meant.

Unless he showed her.
Swallowing thickly, Clint touches his fingers to the chain around his neck. “I’ve been hiding for a long time,” he says quietly, and pulls the chain up through the neck of his shirt so she can see the pendant that dangles from it.

Natasha’s eyes catch on the different colored Gems ringing the amulet. “What is that?”

He takes her curiosity as a sign he can move in closer, so he shifts on the bed until he’s just barely within her arms’ reach. “It’s a protective amulet. It hides… what I am.”

“It hides that you’re a dragon.” Natasha leans forward a little and wraps her fingers around the amulet. “From who? Loki?”

Clint nods, not trusting his voice to talk about him when he’s already being steadily stripped bare by this conspiracy of coincidences around him. “And everyone else.”

He puts his hand on Natasha’s when he sees the muscles in her forearms tighten. “Don’t,” he warns. “Break the chain and it’ll take your hand off.”

Natasha loosens her fingers and slips her hand out of Clint’s grasp and away from the amulet. She’s still eyeing it with something not quite like wariness and not quite like curiosity. “It makes you… seem human.”

“Yes.”

“But you already look like us, when you don’t have your wings out.”

Clint’s throat is dry, but he doesn’t swallow. He’s not sure he can. His eyes find Natasha’s and he’s almost angry that he finds comfort in the remembrance that she’s only human. She won’t be around much longer, and unless this somehow goes public, his secret will die with her, Phil, and the other Avengers.

“No,” he hears himself say. “I really don’t.”

He holds his breath when he lifts the amulet over his head.

Of course, this isn’t magic that acts on him, just others’ perception of him, so he can’t feel the change. But he takes in Natasha’s slightly widened eyes and knows that she’s finally seeing him as he really is. That she sees his hair with all the shades of amethyst, shimmering a bit under the fluorescent lights in a way unnatural to humans. His eyes slightly slanted, his shoulders and torso slightly slimmer.

Natasha can see his eyes as they truly are. He holds her gaze and hopes like hell that she won’t look away.

She doesn’t.

“I always thought your predilection for purple was suspicious,” she says. And that’s it.

“It’s important,” Clint says. The words don’t come easy, and they don’t communicate quite what he intends, but he needs to say it. “The purple—well, really, it’s Amethyst. And that’s important, to me.”

She takes that in, mulls it over and comes back with: “Why?”

“It’s my core. It means… Trust. Trust is what I thrive on, it’s my focus, I—well. My core, my
“Nothing is coming out right, but Natasha knows eight different languages fluently and plenty more besides passably. She can parse this.

“I think you botched that one,” she says.

“I guess I did.” He looks down at the broken arrows. “But then, I wouldn’t be here on earth if I wasn’t more than a little screwed up.”

“Must be superhero thing,” Natasha agrees. Then she reaches forward and tugs him forward by the shirt. Clint almost expects a kiss, but instead she starts playing with his hair, sifting through it. “You know, if you grew this out, you could make a fortune selling it.” She tugs at two different swatches of hair and Clint rolls his eyes, batting her hands away.

The mood swiftly sobers and Natasha gently lies down beside him. “You’re in the dog house for at least a month, you know. I did not know this was an interspecies relationship. That’s something you’re kind of supposed to tell your partner.”

Clint bites back a few frustrated words because frankly, that’s just as fair as the broken arrows. “I’m still not going to apologize.”

“If you did I’d be insulted.”

“Glad we agree on that.”

The silence trails on, and Clint is just about ready to declare the situation as fixed as it’s going to get when Natasha says, “I just have so many questions.”

Again: fair. “Well, you don’t have to do a sneaky interrogation with me,” he says. “Just ask.”

She rolls over closer and ruffles his hair. “For one, you look at least ten years younger. Tell me I’m not some kind of cougar.”

“You’re not some kind of cougar,” Clint says obediently. “I’m over two thousand years old. You don’t have to worry about that.”

She pauses. “That’s a whole ‘nother kind of creepy, Barton. If that’s even your name.”

“Clint is,” he says. “I chose it three hundred years ago, when—well.” He cleared his throat. “Basically I threw away my other name. So Clint is… it’s true.”

“Feminine,” Natasha says suddenly, raising herself up on her elbows. Clint shoots her a baffled look. “That’s why you look so young. Your face is way more feminine without the amulet doing whatever mojo to make you look human.”

“Just what every man wants to hear,” Clint sighs.

“It’s okay,” Natasha says. There’s a ghost of a grin on her lips. “I still like you.”

Clint holds her gaze and slowly the ghost of a smile returns to its grave. Abruptly she rolls off the bed and walks over to his closet, rifling through it and pulling out one of his larger t-shirts. “Two thousand years. Huh.” She swaps her shirt for his—apparently his shirts are extremely comfortable or something, or at least that’s what Nat always says, but he’ll feel the material of her shirt and it’ll be softer, Nat just staring at him with amusement like it’s all some big inside joke. “Got any girlfriends I should worry about?”
“Can you not,” Clint starts wearily, then thinks. “Just a few human flings. They’re all old ladies by now, or dead. Probably dead, it was a while ago. And I never really dated any dragons”—the thought makes Clint scrunch his nose with residual adolescent disgust of the opposite gender—“I mean, I left…”

“Before you were dating age?” Natasha fills in the blank and eyes him speculatively. Clint’s shirt falls mid thigh on her, but somehow even the ratty t-shirt looks like some kind of scruffy fashion statement on her. “What about now? Are you dragon dating age?”

Clint grimaces but figures he can spoil Natasha with answers, at least today. “Sure. I’d generally be expected to be starting a family about now. Bonded to a mate, maybe with an egg or even a hatchling.”

“Bonded?” Natasha tilts her head curiously. He feels tired again, just from hearing that word in that questioning tone. “Clan bond. Look, I’m—I’m really not up for talking about that. Not right now.”

Carefully, Natasha sits on the bed again and strokes a hand through his hair. “Okay. You don’t have to.”

“It’s like human families, but closer,” he says. “And really, that’s all I can say to explain it.”

“Alright.”

Clint squeezes his eyes shut, but it comes spilling out even though he doesn’t want it to: “I offered it to Stark but it didn’t work and we’re so screwed.”

Natasha’s hand stops, still resting in his hair. “You… offered what to Stark?” Her voice sounds weird, almost upset.

“Clan bond.” Clint says, peering up at her. “What we were just talking about.”

Natasha seems to be struggling for words. Finally she says, almost pleasantly, “So you swing that way. You have about ten seconds to explain.”

Clint realizes the miscommunication and backpedals as fast as is draconically possible. “Whoa, whoa, whoa—“ He jerks into a sitting position and winces, because he seems to have left a few hair in Natasha’s grasp. “It’s not, clan bonds aren’t just for mates. It’s like, it’s like—heh, finding human words are hard, give me a minute, I swear I didn’t proposition Stark so you can totally stop glaring at me like you’re going to kill me.”

Natasha scales down the glare. Slightly.

“He needs another dragon to be his clan, because if he doesn’t have a clan bond he’ll die when he gets his wings. The transformation’s not easy on a human body. It’s a ‘friends are a family you choose’ type thing, and sure, mates do it, but—“ Clint makes a face again. “Ew. Me and Stark? No. Just, no.”

The glare fades down to a sustainable level and Clint breathes again. Natasha sniffs and flicks her hair over one shoulder. “Good. Anyway, so you and Stark are, what, dragon brothers now?”

Clint sighs heavily and sits up. The conversation is hard enough to have without feeling like he’s trapping his wings between himself on the bed. “No. We’re supposed to be, but… something went wrong. He’s fine, mostly, but if we don’t figure out what went wrong and fix it, he’s gonna be dead
by the time he should have wings. That’s only a few weeks from now.”

“So you have to do something.” Natasha frowns, her eyes narrowing like they do when she’s thinking, and her gaze flicks over to Clint. “Your age. You’d have a family, back in your world.”

“I’d pretty much be expected to?” Clint warily agrees, not quite sure where she’s pulling this from. Natasha smirks triumphantly. “Stark’s your hatchling.”

Clint flinches. A flurry of images pass through his head: his sisters, little hatchlings, all the protectiveness his mother had circled them with even when she no longer had her wits about her, the bond fracturing down the center where his father had been and only broken ties reaching through the shards. Clint’s off the bed almost before he can parse his own scattered thoughts, his hands shaking and clenched into fists.

“He’s not my family,” he snarls at her, and hunches instinctively, glaring and baring his teeth. His wings itch to burst free and put on a properly intimidating display. “You don’t get it, he’s not—he can’t ever be—”

Natasha stiffens at his sudden rage, but relaxes almost as quickly. It’s fake; he can see the tension in her neck, but her expression is sufficiently unimpressed to make him hesitate.

“He’s not,” he says again, since it doesn’t seem to have sunk in the first time. She actually has the gall to roll her eyes at him. “You know, oh great and fearsome dragon, you only ever get angry at me when I’m right.”

The fight rushes out of Clint and he sits heavily on the floor. Finding a seat on the mattress just isn’t worth it anymore. It takes him a long minute to find any words, resting his head in his hands and trying to make sense of the maelstrom inside of him, and even then, all he can think to say is, “I don’t want this, Tasha. And he doesn’t either.”

He can hear her soft sigh. “I have the sinking suspicion that may be the problem you were having with the bond. Maybe talk about it with him? Just a suggestion,” she adds sarcastically.

“I hate talking,” Clint retorts.

“Oh? And what do dragons do?”

“Communicate telepathically.”

Natasha digests that. “Okay. That… would have its pros and cons.”

Clint snorts.


“Well, I can’t.”

Natasha rises from the bed and walks over slowly, stands by him and runs her fingers through his hair again. Clint supposes a new fascination is only expected; he’s never seen even a bird of paradise with quite the depth of color that dragon hair has.

“Is there any other angle?”

“No,” Clint complains. “It has to be a clan bond.”
“Then you need to find a way to make it work. And Clint, I hate to break it to you, but your whole telepathic thing? Isn’t going to be much help if you guys can’t even talk to each other like normal—“ Natasha catches herself. “Like humans do.”

Clint hasn’t heard her stumble over her words for years. He’s not sure whether it’s a good or a bad thing that she has now: it’s bad she’s off balance, but it’s good she’s willing to fix an honest stumble in front of him.

Somehow this relationship turned a little bit into a train wreck and Clint will fix all the pieces Natasha will let him get his hands on. For however long it lasts, anyway. The brevity of human lives has never seemed so daunting. He reaches up to fold his fingers with hers, and she stills.

“I wasn’t joking about you fixing this with Stark. He’s a piece of work, but I’d rather not have to bury his corpse, if that can be prevented.”

Clint sighs. “I was trying to have a moment here,” he protests.

“Try that again when you’re not already in the doghouse.”

—§§§—


Stark is in his workshop, doing stuff, which Clint chooses to take as a good sign: his brain is still functioning and his eyes can focus on Clint when the door opens before he even has a chance to knock.

Clint lowers his hand. “I guess I did.”

