Out of Silence: a Series of Life-Altering Conversations Involving Clint Barton

by nwhepcat

Summary

Phil Coulson is the first person in years to discover Clint's weakness. He's also the first in a hell of a long time to realize his potential.

Notes

When I saw a reference to Clint Barton using hearing aids at one point in the comics, I let my imagination consider what Clint's life might be like if he were deaf most of his life. So. This AU.
There's one thing Clint knows for sure: Agent Bramwell is an asshole.

Clint doesn't know what fed agency he works for. He's not even completely sure his name is Bramwell. That's because he spends most of his time talking with his head tipped down, perusing a fat file which is apparently full of Clint's misdeeds, which means Clint hasn't been remotely as clever as he'd thought.

Someone has been watching him for a long time.

But back to the main point: Bramwell is an asshole. There's also the walrus mustache he affects, which obscures half of what he says even when he's looking directly at Clint. Isn't being clean shaven standard dress code for suits?

Doesn't matter. Clint settles back into his routine for situations like this, smirking and uncooperative, sarcastic when he bothers to speak. Feigning nonchalance, he lets his gaze wander around the featureless room. There's nothing so obvious as a two-way mirror, but he's certain this interaction is being observed. The whole process of getting him here was too well orchestrated. He'd been dancing with a girl with multicolored hair who was handsier than Kali, and then he was swaying and stumbling, and then he was being "helped" outside, his tongue too thick to protest. The hot chick did a fade when she got him to a van, where he was unceremoniously dumped inside. Clint never lost consciousness but he was little more than a floppy tangle of limbs. From there, he was hauled to a small room with a cot and a guard, and once his body was under his own control again, he'd been brought here.

Clint lets his attention settle back onto Bramwell, who's still droning on at the stack of papers, by all appearances. Abruptly the agent's head snaps up and Clint catches "--the fuck?" from beneath the curtain of mustache.

An answering blur of sound that Clint recognizes as a man's voice, and a staccato of footsteps coming from behind announce the arrival of another guy in a suit. After a brief exchange, Bramwell leaves and the other man approaches Bramwell's vacated chair and rests a hand on its back. This one is clean-shaven, hair cut to a conservative length. His face bland as baby food, the guy looks like he was born in a suit.

"Are you the Good Cop or the Bad Cop?" Clint asks. "Starting off with Mediocre Cop makes it tough to tell."

The bland half-smile unwavering, New Possibly Also Mediocre Cop says, "Mr. Barton, I'm Agent Coulson. Agent Bramwell and I are with the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division -- or SHIELD, when we don't have all afternoon."

Humor. Clint's leaning toward Good Cop.

Coulson sets a water bottle on the table in front of Clint, then a bottle of aspirin he produces from his jacket pocket. Both have an intact plastic seal over the lid. "You may have a headache from the substance we used to aid us in bringing you in."

Definitely it's Coulson in the role of Good Cop. Clint seizes both bottles and tears at the seals as Coulson settles himself in Bramwell's chair. He closes Clint's file, resting a hand on it. He regards Clint for a moment that stretches almost to uncomfortable levels. The more antsy Clint feels, the
more he settles into his bored act. Finally Coulson says, "If I may ask a personal question, what is the extent of your hearing impairment?"

Clint can feel the minute shift in his expression, and brief as it is, he knows it's not lost on Coulson.

Still, Clint tries to bluff his way through it, dialing up the smirk to eleven. "My what?"

The agent's expression does a better job of staying on task. "Your speech and lip-reading skills are really quite remarkable. We've turned up nothing on your education, but the results are impressive."

Clint barely restrains a laugh at this, but laughter would give him away entirely, so he chokes it back. "Where'd you get this idea?"

"I suspected it when you were least responsive to Agent Bramwell when his mouth was most obscured."

"Sorry," Clint said. "I strive to maintain a steady level of unresponsiveness. I'll work on that."

The bland smile never wavers. "You did a commendable job a moment ago when I said I'd been ordered to have you taken out and shot."

Fuck. Who were these people?

He's not sure he'd put it past them--Bramwell's shocked expression makes complete sense now, and Coulson's gesture of closing Clint's file takes on an ominous cast.

"Relax," Coulson says. "That was just my crude attempt at confirming my suspicions about your hearing loss."

"You're a cold sonofabitch."

A twitch of the smile. "It's been said."