“You guess.” Stark rubs at his temples, squeezes his eyes shut. “Are you sure that thing didn’t work? Because my brain feels weird. Not in a good way, like LSD, I mean, this is full-on hangover plus something, what’s the word. Ugh, I can’t think.”

Warily, Clint glances at the holographic images up in front of him. “Sure looks like you can.”

“This is—“ Stark waves his hand at the holograph. “This is, like, college-level. My brain hurts, Barton, and you’d better be coming down here with a magical healing potion or something.”

“I thought you didn’t trust magic,” Clint snaps, before he can stop himself.

Stark snorts. “I’m a scientist. I don’t trust anything until it’s tested. It’s the opposite of court, innocent until proven guilty? Everything’s a lie until it’s proven true. So prove it. Fixing it would be a great start.”

“Then we might be at a dead end, because to fix it, I need to have a clan bond with you.”

Stark gives him puppy-dog eyes, like that’s going to somehow make Clint suddenly able to fix everything. Then he sighs and glares at his hands. “Right. Because nothing ever likes working out the easy way.”

Clint hesitates. Then, tentatively, thinks the way Natasha suggested he might: like Stark is his… or, just generally, a hatchling.
It makes him think of his sisters, young, confused, and bullied into a corner; sympathy isn’t an emotion Clint has invested in for a while, and his heart aches with it. “Can I come in?” he asks quietly.

Stark gives him an odd look. “Um. Sure? As long as we don’t try the Vulcan mind-meld again too soon.”

Clint doesn’t bother correcting the terminology. He’s beginning to notice that Stark generally give nicknames to things that just might pose a threat to him. Otherwise, he wouldn’t waste the attention to bother. “Thanks.” He walks into the lab and looks around: lots of machines, tables with metal bits on them that Clint doesn’t bother trying to parse the use of. A robot in a corner seems to perk up, twisting a claw at Clint almost inquisitively, but it doesn’t move so Clint files it in the “unimportant” section of his surroundings and sits down on a beat-up, oil-stained, but rather comfy looking couch.

“D’you want me to tell you why I think it didn’t work?”

“That might be useful. Is it fixable?” Narrowing in on the problem. Like always.

Clint’s not so sure Stark’s idea of how it works will work, this time. “Hate to break it to you, but this isn’t a hard science. So, fixable? Sure. How? We’re gonna have to figure it out.”

“But what went wrong?” Stark demanded impatiently.

“We don’t know each other. And we weren’t really willing to let each other in.”

Stark stopped fiddling absentmindedly with the hologram and looked at Clint incredulously. “What, we need a sincere heart-to-heart before this thing’ll work?”

“Basically.”

A couple more seconds, and Clint thinks Starks going to laugh at him. Instead, he sighs, flips a swivel chair around, and straddles it backwards. “Okay. So, hi everyone, I’m Tony and I’m a genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist, I’m somewhat socially maladjusted and according to half the world I’m scared of commitment to boot.” He pauses. “Your turn.”

Well, the sarcasm seems like a good idea, anyway. “Hi everyone, I’m Clint and I’m a clanless, runaway dragon and I’ve been on earth probably longer than is healthy for a lone wolf like myself.”

“Runaway,” Stark echoes, brow furrowing. “What did you run away from?”

Breathe, he tells himself. Don’t bite. “A broken clan.”

“Why was it broken?”

Clint forces himself to think of a fledgling. Curious, honestly clueless. He just doesn’t understand, yet, why it would hurt him so much. “Dad died, mom kind of—lost it. It was the kind of shattered that makes the broken pieces dig into you, so I figured—I can’t possibly lose any more…” He rubs his face and tries not to look at Stark, but he just can’t help himself.

Stark has the pensive expression of a dragon, eyes flicking to and fro and cataloguing the body language that would tip them off what’s about to happen. Clint looks down again just before Stark speaks. “We both kind of had messed up families, then. We could make it a club.”

“What, like a clan?” Clint suggests sarcastically.
Stark harrumphs and rolls his eyes. “Well, if you wanted to be all extreme about it. Do we really know each other well enough yet?”

Clint almost says sure, then remembers the amulet he’s wearing and swears softly. Stark raises his eyebrows and Clint meets his eyes almost sheepishly. “I’ve been keeping so many secrets for so long, I… kind of forgot that some of them were secrets.” He takes out the amulet. “Like this one. This changes how I look, so I can actually pass as human on two legs.”

Stark opens his mouth, but Clint takes off the amulet before he can say anything. It wasn’t hard with Natasha, it shouldn’t be hard with him.

Except it is.

Stark’s eyes widen. “Oh, okay. Wow. Um, you are a lot more feminine than I was expecting.”

Clint scowls. “I’m not that feminine. You guys are all just needlessly…” He waves his hand vaguely. “Rugged.” Stark raises an eyebrow and smirks. Clint’s scowl deepens. “Shut up.”

“You look like a punk,” Stark says, standing from the chair and wandering over, giving Clint a critical once-over. Clint glares at him. “Purple hair, if I didn’t know better I’d say those were purple contacts. Just add a shredded jacket and some fingerless gloves. Maybe a piercing or two. Really, though, manly color scheme.”


“Trust.” Stark folds his arms and tilts his head.

Clint can almost taste the skepticism. He runs a hand through his hair and sighs. “Look, a lot of things got broken. But I need to know… Can I trust you?” If they’re going to get to know each other — “Tony?”

There. He was willing to give Tony that trust, if he would take it, if he would promise to hold it carefully, not let it fall. But Tony looked down, his expression shadowing. “I have it on good information that I’m not exactly trustworthy.”

“But you could be,” Clint says, almost desperately. Tony can’t turn him away now, not now.

Tony looks away and Clint holds onto his temper and wayward emotion, intent on giving him the choice. He has to, if a healthy bond is even going to be an option, even if—even if Tony says no.

But Tony will die if he does, so Clint will do everything in his power to convince him otherwise.

The muscles in Tony’s jaw clench. “Trust isn’t my thing. Generally. I mean, there was the cover story, but I think you know the real story of how I became Iron Man.” He strides away, restless, but stops again before he gets further away than the workbench and looks guardedly over his shoulder. “I don’t do trust.”

And Clint gets that, actually. He knows the ins and outs and intricacies of trust to see how it knotted a noose around Tony’s neck, once, how even if he can tell his story with flippant words and smiles too bright to be real, he can’t quite bear for trust to touch him again. So it’s forced to skirt around the edges of the room as Tony stands in the middle, ever watchful for trust to pounce the moment he lets his guard down and hang him at last.

“It doesn’t have to hurt you,” Clint says. Tony’s eyes skitter away from his again, trying and failing
to hide a wince. “It’s not supposed to hurt you.”

“And your own weapons aren’t supposed to kill you, but sometimes it happens anyway.” He turns and folds his arms just under the arc reactor, putting it on display, daring Clint to argue. “This whole clan bond. It means that you will be able to get inside my head. If I trust you. But once you’re inside, who knows what kind of damage you could inflict in there.”

“You don’t do that, though,” Clint says blankly. Then he groans internally: interspecies communication gap, again. And he doesn’t know how to adequately explain. “You just—don’t. You don’t wreck a bond on purpose, a clan’s like your lifeblood.”

“You’ve survived without one.”

“Yeah, well—” Clint glares down at the ground for a few moments. “It’s not easy. I wouldn’t wish it on any dragon. You flat-out won’t survive without it.”

“I know!” Tony snapped. “You, yeah.” Tony leans against the workbench, shoulders slumped, and Clint has always been able to note the little wrinkles and a few white hairs that mean he’s edging closer to the end of his middle ages, but right now he looks positively ancient. “Yeah, you’ve said. I just don’t trust people, and considering that, there’s no reason anyone has to trust me. I don’t know if I know how to trust, anymore.”

That resonates; probably because Clint has wondered, right up until this moment, if he remembered what Trust was, if he was still really a part of it, and now he knows. Trust issues, the humans call it, and Clint knows they don’t see the half of it because they don’t see how Trust is shattered purple dust swirling miserably around the feet of this team. Some are better than others; the Captain has already pieced a lot of his back together, though the Amethyst shards still avoid Banner as though they know he’d freak out if he ever thought he’d been getting complacent.

Clint thinks of the noose Tony’s been ducking, and the complicated mess of Trust that he himself has been tangled in since his birth. “Trust is a rope,” he says, because Tony doesn’t understand the Gems yet. “Sometimes you’re the person on top of the building, sometimes you’re the person hanging on. But there’s two sets of hands on two opposite sides. Sometimes they don’t hold you. Sometimes you don’t let them. But that’s what it is.”

Tony’s expression remains deeply skeptical. “Say you’re both holding on, as tight as you can. What if it frays, or breaks? You can fall anyway.”

“Yeah,” Clint admits. “You can. You can’t know what’s going to happen. Question is, are you going to hold to it?”

Tony is silent for a long moment. Thinking, with too many side notes and foot notes and loopholes. Finally, he says, “You’ll be holding the other end?”

“I am the other end,” Clint tells him, because Amethyst is part of that rope and he is part of Amethyst.

The way Tony is standing, so still, gears turning in his mind but none of his joints doing a thing except stiffening, Clint doesn’t know if he’s done any good. He doesn’t know if he’s been able to tell a lonely hatchling—and make them believe it—that there’s a way to be okay.

Tony sighs explosively. “So you don’t do anything to my head, okay, what about the other dragons? You’re telling me none of them, not one, would ever consider using a clan bond to destroy someone from the inside out.”
“I’m not asking you to trust the other dragons. I’m asking you to trust me.”

“You’ve lied to us before,” Tony retorts.

“I prefer to call it omitting the truth,” Clint hedges. Tony’s flat looks lets him know he’s said the wrong thing and he quickly backtracks: “Okay, yeah, I kind of did. And I know that makes trust harder. But I want to help you.”

“Then what’s in it for you?” Tony asks, daring to walk a little closer. “You can’t expect me to believe you’re doing this all out of the goodness of your amazing dragon heart.” With his arms folded, and standing up while Clint is sitting down, Tony makes at least half of his dragon instincts wake up and growl. If he had wings to be flaring about now? There just might be a fight.

Clint breathes out slowly. Don’t bite the hatchling, don’t bite, chill. And then: hatchling.

He keeps his body posture relaxed and nonthreatening, but he looks Tony straight in the eye when he says, “I’d get a family again.”

Tony drops his arms, shoves his hands in his pockets. Clint gets the vibe that he’d also like to look away, but he doesn’t back down from a fight, so he stares straight back at Clint instead. “I don’t even know what a good family is like, you know. Do you?”

There are a lot of things Clint can say to that. He can try to explain, or he can try to tell Tony his memories, or he can try to skirt around the fact that sometimes the best of things, the things you live for, can turn overripe, sour, rotten, nothing but a deep, broken hole inside you. But all he says is, “I remember.”

There is a lot more pain in those two words than Clint means to put there.

But maybe that’s what Tony wanted, some painful realism in the fact that bonds are meant to be the best thing to ever happen to a dragon. He sits down next to Clint on the couch, and for a moment he dares to hope that maybe it’s time, maybe Tony’s ready for the bond, ready to trust.

“How old are you?” he asks thoughtfully.

Clint turns head slowly to stare at Tony in bewilderment, but his mouth automatically answers, “Over two thousand years old.” Then he properly processes the question and shakes his head like he thinks that will dispel the randomness. “Why?”

Tony’s eyebrows are just about in his hairline. “Whoa. Wow. That’s—“ He shakes his head, too, almost an echo of Clint, and says, “Not actually what I meant. You seem,” Tony doesn’t finish the sentence, just waves his hand in a gesture that is probably meant to be somehow descriptive but just leaves Clint guessing. “I meant, how old, in equivalent to human years, are you?”

It takes Clint a little while to do the math. Fledging ceremony would be coming of age. In modern days, that would be equivalent to eighteen, but before, back during the vast majority of human history in Clint’s lifetime, it was closer to sixteen. That would make him, in equivalence, anywhere from twenty to almost twenty-three, depending which age he used as a reference.


“But you left home.” Tony’s eyes are sharp, intelligent, and they narrow as he thinks, starts to add things up. “How long ago?”
“About three and a half centuries,” Clint answers cautiously.

“So you were—say, eighteen. You’re practically a kid.” Tony’s staring at him with something close to horror, in a completely new light, and Clint isn’t sure he likes it.

“Was,” Clint says sharply. “I’m not anymore.”

“You can be of age and get sent to war, but that doesn’t mean you’re ready for it,” Tony says grimly, and Clint supposed a former weapons dealer would know that. “You were eighteen, left home under strenuous circumstances, never returned, never saw your family again, and, and that, is just.” Tony stops again, collecting his thoughts and presumably his words, and shoots Clint a look more openly vulnerable than any he’s seen so far. “You just want a family again.”

It’s basically exactly what Clint had admitted to, earlier, but the way Tony says it is weighed down with some kind of emotion he doesn’t know what to do with. He senses that, somehow, the whole dynamic of being an adult and a hatchling has been reversed between them, and in that moment it’s Tony suddenly self-conscious of how to best approach helping a younger Clint.

It almost makes his skin crawl, but mostly he jus doesn’t know what to do with it.

Tony apparently takes his silence for agreement and, well, he’s not wrong. But it seems to make him nervous, and he runs a hand through his hair distractedly, making it stick up at odd angles. “I’d be a shitty family, you know. Like, you have no idea.”

“You haven’t met my…” Clint hesitates, because he doesn’t know what to call his mother and sisters; they’re not his clan anymore. He settles with the human word for it: “family. This will be a lot better than nothing.”

Tony is looking at him like he’s crazy, but also like he thinks he’s pretty crazy himself. “You’re trusting me to be a, a good—what, brother? Would we be brothers?”


“You think I’d be an okay brother. You’re trusting that.”

“I gotta Trust something,” Clint says simply.

Tony stares at his hands. “So… I maintain that I am a really horrible choice for trust.” He pauses for only a beat before adding, “But I think I can trust you. Not to… ruin my head. I… I can try that.”

Finally, Clint holds his hand out wordlessly, a gesture for the Trust that Tony can’t see. If he’s willing to take hold, if he’s willing to hang on—

Tony takes his hand.

Clint almost immediately takes advantage of Tony initiating the contact and uses it to tentatively nudge at his mind.


“Sorry,” Clint says hastily. “The last attempt… didn’t go too well. I’ll help you fix it, if you’ll let me?”

Tony gives him a side-eyed look. “That’s kind of what I’m trusting you for.” Then he smirks. “Punk,” he adds, and ruffles Clint’s hair.
Clint swats at his hand distractedly, but most of his focus isn’t physical. Carefully, he feels along the outsides of Tony’s mind, where all the shields should be. On one side, they’re strained, and on the other, they’re straight-up cracked and a few places are even collapsed. It’s not pretty.

Tony snatches his hand away from Clint’s hair as he sucks in a breath, but Clint eases off the mental pressure and Tony grips his hand with both of his.

“Sorry,” Clint murmurs. “I should have made sure we were both ready.” All rushing did was get him here, with a lot of damage that could have been avoided.

Tony doesn’t respond, so Clint goes ahead and tries to repair some of the damaged sections. Mostly he holds up the shields so that Tony’s mind isn’t under so much strain, and it’s easier to mend and hold. Tony sighs a little in relief. Clint wraps his arm around Tony’s shoulder, leans over to rest his head against Tony’s, and tries going a little deeper.

He knows he can’t just barge in here like it’s his right. The bristling defenses from last time are still up, though hurt. But this time there’s that thread of Trust that connects them, identifies Clint, allows him in. But it’s foreign here, not his own, and he needs permission to do anything, including help.

[I can help you.] he sends to the communicative part of Tony’s mind. Tony sucks in a breath and tenses. Clint waits for him to recognize the sound of his thoughts before he continues. [You can share my shields. It won’t hurt so much.]

If he keeps himself still, if he’s listening, Clint can hear a spiraling thought, like Tony’s trying to communicate but doesn’t know where to send it. [Do it.]

Clint lets his physical body relax and puts all his attention into the metaphysical, holding up Tony’s shields in the peripheries while at the same time moving in to find the core of Tony’s mind. He follows the bright burning that the magic had imbued into Tony’s being and finds the not-quite formed center, glinting like a polished rock in candlelight. He can’t tell what it is, but no one will be able to until Tony manifests his Gem.

He murmurs a few ceremonial words and asks, one last time: [Is this okay?] before he completes the bonding.

[Do it.] Tony repeats.

Clint touches his fire to Tony’s and Tony jerks and gasps. Steadily, Clint unravels from Tony’s mind, leaving nonexistent strings attached to Tony’s shields to hold them up with his own. It’s… right, it’s a bond, and Clint has a clan again.

Tony’s breathing hard, shaking from residual shock of the bond, and he’s not all there in his physical body again, but he manages to look at Clint with wide eyes. His pupils are slitted, and Clint knows his are the same, because he can see echoes of how Tony is seeing him.

Tony makes a sound kind of like a giggle, almost hysterical, but Clint can feel overwhelming confusion and curiosity and a wary something that feels almost like happiness. They’re not his, but he can feel them and—and—

He has a clan again.

Clint doesn’t know if he’s laughing or crying, really, but he doesn’t care because he’s not alone in his own head anymore.
It takes Tony a few minutes to stop shaking, another few to be breathing regularly again, but he isn’t panicked, really. Clint would be able to feel that. He’s just—drifting. Almost in shock. Feeling out this new bond that they have.

“This is weird,” he says. It echoes in Clint’s head strangely.

Clint smiles. “You know what’s weirder?” [You don’t even have to speak.]

He can feel Tony’s blink of surprise, of reorganizing how he looks at the world. [Tony Stark to Houston, impossible communication is indeed working. How???]

Clint sniggers. [Don’t ask dumb questions.] [But how???]

Clint shares a few memories, a few pieces of knowledge, and watches in fascination as Tony sorts them. It’s like folders, linked in ways that barely make any sense to Clint, but he watches anyway as Tony makes new ones—labeled Clan and Telepathy and adds to one named Dragon Weirdness. Then Tony pauses.

[You’re family now.] Tony sends, which is both a question and not a question; it’s accompanied by wonder and wariness that’s gentler than it was before.

[Of course.] Clint replies, and watches Tony change one of the folder’s titles from Barton to Clint. He’s rather touched by it, actually.

“Mr. Barton, would you kindly alert Sir that Miss Potts has been trying to call him for the past five minutes?” Jarvis asks, jolting Clint from his nice little existence inside his clan, sounding dry as possible for something electric.

“Sure.” [You hear that?] Clint asks.

[Yeah. Through you.] Tony feels a touch disturbed. [Is there something wrong with my ears?]

[You’re probably just not paying attention to them.] Clint explains. [Here.]

Now that he’s looking for it, Tony really doesn’t seem to be registering any physical sensations, too wrapped up in the new method of communication and experience. So Clint pokes him in the forehead a few times. Tony’s head bobs back with the movement, but he doesn’t react. His eyes are glazed over.

[Hey, that’s mean.] Tony complains.

[But can you feel it?] Clint asks.

Clint is given the vague sensation of something thudding in the distance.

[Good. Follow it.]

Tony tries. Clint pokes him in the forehead some more to give him something to follow and Tony finally blinks, frowning. [Stop that.]
[Make me.] Clint invites. Tony growls at him, which, in keeping with the whole hatchling thing, is actually kind of adorable.

Tony sits up a little straighter, eyes narrowing as he growls again. [Hatchling?]

Oops. He forgot Tony can hear those thoughts now. [Don’t worry.] Clint assures him. [It’s just as manly as purple is.]

Finally, Tony is able to swat Clint’s hands away. “Hatchling,” he repeats. “Are you kidding me?” His movements are jerky, but they’re there.

“Pepper’s calling you,” Clint says. “Jarvis says she’s been trying for five minutes.


“Where is your phone?” Clint asks patiently, sending a mental idea of a phone to Tony to spur him along.

Haltingly, Tony scrambles for his right pocket, curses about stupid phones and interruptions and the musing that this could be science trailing through his head. Then he produces a phone and stares at it. He’s accessing all the mental folders that tell him what technology does—it’s taking him longer than it usually seems to, but Clint can’t blame him—and taps the button to accept the call, putting it to his ear.

“Um,” he says, because he seems to recall that he can’t recall who they said was on the phone. He rifles through the past few minutes—he’s got a fantastic memory and it’s fascinating to peek in on—and comes up with, “Pepper. Hi.”

“Did anything blow up.” Pepper’s voice is a mixture between stern and tired, with the vague undertones kind of reluctant amusement that Clint has heard too many times in Coulson’s voice. He’s not sure Tony notices it.

Tony is ready to backpedal like the expert that he is, but the problem is, he hasn’t said anything yet. “No?” he says hesitantly. “In the past twenty-four hours? That I know of?”

[The kitchen.] Clint reminds him, with accompanying flashes of the mess of destruction. Tony probably hadn’t been paying attention to it, but Clint had been.

“Ohmygod it’s better than acid,” Tony says suddenly, latching onto the memory. Apparently the colors are brighter in some spectrums than Tony’s used to—then Clint pushes his thoughts back on focus, and Tony’s feeling of alarm is almost comical. “Oh shit, the kitchen. Is this about the kitchen?” he asks Pepper. “I will absolutely get that fixed, it wasn’t even my fault, Clint will vouch for me.” [Right?] he checks. The thought is misaimed, bouncing around his own head, but Clint can hear it anyway and sends back an affirmative.

“What is better than acid?” Pepper demands, but she continues on without giving him time to respond, like she’s suddenly decided she doesn’t actually want to know. Clint supposes that’s a rational response to someone like Tony.

[Jerk.] Tony pouts at him.

“What did you do to the kitchen—no, actually, did anyone get hurt in the kitchen and did anything expensive explode?”