"You obviously wanted me for something. Now that you know I'm damaged goods, you probably do plan to put a bullet in my head. Well, depending on how top secret you people are."

The change in Coulson's expression is subtle but striking. "I don't see damage. I see resourcefulness and resilience."

You don't know the half of it, pal.

"SHIELD could use your skills and resourcefulness."

Coulson's phrasing is noteworthy. Clint has heard--well, lip-read--"We can use you" any number of times, but the separation of Clint from his talents somehow makes him feel more like he's being seen as a whole person than an object to be used. He tells himself not to read too much into semantics. "What exactly do you have in mind?"

"That depends on your interests, as well as what we'd learn from a full assessment of your abilities and your current levels of hearing. There's always a demand for marksmen, but you'd be surprised how often a good lip-reader comes in handy."

"So what exactly is it that you people do?"

The seemingly benign smile appears again. "I suppose you could call it containment of certain threats to global security."
Certain threats. Clint considers the idea that his very existence, if he should decide to decline whatever offer Couson was winding up to, might be considered a threat.

He smirks. "Well then. I can't wait to hear more."

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This time Clint is summoned directly to Coulson's office.

It's been a week of observation and assessment with some fairly boring downtime in a "guest suite" that's a lot like a hotel room without so much as a Gideon Bible or a Book of Mormon to read. Anna, the junior agent who's been escorting him from appointment to appointment, finally shows him the book swap shelf at the cafeteria. One of the cafeterias--SHIELD HQ is like a walled city, with more food courts than most airports, a hair salon, jewelry store, florist, dry cleaner and pop-up shops (Tuesdays it's cupcakes).

The book swap is mostly full of Tom Clancy ordnance-porn and the like, which in his opinion is so deadly dull he'd personally rather watch an anthill. Anna finds a loaner Kindle and loaded a handful of classics and some man-vs.-nature shit about Mt. Everest and big game hunting on it for him. They occupy him for a while, but by the time he's brought to Coulson he's beginning to get twitchy.

Once he's ushered into the office, Clint barely has a chance to take in his surroundings before Coulson rises from behind his desk, but like the agent himself, it's fairly nondescript. Coulson offers his hand, saying, "Mr. Barton. I apologize for neglecting you this week. Some unexpected issues arose and my attention was needed elsewhere."

Strange. Clint had been aware of being observed through all the assessments during the week. Occasionally the feeling had been particularly sharp, and he'd been certain he was the object of Coulson's scrutiny. He shrugs. "It's okay. There was plenty of attention to work with."

Coulson gestures him to a chair and settles back behind the desk. Again, he rests one hand on a folder on his desk, which Clint assumes is his own file. It's substantially thicker than it was the last time they met.

Coulson chuckles, and Clint finds himself wondering what it sounds like. "I'm certain there was. Your assessment scores impressed a lot of people here. I'm authorized to offer you employment with SHIELD, if we come to a mutual agreement about something that fits with your skills and your interests."

"I work alone." He did not expect this to come out of his mouth, especially considering that it could impact his longevity, but it was on his mind throughout the hours of enforced solitude.

"You work for others," Coulson counters. "Admittedly, you select the jobs you take on very carefully, and it's clear you have boundaries about acceptable ops."

He does, in fact, though he hadn't realized it would be apparent to anyone observing (but then, he thought he'd successfully avoided observation all this time). He aims not to make the world a shittier place. Clint doesn't say this because it feels too personal, too ridiculously idealistic in an altogether fucked-up way.

At his lack of response, Coulson goes on. "Working with SHIELD would eliminate the need to vet every potential employer. Not only that, but you'd have backup in the field, including additional intel if changing conditions warrant it."
"I work alone," Clint repeats.

"That worked out well for you in Kingston."

_Fuck._

"That could have happened to anyone in our line of work," Coulson says. "Some ops turn into a shit show, no matter how carefully planned and executed." He offers his bland smile. "The difference is, SHIELD would have sent you flowers in the hospital. Oh, and we would have paid you. Let me lay out some options before you decide anything."

It feels like an icy hand is clenching in his gut, but Clint says, "Sure. Knock yourself out."

"Your skills would be welcomed as an analyst. You would mostly be working with surveillance feeds—nothing like the bank security tapes. These are high-def—" Coulson stammers a bit here, which is the first time Clint has seen him less than completely self-assured. "—high definition. With your history you may find that less than fulfilling."