“Define explode.”
“Okay, so, we might need a new table. And chairs. And possibly a few new cupboards, but I think the fridge and oven and stuff is fine.” Clint can feel Tony trying to look at the picture he sent to give Pepper an accurate report, but he keeps getting distracted by the colors. Looking through Tony’s eyes, just for a moment, he sees that his spectrum has brighter colors than Tony’s, since his is still closer to human—it’s really quite interesting.

“Okay,” Pepper says. “I’ll see if we need a remodeler when I get back. Now, did anyone get hurt, Tony.”

“Everyone’s perfectly all right now. We’re fine. Except for me, but uh, I’m fine here now, thank you. How are you?”

“Do you need a doctor?” Pepper asks, except Tony’s tuned out, because he’s trying to figure out the bond again. He shuts his eyes tight and seems to be trying to find the visual part of Clint’s brain. Obligingly, he helps Tony to look through his eyes. Tony’s wonder is absolutely worth the strangeness of helping someone else through what he’d learned instinctively.

[So much better than acid,] Tony informs him, and a vague, confusing memory floats up to where Clint can grab hold and glance at it. [I can even still think, and so cool.]

“Tony, are you even listening to me?” Pepper demands, and Clint nudges Tony back into his own head.


There’s a noticeable pause. “Are you high?” she asks.

Tony isn’t really paying attention anymore. At all. But Clint’s bemusement with the situation is apparently hilarious, because what feels like giddy amusement manifests itself as giddy laughter, right into the phone, which hardly helps his case.

Thing is, Clint’s never actually paid attention to what they said about the bonds of Dragonmade. It never seemed relevant, since the rings had been missing since before he’d cared to think about it. So, for all he knew, Dragonmade always acted like this, all floaty and high on the new sense of self, combined with someone else’s.

Either way, it was becoming abundantly clear that Tony could not be entrusted with an independent conversation with his girlfriend at the moment, so Clint plucked the phone from his hands. Tony was torn between grumbling his pouting and agreeing whole-heartedly, so he ended up just kind of sitting there with a vague frown as Clint took the phone from him.

“Hi, this is Clint—uh, Agent Barton.” Tony’s folder re-labeling is already messing even him up. “I promise Tony isn’t high. Or, well, he’s not on anything. No guarantees for his state of mind.”

Pepper adjusts quickly. “May I call you Clint?” she asks politely.

“Sure.”

“So, Clint, how long has he suddenly been Tony? That usually doesn’t happen with the stubborn ones until after a few drunken confession nights.”

Clint ignores the implication that he’s one of the ‘stubborn ones.’ It’s kind of embarrassingly
accurate. “For about half an hour. I think we combined all of those confession times into about ten minutes.” Pepper’s silence doesn’t mean much to him, but Tony’s brain goes on high alert and points out his error for him. Clint hastens to correct it: “Minus the alcohol, I mean, just a lot of confessions. Concentrated, you know?”

Another silence, but Tony doesn’t flip out over this one, so Clint lets it sit until Pepper says, dubiously, “So a therapy session.”

[Don’t let her send me to therapy,] Tony demands, alarmed. [I am perfectly well-adjusted and only kind of socially impaired.]

[I can tell when even you don’t believe yourself, you know.] Clint reminds him. “God, I hope not,” Clint says to Pepper.

“Tell me Tony will be back to normal soon.”

Clint looks at Tony, who’s looking rather intently back at him even though he’s not quite all there—at least half of him is clinging and stringing along to Clint’s mind. [Think you’ll be back online with your body in a few hours?]

Tony hums. [That’s your definition of normal?] A tendril of amusement threads through the bond. [Setting the bar a little low. Before troubleshooting, who knows how long. Give me a few minutes and I’ll confirm/deny.]

“Yeah,” Clint tells Pepper. It’s true enough, anyway. “So what were you calling him about?”

“Phil has asked me to clear Tony’s schedule for the next three weeks, with possible extensions up through eight weeks. You wouldn’t happen to know why, would you? If it’s another alien invasion I demand a bunker.”

Clint’s eyebrows draw together. Why would Phil—oh. Tony peeks in curiously and Clint shoves down his anxiety and the pictures of home. Tony doesn’t need to see those yet. [Phil is a great forward thinker,] he explains. Because they are going to need time to make sure Tony’s going to be okay as a dragon.

But he doesn’t know how to explain to Pepper, and Tony’s vague cluelessness testifies that neither does he. “It’s a long story,” he says. Several centuries long. “A really long story.”

“I have eleven more minutes before my next meeting,” Pepper says. “Time enough for you to start.”

It’s a bad idea, and Clint tries to figure out how to politely turn her down when Jarvis interjects. “Sir, Mr. Barton? There appears to be a Doombot attack in the city. The Captain is assembling the other Avengers as I speak.”

He takes the out he’s been granted. “Crap, Doombots, gotta go, bye,” he says, and hangs up before he can respond. Good, they can go rip some robots apart to make up for the upset of today—

[Can I use my fire on them? I mean, if I wanted?]

Clint’s thought process derails and he turns to stare at Tony. Physically, he appears deceptively passive, but that’s because most of him is operating metaphysically, constructing plans and blueprints with the kind of glee that should send whoever sent these bots back under the rock they came from.

Tony’s pupils are slits again, but he blinks and they’re back to normal.
The team doesn’t know about the clan bond, what it is or that they now have one. Tony isn’t used to it and will get someone—most likely himself—killed if he goes out fighting like this.

*Oh shit*, he thinks, mostly to himself. He’s sure Tony picks up on it anyway.

[Um,] Tony thinks eloquently, because he doesn’t know the rules or limits of how this works. [Armor is a bad idea?] *Confusion* and *worry* jostle for position in the sentence, and the absent spirals of *bad robots=need Iron Man* are clashing with Tony’s negligible sense of self-preservation.

Clint kind of wants to laugh, but he hates his life too much to give the universe that satisfaction. [Bad idea,] he agrees.

They’re screwed.
Tony

And THIS is why I don't promise consistent updates. Like I said, it'll get done. Just... not in a timely manner.

I went back and had to make a few edits to the scene in the first chapter after the "Roughly Three Hundred Years Previously" header, so that the setting of the Dragon Disk would be consistent. They're not huge changes and you're not going to be totally lost if you don't go back and reread it, but I did change it, if you happened to remember that bit and thought this chapter was being inconsistent.

Tony thinks the debrief would be a little easier to deal with if he weren’t trying to keep his thoughts to Clint silent. Also, if Clint didn’t feel so incredibly damn pissed that it made Tony kind of want to go hole up in his workshop for, say, a year.

[This was not my fault,] Tony sends, careful to keep his mouth shut.

Clint doesn’t argue. There is no argument to that statement, whatsoever—but he’s still unspeakably frustrated. [It’s this whole team’s fault.] Accompanying the clear message comes the spiraling, vague and angry thought, someone’s going to get killed before we get our shit together.

“Great,” Tony mutters, because he’s not wrong, then immediately realizes he said that aloud and tries to shrink in his chair. Casually.

“Something to add, Mr. Stark?” Fury says coolly. He’s glaring at Tony—he’s been glaring at all of them for the past half hour, actually, but now the concentrated force of a one-eyed glare is focused on Tony and he isn’t happy about it.


Fury regards him suspiciously, then sweeps his gaze over the rest of the team and continues. “Does anyone want to tell me why I only had four superheroes out there?”

Rogers sits up straighter in his seat. In direct contrast to everyone else, who is slouching and trying to avoid the guilt trip with varying degrees of unprofessional posture, Rogers looks like someone has taped a support beam to the back of his suit. “Sir. I believe we already explained that Iron man was temporarily out of commission—”

“Yes, you did.” Fury crosses his arms, his mouth a slash of hard feelings across his face. “I don’t care. Everyone’s got to fight short-handed sometimes, and you should be able to cope with that. I want to know why I had four superheroes out there?”

Rogers rubs the side of his nose, eyes averted, and Natasha scuffs the heel of her boots on the floor, apparently unconcerned. Tony swears he can see the metaphorical raincloud over Clint’s head and tries his best to ignore the stretching, awkward silence.

He wasn’t there. So therefore he shouldn’t be expected to interject with anything useful.
The corner of Fury’s mouth curls downward at the awkward silence. “You stepped up to the plate during the first invasion. I can’t pinpoint what’s changed now, but I want you to fix it.”

“If I may, Director?” Bruce says, turning his glasses over in his hands. He’s squinting into his own lap, but at least he’s talking, which Tony thinks is an improvement. “It’s not that easy.”

“I didn’t tell you it would be easy. I just told you to do it.”

The wave of contempt hits Tony like a tsunami and he can’t help but snort. “Because your word is supposed to be our gospel.”

His voice comes out colder than he means it, colder than he feels—but he does feel this arctic storm of frustration swirling inside him and waiting to roar forward—

[Tony. Relax.] Clint’s worry is a shard of glass just clear enough to cut through the anger, the frustration, and the storm is slowly withdrawing back to where it came from.

Back to Clint’s mind, Tony realizes. [That makes that at least 90% your fault.] he says, alarmed. Then pauses, glancing sideways to gauge Bruce’s face. Nothing much different; okay, he probably didn’t say that last part aloud.

Fury’s eye is sharp. “Who would you rather answer to? Yourself?”

[Still blaming you.] Tony insists. His jaw feels glued shut—no, that’s Clint, Clint feels like his jaw is glued shut, Tony never stops talking. The awkward tension in the room is reaching critical levels, so Tony grins and leans back like he doesn’t notice. “Nah. I mean, what’re the odds that the world could take me being an ultimate authority? It’s having enough trouble with me as it is.”

Fury stares at him, flatly unamused the way most people get when they’re the ones dealing with the mountains of bureaucratic red string and paperwork that Tony tends to leave in his wake. “Is this something you can resolve as a team so I can stay off your backs?”

There’s a weighty, elastic moment when anyone might say something incriminating and get Tony and Clint either strapped to lab tables or locked in the therapy rooms, and Tony doesn’t know which would be worse.

“Yes,” Clint says tightly, before anyone plucks up the courage to deny it. “We’ll work it out.”

“Good,” Fury says. “Make sure what happened today doesn’t happen again.”

“Well,” Clint says, and he’s stalling, he’s trying to avoid incrimination—“it’s not, we’re gonna need a little time to fix some stuff, and not the whole team. We’re—it’s not.” Clint seems to give up trying to find words, just clenches his jaw so tight that the muscles are visible across the room.

This is why people can dismiss Clint, Tony thinks. This is why he can pass himself off as just there for a good shot. When it’s something he cares about, something that ties him up inside, his words can’t unravel themselves from the knots.

Clint rubs his forehead to hide his face and coughs a little self-consciously. He doesn’t try to say anything else.

After a moment, Fury stops waiting for him to. “Why don’t you try getting your act together as a team before you go all lone wolf.” He pauses, looks around at them all. Not the team—they’re hardly a team. “You need it.” His chair scrapes against the floor as he pushes it back and he stands with a heavy sigh, ever the disappointed mentor. Tony feels shame, shoves it back to Clint, because he
doesn’t owe Fury anything. Really.

[Not even for saving your life?]

Tony chooses to ignore that.

“You have got to have more in common than just saving the world,” Fury tells them. Tony narrowly repressed the urge to snort, but he has the feeling it shows on his face. Fury rolls his eye at the general lack of response from the room’s inhabitants and turns swiftly to stalk out of the door. “If you can’t think of anything, I’d suggest ballroom dancing as a place to start,” he says as a parting shot.

Tony entertains the notion of Captain America on a dance floor. Then calculates the strength and height necessary to safely dip him, and if Tony could manage it—

[Oh my god, shut up.]

Tony frowns, shoots Clint a hurt look that’s more emotion across the bond than it is anything else. The exasperation in Clint’s thoughts has hooks in its fragile flesh, snared by the anger underneath, the anger that would pull Tony under if he gets too close.

It’s no wonder Clint has a resting bitch face, if he’s constantly hiding that.

“You know, he’s got a point,” Rogers says reluctantly.

Tony opens his mouth to protest—oh, so he’s supposed to shut up—but closes it before he can embarrass himself because that conversation had been in his head. It takes him a second to rewind—“What, ballroom dancing? Really, Rogers?” According to his calculations, if Tony tried dipping Rogers then they’d both end up on their asses, but if Thor was planning on coming back any time soon they might have a working model.

Rogers shoots him an annoyed look. Tony preens under it maybe a bit more than he should. “We have to get this team together.” He glances sideways at Clint. “That includes you two.”

“I’ve been saying,” Bruce says tightly. “We’re a chemical mixture; too many people who are too strong. We’re going to explode.”

“And we’ll take half the city down with us,” Natasha murmurs in agreement.

That triggers a derisive isn’t that obvious in Clint’s head, accompanied by a sprawling strategy that he hastily shoves into a box, hides it away, draws back before it can see the light. Another thing he’s too close to, another thing he won’t be able to articulate—

Tony can’t help it. He takes it.

“Isn’t that the point?” he says suddenly. He’s staring Natasha straight on, which isn’t the best thing he’s ever done, according to his catatonic self-preservation instincts, but dammit, Clint has a point, even if he doesn’t share it beyond his head. Tony spreads his hands. “We’re all too strong for anybody else. But we can keep each other in check, if one of us goes rogue—provided the others are team enough to work together. This system works, but it can’t work one on one.”

“That’s morbid,” Natasha says, surprised. She sounds like she approves.

Rogers doesn’t seem as settled with it. “You’ve gotten cynical.”

Tony scoffs. “I’ve always been cynical, Spangles. I mean, if you could see the inside of my head—“
The conversation—and this is, sadly, about the best conversation they’ve had as a group since they saved the world together (Tony feels like that’s supposed to count for some kind of camaraderie)—abruptly comes to a halt. For, like, a lot longer than Tony would normally let it last, except that he caused this one completely by accident and for once would rather not make it even worse.

“Well,” Rogers says finally, looking sideways at Clint. Clint is staring stubbornly at the wall, but watching the rest of the team rather closely through Tony’s head; there’s a sinking feeling in their shared headspace and it’s rooted in both of them. “I really can’t.”

This is how Tony finds out that Clint hates feeling guilty, but feels it far too often. [Screw this,] Clint thinks venomously.

[Seconded.] Tony agrees. “Poor choice of words,” he admits. Rogers’ expression stays skeptical, and you know what, Tony’s only been dealing with this for a few weeks and he’s already sick of it. He doesn’t have to prove himself to anyone or anything. “When you can get over the fact that I’m kind of trying really hard not to die, over here, then we’ll try this again.”

He storms out of the room, leaving Clint tugging after him in a bit of a panic—whyareyouleavingnostop—but Tony can’t stay in that room. He stops right outside of it, nudging Clint to come after him, huffing at the hesitation he receives.

[If I asked you to fly me out of here,] Tony wonders, [would you do it?]

[No. Something tells me that showing off isn’t exactly the best idea at the moment.]

Tony tries pulling Clint out here with him, again, since no one’s even talking in that room, just exchanging significant looks that Clint’s having trouble reading. Clint ignores him and Tony withdraws, pouting by himself in a hallway, which, when he thinks about it, is about as pathetic as a superhero gets. He didn’t even bring his suit, something about solidarity, and how is he supposed to get home without slinking back to the team with his tail between his legs?

Tony huffs to himself and starts down the hall. He can probably hijack a helicopter or something. When he gets outside, though, someone with a hand approximately the size of his head claps down on his shoulder roughly and Tony yelps.

“Friend Tony,” Thor rumbles. “I do not see your flying armor here. I was wondering if you would appreciate a ride home.”

—§§§—

“First of all, when did you even get here?” Tony bursts out. Not until his feet are safely on the helicopter pad of the Tower, of course—he’s not scared of heights, oh no, he flies around in a tin can! It’s just that there’s a big difference between a tin can he built and has faith in and a god with an arm slung across his back, casually, like there isn’t a terrifying number of feet between them and the ground.

“Inwards of half an hour ago,” Thor rumbles. “Heimdall had informed me about some…” Thor pauses as if considering his words, a show of tact that Tony frankly hadn’t expected of the god, “curious developments since I last fought by your side.”
Tony fought the threat of an escaping hysterical giggle down to a somewhat high-pitched, disbelieving, “Huh.” [Clint where are you guys Heimdall’s been creeping on me and Thor’s in town.]

Clint, almost a mile away but still clear in Tony’s head like he was standing two feet from his elbow, responds first with a wordless request for patience and a muffled spike of anxiety. Then, [Okay, I’ll get the others going. I have the feeling this is going to be a team thing. Stall him until we get there, yeah?] Beneath the ever-present, curdling tide of anger, there’s a sudden jumble of worry don’tlethimspeculate, theydon’tunderstand under a familiar hiss of Asgardian. Apparently that went back a ways. Interesting.

Thor is looking at him rather intently when Tony checks back into his physical body. “Have the two of you already bonded, then?”

“I, um.” Tony clears his throat; he isn’t sure which answer Thor would like to hear, so he goes with the truth. “Yes, actually.”

Thor’s face brightens, just slightly, the corner of his mouth tilting up like he’s satisfied. “Perhaps you will survive this trial of the body, then. It would be a great shame to lose you before your time.”

“And when exactly do you think my time is with all this magical shit from immortals?” Tony snaps testily. A mistake. Losing his temper gets him approximately nowhere ever; he’s got to think his way through this. He breathes purposely in through his nose and out through his mouth. “I’m just going to —you want a seat? Let’s sit down.”

Tony saunters over to the indented pit in front of the television, lined with couches so soft you could probably lose a small child in them. He’s practically oozing casualness, here, and hopes Thor picks up on the presented emotion and doesn’t make this any worse than it has to be.

“Learning of Clinton’s true nature worried me, I’ll admit,” Thor says musingly, settling into a couch of his own.

So much for picking up on the not talking vibe. But Tony’s pretty well resigned to some extremely weird smalltalk. “Dragons not friendly with Asgard?” he asks. That could be a problem. That could really be a problem, actually.

Thor looks pensive. It’s not a natural expression on his face, not while he’s in full armor like he’s ready to go down swinging. “No. That is, we are not un friendly with the Disk.”

“It’s Thor’s turn to look vaguely confused. “I do not know of Disk-World, but the Dragon Disk is where Clint would hail from. They have isolated themselves for some centuries, now. Clint’s presence here cannot be a sign boding of much good.”

Tony gets the feeling he should probably be asking Clint these kind of questions, but currently he’s distracted trying to get the rest of the Avengers on the move and frankly, Tony thinks this line of questioning would plunge him straight into the pit of stewing emotions he doesn’t think Clint has looked at too closely for at least a hundred years.

He thinks he can be forgiven a little prying. “It’s not good for Earth that Clint’s here?” Tony asks, because that could be a problem too.

“Not good for Clint,” Thor corrects. Frowns. “You don’t quite understand the importance of the bond, do you?”
Tony scowls. “All I know is it’s full of warm fuzzies but also a potential emotional disaster zone. Also, I’d die without it.”

Thor doesn’t appear satisfied with that answer. Personally, Tony thinks he’s been doing pretty damn well, all things considered, and it’s really not Thor’s place to judge that. “The state of a dragon’s mind without a bond is the stuff of cautionary tales,” Thor murmurs, quiet enough, expression distant enough, that Tony’s not entirely sure the words were meant for him. They strike a chord of unease, however, and it runs deep into Tony’s mind.

[What happened to waiting to talk?] Clint snaps across the bond. He seems testy—no, uneasy. Almost self-conscious.

Tony rubs his forehead in an attempt to cover the communication. [Well, stalling didn’t work so well, okay?]

[Admit it, you were being nosy.]

Tony pauses. [Are you pouting? What are you, five?]

Clint withdraws so fast it gives Tony a mental whiplash. Five indeed.

Or, well, almost two thousand. Close enough.

“Your communication seems to be coming along,” Thor says. He looks mildly concerned.

Tony coughs, self-conscious. “Um. Yes. Somewhat.” If you can call it ‘coming along’ when they’ve been doing this for barely eight hours. Is it supposed to take longer? Does that mean Tony is lucky or screwed? With his luck, probably screwed.

Thor nods, and for the first time Tony sees the veins of discomfort in his movements, as well. “Are… you set to visit the Disk soon?”


The silence is temporarily palpable. “You… do know that you will need to, correct?” Thor asks cautiously.

“Um, what—“ Tony switches almost immediately to contact Clint. Wherever he is. Still not close, but Tony can follow the bond and shout, silently, disoriented, [Okay so what’s this about going to your dragon Discworld?]

[Um.] Vague guilt. [I was going to get around to that part. You know, after we got back, before the whole Asgardian thing.] More sensations of grumbling.

“Oh my god,” Tony groans aloud. [Great. I get to be the first human in however many centuries, you know what, nope, it would be a political disaster and contrary to popular opinion I actually try to avoid those.]

[We don’t have a choice.] Unease/resignation/guilt/guilt/guilt [We’re going to have to go, if you’re going to live.]

Tony glares hard at the floor. He is really beginning to hate the ‘or you’ll die’ that is starting to seem like it’s part of every ultimatum. [I demand pictures. Information. I once offended almost half of the population of Tokyo and that is not an experience I want to repeat.]
[I’d help you.] Clint assures him, but the nervousness in the bond doesn’t help. An image flashes in Tony’s head, attached to wistfulness and gut-wrenching anxiety alike, presumably the Disk. Tall, chrome buildings, shining like it’s reflecting the light of a thousand galaxies, dragons flying—and—

“Pod racers?” Tony blurts, straightening his spine so fast he almost falls off the couch. “Ohmygod, I change my mind, when can we leave?”

——§§§——

Rogers walks in with a scowl on his face. “Welcome back,” he tells Thor tersely. No one looks surprised to see an Asgardian lounging on the couch; Clint must have warned them. Mind you, Rogers doesn’t look particularly enthused about it, but he looks less annoyed than he did in the debrief, which Tony takes as at least an improvement.

Tony is still vibrating slightly in excitement because pod racers, but any time they’re all in the same room lately, he doesn’t seem to be capable of keeping his mouth shut. “Yeah, welcome back to the train wreck,” Tony says blithely.

Rogers no longer looks any less annoyed than he did on the Helicarrier. “Your attitude isn’t helping, Stark.”

But he doesn’t actually deny it.

Thor’s eyebrows are slowly crawling up his forehead at the exchange. “I was told some things had changed since we last fought as shield brothers.” He pauses. “And sister,” he adds, for Natasha’s sake. His eyes scan the rest of them, a little bemused and rather unimpressed.

Bruce is holed up on a couch as far away from Thor—and, in consequence, Rogers—as possible, positioning his body like he’s trying to hide in plain sight. Natasha has claimed the arm right next to him and is perched on it as regally as Tony’s seen anyone sit on a couch. Clint has slumped on the other end of Tony’s couch, still close enough to Natasha that he could reach out and rest a hand on her knee.

Rogers is the only one left standing. When he notices, he drops down into the seat next to Thor, but somehow it still feels like he’s towering over Tony, and he doesn’t like it.

“I get that this is a difficult thing that happening,” Rogers begins, with the tone of voice that tells Tony he’s about to prove why he doesn’t, as a matter of fact, understand it. “But we’re a team. It can’t be just you two off in your corner.”

[This would be a bad time to tell him we have to go to Discworld, wouldn’t it,] Tony notes.

[The Dragon Disk,] Clint corrects him, aggrieved. “And why can’t it, Cap?” he says aloud, vaguely smirking, eyes somehow distant in a way that tells Tony he’s paying way more attention to the bond than anyone else in the room. Which, kind of flattering, but probably not helping.

“We’re supposed to be a team,” he snaps. “That means teamwork, trust.” Clint stiffens, unnoticeably, but internally Tony has the sensation he’s just watched Clint get slapped across the face. “We need to know everyone is worthy of being trusted before this can work.”

The incredulity blocks Tony’s throat, almost bubbles over as it mixes and hisses in a reaction with
poison anger, but it’s not until Clint starts laughing that Tony can pull back enough to realize the emotions aren’t his. Tony sighs, pressing two fingers between his eyes to focus away from that anger before he snaps. Instead, he’s swamped with tiredness, emanating, again, from Clint, the kind of hopelessness held back only by sheer force of will.

Natasha side-eyes Clint and Bruce looks like he’s about ready to get up and walk out of the room, but it’s Rogers who gives them both a flat look and asks, “Care to share with the class?”

Clint grins sharp enough to make Tony have to suppress a wince. “I don’t know how you think trust works, Cap, but that ain’t it. In order to be trusted? Someone’s got to trust you first.”

Bruce looks like it’s occurred to him he might be standing in front of an oncoming train. “And if that trust turns out to not be deserved?”

Tony knows the answer to that one. “Then it breaks.” Reflexively, he looks to Clint, whose expression has smoothed over despite the consistent turmoil inside. He remembers Clint’s words: I am the other end. He is Trust.

How many times has he broken?

It’s not sent, really, but Clint seems to hear the thought anyway, and he turns to stare at Tony. And even though their bonded, they’re closer to each other than Tony’s been to anyone besides Rhodey and Pepper, Clint feels suddenly alien. “Trust does that, sometimes,” Clint says, and Tony doesn’t know who he’s talking to.

Bruce notices something, because he’s looking between the two of them like he’s a little worried for Tony’s safety. “And what if we can’t take that?”

Clint looks to Bruce, instead, and finally released, Tony tears his eyes away. Natasha is watching him, but he doesn’t meet her eyes.

“How do you propose we trust you?” Rogers asks, and the worst part is, Tony’s about 87% sure he’s being sincere. Suddenly, looking at this haphazard joke of a team, Tony feels like an alien too. So distant.

So tired.

Tony’s previous excitement about the pod racers has been dampened by the conversation, but he’s still sure about going.

Or maybe Clint is sure. Either way, it doesn’t seem to matter anymore.

“How soon?” Natasha asks abruptly, her eyes shrewd. Probably suspicious that Clint hadn’t mentioned it to her, but welcome to the club, surprises all around.
But it’s actually a good question. He relays it to Clint and the answer is immediate: [Tomorrow.]

Tony’s past worrying about this. He’s jumped off the edge hoping Trust will hold, and if it doesn’t—

Well, if it doesn’t, then he’s pretty good at dealing with consequences.

“Tomorrow,” Tony says.

—§§§—

When Tony finds him, Clint is perched in the air vents in the hallway. Perfect for watching everyone else leave the room, but he can’t fool Tony.

Tony stops just below him and folds his arms, glaring upwards. [Get down from there or help me up.] Even the short message opens Tony to the anger lurking within the bond, but he’s not about to let the guy who talked him into a telepathic bond go and hide from it, now.

Clint’s riling up to argue, but maybe realizes the futility of it, because he moves an air vent and reaches down. [Jump.]

Tony does, even though he’s about 60% sure that Clint’s arms don’t have the strength. Clint is sure, and Tony doesn’t know when that started being enough.

[Dragons are stronger than humans anyway,] Clint tells him silently. [So whatever calculations you’re running in that brain of yours? They’re faulty.]

The quiet of their little encounter is ruined when Clint’s apparently superior dragon strength still can’t manage to hoist Tony up without Tony banging his knee hard on the edge of the vent. He swears loudly as Clint finishes hauling him up and shoves him on the other side of the opening.

[Shut up,] Clint sends him, the thought hissing, hackles raised.

[What, do you think the rest of the team is going to hear me and try to corner you for another awkward conversation?] Tony snips irritably. Pauses, paying attention to the sudden lull in the bond.

[You totally do, don’t you. Clint.]

[Move it, we’re going somewhere else.] Clint replaces the vent cover and nudges Tony’s thigh in a gesture for him to continue into the deep, dark depths of the ventilation shafts.

[Cliiiiiint.]

[You’re right, okay?] And there’s the anger—Tony didn’t realize it was gone until he could feel it again and wow, he hadn’t missed it. This time, a portion of it is directed through the bond. Tony recoils. [I don’t want to talk to them, I’m sick of trying to make this work.]

[You’ve barely even been trying,] Tony points out.

Clint throws a bundle of memories at him. Human faces Tony doesn’t recognize, laughing, stony-faced, hurt, all of them flashing by in moments and they’re all teams, but not his team. Never his. [It’s always the same,] Clint says darkly.

Tony tries to echo the feeling, throw his own mind at Clint’s in the same overwhelming way, mirror
the feeling of the bond. [Not this time.]

For a moment, Tony’s not sure it makes a difference. He’s out here on a limb, in the bond because of blind trust that Clint will hold on the other end, and for that moment that feels like an eternity, he’s suddenly terrified that Clint is going to let him fall.

Then the bond is flooding back angrily, full force, and Clint crawls over and nudges his side pointedly with his head. [Different this time. But only for you. Now move.]

Tony will take what he can get.

They crawl until Tony has no idea where they are, but Clint’s internal map tells him they’re above the alcove where the elevator is, the one on the outside of the tower where the glass makes you feel like you could take a step out into the sky. Somehow, proximity to the sky helps, but the inside of the vent is dark and muted, the gentle humming of an active vent a floor or two up vibrating gently in their bones.

[Cap is actually trying to help, I think.] Tony ventures. [We’re a mess, but we don’t hate each other.]

[If you think he’s so set on helping, then why is he the only one who’s folder is still labeled by his last name in your head?] Clint sends waspishly.

He’s got a point, but Tony is not going into his copious amounts of daddy issues right now. Especially not with Clint’s anger dogging his heels with such vitriol there’s a high probability that his own emotions would get blown out of the water.

Clint pulls back so hard Tony physically jerks and swears—softly, this time—but the bond is suddenly cavernous and dark. [Hey.] he says, peeved. [Hey.]

No response. He’s not even sure Clint can hear him.

It’s hard to see in the darkness, but looking over, Tony’s pretty sure that Clint has gone pale. He reaches out, touches Clint’s arm. Clint flinches. “Hey,” Tony says softly.

“I don’t—“ Clint starts, stops suddenly. He makes a guttural, disgusted sound. “I hate this.”

The anger, Tony would guess. But there’s a theory on that which has been sitting on a back burner, and Tony finally brings it out. “You know, there’s something I read somewhere a long time ago. On psychology. And I’ve been thinking."

“A dangerous pastime,” Clint mutters.

Tony’s been in Clint’s head just long enough to know his defensive mechanisms when he sees them, and the sudden silence over the bond gives him enough distance to not be affected by Clint’s reluctance. “Anger isn’t a base emotion. It’s secondary. There’s always something under it. Sometimes it’s fear,” Clint tenses. “Or sadness.” Tony presses his shoulder against Clint’s as Clint seems to curl in on himself. “Or shame,” he adds, softly.

“I don’t want any of it,” Clint whispers harshly. Tony closes his eyes and tilts his head until it bumps against Clint’s, trying to seek, as Clint had before, the mind on the other end of the bond.

[But you don’t have to be afraid of it.] Tony sends as loud as he can. Clint stills and Tony knows he heard.

Slowly, the bond opens again. [I don’t want it.] Clint says again. [I don’t want to go home.] Tony
can feel that nest of vipers and knows there is fear, sadness, shame, all of it waiting for Clint when they go to the Disk.

Tony doesn’t want to go either. Not if that’s what’s there. But they have to, and they both know it, so they’ll push aside their emotions and tough it out like they’ve both been doing for longer than is healthy.

*Oh god,* Tony despairs to himself, *why is everyone in this tower so emotionally stunted?*

Judging by the clear sensation of someone rolling their eyes, Clint heard that. [Speak for yourself.]

[Oh.] Clint thinks about that. [Probably because we’re superheroes.] And as if that’s supposed to clear everything up, he wordlessly declares the conversation over, leaning his head back against the side of the vent and closing his eyes.

*God,* twenty-one isn’t supposed to be that young, but Tony feels like he should be able to lock Clint up in room and not let him out into the big, cruel world. It’s a little too late for that—Tony can feel it—but the feeling is there nonetheless.

[I’d be offended,] Clint says, sounding sleepy—it’s been a long day for everyone—[but the feeling is mutual.] And he wraps an arm around Tony’s shoulders to shove his head down onto Clint’s shoulder. The mental hum of *hatchling* is more comforting than any word Tony can remember Howard saying and carries the lilt of an Italian lullaby his mother used to sing. He tries to remember the words, but doesn’t manage it before he falls asleep.

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Tony wakes up alone in an air vent. Somehow, he thinks that’s a metaphor for something, but he can’t put his finger on quite what.

Prying up the air vent cover is a piece of cake—it’s the nine-foot drop underneath that proves to be a little nerve-wracking. Dragons are apparently stronger, but Tony doesn’t think that applies to him quite yet. But if Clint can do it, so can he, so he narrows his eyes at the trajectory, measures how to move to disperse the force, and takes a leap out of the vent. He falls okay, not great, but nine feet with only a twinge in his back is a result he’ll tick under the experimental success column.

Clint has to be around here somewhere. Reaching out for the bond is easier, now, as though it’s growing stronger, or maybe like Tony’s brain is still hooking onto new connections that don’t exist for most humans. The trail of awareness pops up with cupboards, a boiling coffee pot, and a toaster. The kitchen, then.

Tony walks in carelessly, finding Clint hanging out in the corner and pouring himself a cup of coffee, and it’s probably Tony’s carelessness that causes Bruce to catch him by surprise.

“Are those the same clothes you were wearing last night?”

His heart skips a beat and he nearly runs into the table. Tony almost turns that into an innuendo, but this is Bruce, and the poor guy is already squinting at him warily enough. Instead, he blinks, and backtracks to what Bruce had said so he can actually answer the question. “Wow, judging me,
now?” Tony pouts theatrically. “There was an air vent, it’s not—you know what, somewhere in my head that didn’t sound as weird as it does.” Bruce opens his mouth, but Tony beats him to it, already moving on: “Hey Clint, we’re leaving today, yeah?”

Somehow, in the space of about seven seconds, Clint has perched himself on top of the refrigerator. Again. Bruce starts when he turns his head and puts a hand on his chest like he’s trying to manually slow his heart rate. Which is kind of weird, because okay, on top of a refrigerator, but it is the highest place in the kitchen, so.

It suddenly occurs to Tony that Clint perching on top of the refrigerator isn’t supposed to seem normal. Because it isn’t. For humans?

When he starts this whole dragon transformation in earnest, Tony dearly hopes he doesn’t start perching on refrigerators and other miscellaneous pieces of furniture or Pepper is going to think he’s lost his mind.


Tony spares a moment for an incredulous look, then makes a beeline for the coffee because boy does he have to wake up. “An hour? Do you have any idea how many projects I have going right now? They’ll all explode and die if I’m not here—“ Tony pours himself a cup of coffee, tries to take a sip, and promptly learns why Clint is still cradling his mug in his hands.

Jarvis swiftly interjects. “Sir, I have taken the liberty of ensuring nothing will explode or die in your lab whilst you are away.”

“—And I haven’t packed—“

“Don’t bother,” Clint says, eying his coffee like he’s about willing to risk the heat again. “They’ll get you anything you need once you’re there.”

“—And—an hour? Seriously?”

“Yep.” Clint takes a sip of coffee, apparently deems it cool enough, and downs the whole rest of the mug in record time. A quick two movements later and Clint is back on the floor like the normal person he emphatically is not. “Eat up. No, more than just coffee”—Tony isn’t so sure this telepathic bond is going to have a positive effect on his dietary habits—“do it now, you’ll need time for your food to settle before we leave.”

Tony narrows his eyes, because that is not a comforting statement. “How exactly are we leaving?”

Clint offers him a brief flash of sensation: spinning space, nausea, moving too fast to settle before shooting out the other end.

“Oh, that’s unfortunate.”

Bruce breaks his silence with the air of a student unable to sit on his hands anymore. “Alright, I have to know—did you hear words in your head just now?”

Tony didn’t think Bruce wanted to know, but apparently that’s not true. It’s probably the scientific curiosity. God knows that’s been a problem for Tony, as of late. “Well, in general, we can think words at each other, but a lot faster than you’d be able to say them aloud. Don’t know exactly how fast, we’d need to do some testing… But just now, that wasn’t words, it was a combination of visuals and physical sensations. Did you know dragons see colors differently than humans do?”
Bruce’s eyes, already wider than normal, light up at the last piece of information and Tony knows he’s got him hooked. It’ll be awesome: he can science the bond with Bruce, and maybe they can both make sense of it and Tony will understand why the idea of the bond doesn’t bother him anymore—besides the suggestion lurking in his brain that the bond was distorting his perception…

Hopefully that wasn’t actually the case.

Clint’s eyebrows are raised high and he’s eying Bruce like he hasn’t even seen him before.
[Ooookay, you guys nerd out together. I’m gonna go make sure Phil’s got stuff set up. Can I use the roof?]

Tony blinks. “Sure.” [Do I want to know why the roof?]

“I need somewhere high up,” Clint replies, making a beeline for the doorway and tossing a wave over his shoulder.

“What did you guys just say?” Bruce asks curiously, leaning forward in his chair like he could maybe see the conversation trailing after Clint’s sudden departure. Tony echoes the brief conversation and Bruce shakes his head. “That fast?”

“That fast.” Tony tries his coffee again, finds it worthy, and settles into a chair with all the contentment of a caffeinated cat. “You know, you were pretty freaked out yesterday. Like you were about to take off for India at a moment’s notice. Now you’re pretty chill. What changed?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Bruce says. He stirs his tea—green tea, when there’s coffee right here, the heathen—and raises an eyebrow expectantly.

Honestly, Tony is trying to avoid looking at it too hard. He shrugs. “The whole trust thing? Clint is all over that. Talked me into a leap of faith, ‘cause, I mean, this whole dragon thing is pretty ritualistic and I miss a step, I die, it sounds like. I’m trusting him so far, since I’m not dead yet. We’ll see where this takes us.” Bruce seems to be mulling over another potential question, so Tony waves his hand impatiently to try and derail his current train of thought. “Your turn, bud, what’s up with your zen?”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “It’s not zen. I mean, I’m a little freaked out still. Dragons aren’t supposed to be real.” He frowns at his tea. “But the Other Guy freaks me out too.” Bruce takes his glasses off, cleans them on his shirt for an excuse to avert his eyes as he continues. “I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes. I don’t think I’d be able to take it nearly as well. But if there’s a scientific discovery to be had, I want to be there.”

Tony smiles, satisfied. This is why science is the greatest; it makes things easier. Bruce is obviously a man after his own heart.

Bruce replaces his glasses and blinks at Tony owlishly. “Speaking of which, does it seem like dragons are scientific? If Clint’s given you anything to work off of, that is.”

Tony’s grin widens, because that excitement he’d maintained so briefly about the imminent expedition to the Dragon Disk is coming back in full force. “Pod racers, Brucie Bear. They have pod racers.”

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Tony is jerked back into the moment, away from his scientific musings. Bruce is still staring glassy-eyed into space as he tries along with Tony to speculate how on earth pod racers would work, functionally, in a world with physics that doesn’t occasionally go on vacation.

[Ready now?] Tony echoes back questioningly. His brain finally clocks back into real time and, yes, it’s been almost an hour. Oops. [Uhhhh I forgot to eat.]

He can feel Clint rolling his eyes at him. But Tony knows that Clint didn’t have anything but coffee for breakfast, either—too nervous. [We’ll be okay,] Tony says. Clint’s emotional makeup doesn’t shift in the slightest and Tony sends a tentative, [Right?]

[Right.] Tony isn’t sure who Clint’s trying to convince, but he’s doing a really terrible job.

[Suuuuuure.] The nerves that he had been blissfully steering clear of crashed into him with a vengeance. This had so much potential to go wrong. [Can I bring my armor?]

[Don’t, there’s only going to be problems if we, I don’t know, pop in with a weaponized suit of flying armor. They’re not stupid.]

[I know they’re not!] Tony sends indignantly, waving goodbye to a pretty well zoned-out Bruce as he staggers out of the kitchen and makes his way to the elevator. [You are oddly fixated on those vehicles.]

[You are oddly blasé about frickin’ pod racers, I mean, would Star Wars just be old news in the Dragon Disk?]

[I’m sure they’d find it amusing.] Clint offers. As Tony mentally splutters, he adds, [Of course, it’s not that accurate to the structure of the world we live in. Too many planets in Star Wars.]

“I cannot believe you,” Tony mutters to himself, just as the elevator dings. The doors open and he strides out onto the roof, with whatever Clint’s drawing with chalk sprawling across his rooftop. “But really, you’ve been gone for like three hundred years, doesn’t that mean it could be more like Star Wars than you remember?”

Clint sighs, sits back on his heels, and gives Tony a look. “That’s still the equivalent of about three years, to dragons. Trust me, there will have been about seven new models of Accipiters—excuse me, pod racers—but nothing will have really changed.” He tosses the chalk to the side and stands, dusting his hands off on his pants.

“Is the portal ready?” Agent says from about three feet to Tony’s left, and he just about has a heart attack.

No amount of pre-transformation draconic instincts could prepare him for Agent sneaking about, though. “Have you been out here the whole time?” Tony demands.

“Yeah,” Clint calls to Agent.

“Good. And yes, I have,” he tells Tony. “Sounds like you’re ready to go. Any last words?”

Tony scowls. “Not funny. I went through a space portal once already, trust me, that’s really not funny.” He doesn’t actually give Agent a chance to take it back, doesn’t want to know if he would, he just swiftly adds, “Actually, give Pepper my love, okay? Explain why I’ve disappeared and all,
she might get worried if I miss more than two board meetings without calling up with ridiculous excuses.”

“I thought you told her,” Agent says, vaguely confused. Which probably means he’s very confused, if history holds.

“Who, me, responsible? I don’t know what you were thinking—“

“Clint,” Agent snaps, and actually, Clint is smirking rather widely and his satisfaction is rolling through the bond in little waves, “you told me he told her.”

“Oh, come on, I’ve been known to exaggerate.” Clint strips off his shirt quickly, now grinning like the cat that got the cream. “And I thought Tony would appreciate it. Ready?”

The last word resonates through the bond and Clint crouches, wings folding suddenly out of his back, huge and Amethyst. His grin is impish, head tilted, and if he weren’t still wearing that amulet, Tony doesn’t think he would look human at all.

“I am indeed,” Tony says, grinning back, because all the anger and the fear and the shame falls away like dried leaves with the magic Clint can sense running through the runes on the roof. Clint telegraphs his movements through the bond, so Tony is ready when suddenly Clint is fully scaled, huge eyes refracting light as his head, larger than Tony’s torso, snakes around him in a split second. He reaches out, tries to grab one of the spines on the back of Clint’s neck, but Clint’s got other ideas.

Clint’s jaw snaps shut centimeters away from the skin of Tony’s back, right on his shirt, which doesn’t bother Tony nearly as much as getting lifted into the air by his shirt does. And it’s not like he squeaks, or anything, it’s just—

[Yes, hatchling, you squeaked,) Clint tells him, his whole shining, scaled body rumbling in amusement.

“Not a hatchling!” Tony protests.

Agent’s eyebrows are currently raised so high it almost makes up for his receding hairline. Whether it’s from shock or amusement is anyone’s guess except for Tony’s.

Clint’s wings lift, come down and suddenly the air is humming with something that makes Tony’s brain rattle in his skull; there’s light, there’s space above them, and they fly through, spiraling into foreign galaxies as Clint’s heart sings home across the bond.

—§§§—

“Oh my god,” Tony says, and sits down hard on the ground.

“It’s not that bad,” Clint grumbles at him, voice changing from snarly to gravelly to actually human as he shifts down to his bipedal form. [You’re being a wimp. Get up, someone’s here for you to meet.]

“Tell them to come back later,” Tony moans, cradling his spinning head in his hands.

There’s a dry chuckle that sounds like the creaking of old hinges that is definitely not Clint.
“Don’t tell me you’ve created a Dragonmade, hatchling,” something says, the words hooked and gnarled in a way that makes the hair on the back of Tony’s neck stand up. Whatever is speaking is definitely not human.

Tony dares to spread his fingers just wide enough to peek through. There’s a dragon, scaly and everything, standing right in front of them, easily as tall on all fours as Tony is standing up. Or, it could be, if it weren’t looking distinctly slumped. Its jade-colored scales are greyed around the edges, but the dragon’s eyes are sharp, and they’re staring straight at Tony.

“Elder,” Clint says. His words are echoing strangely in Tony’s head, like he’s adopting some weird type of accent that Tony hasn’t ever heard in his life. “He is a Dragonmade, but I didn’t create him. They meant for him to die.”

Well, that’s something Tony would really rather not think about. He stares really hard at Clint instead, because something is a little off—ha! His mouth isn’t moving at the same time as his words. It’s like…

[Holy shit are you speaking a different language? Why am I hearing English? Is this the bond, what even—]

Clint glares at him out of the corner of his eye, which is purple again. His ear’s pointed too—huh, must have taken off the amulet thing already. It probably would be weird to look like a different species while talking to your own species. [Yes it’s a different language, shut up and stop thinking, I’m trying to have a conversation.]

[Um no gimme a second, don’t you know like Russian and crap, does that mean I understand Russian too? Wait can you understand Italian now? How does this functionally work, even, do you think in English or in Dragonese?]

“Dragonese?” Clint echoed flatly, giving Tony a baleful look.

“Well you haven’t told me what it’s called,” Tony explains impatiently. The little burst of adrenaline from new information breaks through the worst of Tony’s dizziness and he manages to get back onto his feet.

“Pretty sure I haven’t had time,” Clint mutters to himself, rolling his eyes so hard they’re probably going to end up little Amethyst marbles on the ground sooner or later. He’s still got his wings out, curled around half of his own body like a makeshift cloak or something.

“Okay, now you have time,” Tony says pointedly.

“Doesn’t have a name in English,” Clint says shortly. “Now, Tony, this is Elder—“

“Then I’m calling it Dragonese,” Tony says promptly. “And nice to meet you, Elder. Do you understand English?”

Tony isn’t exactly the expert in draconic expressions, considering he’s seen Clint scaly a grand total of once, but he will eat his arc reactor if that isn’t amusement in this Elder dragon’s eyes. “I do indeed, Dragonmade. You’re a curious one, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been told it’s a blessing and a curse. So if Amethyst is Trust or whatever, what’s Jade? I’m guessing you’re Jade. I mean, dragons are gem-coded or something, yeah?” Tony’s pretty sure he picked up something about that through the bond.

Clint makes a slightly strangled sound “Tony, stop.” [At the risk of quoting Mean Girls, oh my god,
you can’t just ask someone what their gem is. Wait and learn.

[I don’t wait.] Tony sends back stubbornly. [Also? I’m really not surprised you’ve seen Mean Girls.]

Clint looks to the sky and mutters something in Dragonese that seems to translate to “Tiamat, give me strength.”

“Don’t pretend he’s any worse than you were, hatchling.” Elder says, eyes sparkling as she chuckles, the sound like the husk being torn from an ear of corn. Tony likes her already. “Jade is the Gem of Physic Fortitude. In some rare instances, that means a certain amount of clairvoyance. In most cases, I simply understand others’ minds. Even if we have never met.”

Her eyes are trained on Tony’s and he gets the distinct impression that she means his mind, in particular. He stares right back at her anyway; he’s in a frickin’ telepathic bond with someone he didn’t know as well as he thought he did until about two days ago. She’s not going to scare him into a corner with her mind tricks.

Elder lowers her head, a brief nod, and swings her long neck around to gently nudge Clint in the shoulder with her snout. “Keep him safe. You need someone like him.”

Clint’s brow furrows and Tony can feel his curiosity. It simply bounces off hard experience before it comes to fruition, though. Apparently when Elder feels like being cryptic, no one gets answers from her. Not even—

“I told the Queen you were coming,” Elder says. Clint’s anxiety spikes, and though he manages to keep his face schooled, Tony gets the impression that Elder knows exactly what he’s feeling. “You may wish to get dressed before you see her. There’s a spare robe in the closet.”

“Get—“ Tony begins in confusion, and then he snorts and tries really hard not to bust a rib laughing. [Did you break your pants when you went scaly?] he sends, delighted. [Wow, buffing it in front of an old lady. Nice trick with the wings, though, I’ll give you that.]

Clint shoots Tony a poisonous glare that would probably inspire a little more fear if Tony couldn’t feel the embarrassment behind it. His wings curl up a little tighter around him, making it look like he’s wearing some weird sort of veiny, purple towel.

[This side of the portal, we’ve got clothes that can survive through transformation, okay? Humans just aren’t technologically advanced enough yet.]

Tony stops laughing in order to gape. [You didn’t.]

[I did.] Clint sniffs, pooling his wings out a little so he can pull on the pants Elder so thoughtfully provided without mooning anyone in the room. [Caveman.]

Tony makes an inarticulate sound of rage. [How dare you. We’re technologically advanced. I mean, we’ve made a lot more progress than you guys have the last three centuries—]

[Oh, my bad.] Clint sends with a sigh. [You are technologically advanced. You probably don’t need our clunky old pod racers after all.]

[No—what—I—] “I hate you,” Tony grinds out.

“You certainly chose the right clanmate,” Elder tells Clint cheerily. Clint’s long-suffering face is what Tony will always blame for not being able to walk out without placing Elder on some grandmotherly pedestal.
“Just to be clear,” Clint mutters, “I talk. You don’t talk.”

“Queen, right? We’re meeting a Queen? I’m pretty sure that calls for my incredible charm.”

Clint’s roiling emotions have reared their ugly heads with a vengeance, however, and Tony is actually beginning to think that he should shut up for once. Clint is obviously trying to keep his anxiety to himself, but even the leakage makes Tony want to sit down and have a little time to hyperventilate for a while. It’s bad enough that even the spectacular chrome city towering ahead of them isn’t enough to keep Tony distracted.

[I demand a tour when I don’t feel like I’m going to throw up,] Tony says grumpily, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to do some of those lame breathing exercises he’s supposed to do when the pain of his arc reactor gets bad. At least this time he’s sitting just ahead of Clint’s shoulders instead of dangling from his mouth.

[At least that’s just the anxiety,] Clint sends back shakily. [This whole trip would be a nightmare if you got airsick.]

Considering that Tony lost count when he tried counting the stories on these buildings? Yeah. Yeah, probably.

They fly up and up until they’re cresting over the top of a the first building, then flying around another, wings spread wide as they bank and glide. There are dragons and pod racers below them, zipping past and moseying behind, so many different velocities that Tony starts tracking the lanes they’re all moving in. It’s so ordered, so natural, and using equations to map out the city’s movement in his head is almost enough to distract him from Clint’s worry.

Until they crest over another building and land—a little hard, Clint’s moving jerky and Tony doubts he’s flown often on Earth—on a huge marble platform twice the size of the Avengers’ entertainment center. In other words, bigger than even Tony Stark would have thought necessary.

On the far end there’s a throne with a huge ruby dragon in it. Ruby with a capital R, supposedly?

[Garnet,] Clint corrects him. He sounds weird, over the bond—trying to tune into his emotions is almost physically painful, so Tony stops trying. Clint nudges Tony off his neck and onto the floor to stand for himself. Clint swiftly shifts back, scales receding, new **technologically-advanced** clothes thankfully still intact. [Let’s go. Remember, I talk.]

Clint begins to walk forward, and suddenly he doesn’t look like a lost boy barely discovering adulthood. Maybe it’s the posture. Maybe it’s the blasé acceptance of a world Tony never would have dreamed of, but Tony finds himself obediently falling into step a pace to the left and half a pace behind him.

It’s a weirdly ceremonial table. As they walk forward, the open sky seems to vanish and a ceiling appears, paneled with something that reminds Tony of the Helicarrier’s reflective panels. The pillars reveal guards on two legs with brightly colored eyes, armored in metal that Tony would bet is a lot stronger than a titanium alloy. If he didn’t feel like he’s walking into a painting just by existing here, he’d probably be feeling just obnoxious enough to go over and start asking about it.
When they’re just about two thirds of the way across, Clint speaks, his voice carrying, “I come seeking asylum for an unwilling Dragonmade.”

Tony almost flinches at the sudden noise, but manages to suppress it. He keeps his eyes up, aware, and the guards are half staring at him and half staring at Clint. The Queen in the throne, Garnet scales strangely dulled from what Tony recalls of the jewelry he’s seen, barely spares a moment to flick her eyes in Tony’s direction before focusing back on Clint.

Tony would be absolutely sure Clint was about to throw up, if it didn’t also feel like his insides might be frozen. He hesitates in his gait, just a moment, and Tony falters in his place behind him.

“Approach,” the Queen says. Her voice is soft, but the acoustics of this place must be amazing, because Tony hears it as if she’s standing next to him.

Clint continues on.

[Oh god why do I feel like I’m going to get thrown out of a window to fall to my death,] Tony sends frantically.

[Shut up, I just requested asylum for you, it’ll be fine.]

[Then why are you flipping out?] Tony demands. He keeps his mouth tightly shut even though he kind of wants to yell at Clint, since he kind of figures that accidentally speaking aloud would be a lot more awkward here, among an entirely different species.

Clint doesn’t answer him. Thirty feet from the throne, a guard moves as though to stop them; Tony startles, embarrassingly, but Clint acts like he didn’t even notice and the Queen holds up her hand towards the guard, silently stalling him. Twenty feet from the throne, Clint stops and kneels. With a mental nudge, Tony warily does the same, copying the image in Clint’s mind. The back of his neck prickles when he bends his head.

The silence stretches, but Clint’s anxiety has Tony’s jaw glued shut. A bead of sweat trickles down his neck, which he tries to tell himself is from the temperature.

“You seek shelter for this Dragonmade?” the Queen says simply.

Tony gets the impression that Clint would rather be banging his head against the marble floor than actually talking to the Queen. “Yes.”

“You have returned solely for this purpose?” the Queen presses.

Which is when Tony conveniently remembers, oh yeah, Clint ran away. Hopefully not because he was an outlaw. [You weren’t an outlaw, were you?]

Clint shoves the question back at him without answering. “It is the reason I finally made the journey,” Clint says.

[Evasive answer much?] Tony sends grumpily, fully expecting it, this time, when Clint shoves the thought back without responding.

More silence. Finally, the Queen says, “Asylum is granted.”

Clint breathes out slowly. “Thank you… my Queen.”

Tony dares to sneak a glance upward just in time to see a strange, silent devastation on the Queen’s
face. It feels enough like an intrusion that Tony swiftly looks down again, because what is going on with her?

“And you are always welcome,” the Queen replies softly. “My son.”

Tony whips his head around to stare at Clint, who is looking at the floor like he might want to turn the marble into his own—apparently princely—grave.

“Say what?” Tony demands.

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