"Damn straight. Let's get to the options that aren't me sitting on my ass lip-reading."

"You would be an incredible asset in the field. But any agent must work with a handler in the field. We have to have a means of communication that isn't strictly line of sight." There's no verbal stumble this time, but Clint notices Coulson's thumb rubbing up and down along the spine of his file. "We're prepared to offer you the necessary tech to facilitate communication in the field. That would mean cochlear implants." Coulson shifts subtly in his chair. "I realize implants are a controversial subject in Deaf culture, and I want to assure you—"

Clint makes no effort to smother his laughter. He knows it sounds ugly as shit, so he only ever allows it to escape to get a reaction. "I've never had anything to do with Deaf culture, and it's never had anything to do with me."

Mild surprise registers on Coulson's face. "You were home schooled?"

Clint laughs again. "You could say that." His education was driven by trying to avoid being slapped or punched in the head, and especially his ears. Back when he was Clint's ally, Barney helped him learn how to pronounce words to their old man's satisfaction. Clint's hearing wasn't as impaired then, either. Later when it was, Barney had friends of his own that he needed to impress, so Clint's training was accompanied by shouts of "Stop sounding like a retard!" He'd usually get an angry lesson in pronunciation, but if he ever made the mistake of laughing, fists were the immediate response. It was a mistake he didn't make too many times.

Coulson visibly draws in a breath and releases it. "You've done an amazing job. We found not even a suggestion of any impairment in all our inquiries about you."

This was thanks in part to Clint's elaborate system of communicating about potential jobs and ones he'd accepted. He encouraged the belief that it was one of his personal quirks, among others that he affected for the camouflaging effect. Perhaps he'd believe SHIELD just hadn't investigated that hard, but for the fact that they knew Clint's name.

Clint lets the comment hang in the air, and after a moment Coulson goes on: "If you have no objection to cochlear implants, let's discuss where things go from here."

It's a lot, even though Coulson is skimming over the details on the medical stuff. The short version is, they can get him an experimental model more sophisticated than anything available to civilians. The implantation requires surgery, and there are risks and potential complications. The downside is
that he will lose some or all of the natural hearing he has left in the implanted ear. The preliminary tests he's had during the past week have indicated Clint is a good candidate, but he'll get more tests and the full info-dump from the medical team.

If the first implant is successful, Clint will have one on the opposite ear, giving him the ability to locate where sounds are coming from. After this, before he can go into the field, he'll have to go through SHIELD basic training. The upshot is, he's likely to go bugfuck before he ever gets a shot at a real mission.

"I realize you have a lot to think about," Coulson says at last.

"I want to work in the field," Clint says before Coulson can go any further. "So when do we get this show started?"

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The last thing Clint expects is Coulson asking him if he can be present when the implant is activated. Not the idea, but the asking. Hell, SHIELD has put tens of thousands of dollars worth of tech in his head and plan more--doesn't seem like they'd think they needed permission to watch someone push the Go button.

"Nervous?" Coulson asks him in the waiting room.

Clint would not have believed in the possibility Coulson could fidget, but he keeps standing up and gazing at the magazine rack, jangling the change in his pocket until a woman nearby asks him to please stop. Maybe he's got a promotion riding on how this all turns out--or maybe it's his job that's at stake.

Clint shrugs a shoulder and makes a face roughly translating as meh--a word he learned from Berit, the SHIELD agent he thought of as Kali until he met her again. She has taken him dancing a couple of times--minus neurotoxins--when he's too antsy to spend another minute in the SHIELD HQ. She showed him how to say it the way Barney used to, letting him touch her face, her throat as she repeated it.

Not nervous so much as deliberately tamping down any expectations. In his experience, good things are just the slow rise of the roller coaster, from his apprenticeship with Trickshot to dancing with a hot girl with greedy hands. There's always a gut-wrenching fall you can't see until you're teetering at the brink.

The longer Coulson fidgets, the more restless Clint gets. It's contagious, that's all. Finally Clint gets up and grabs an ancient magazine at random. It's the Time cover from when Tony Stark was missing in Afghanistan and presumed dead. Jesus, there was a transformation for you. He reads the article, though everyone knows by now how that turned out. So Clint’s getting a tech upgrade himself. He's gotten the hole drilled in his skull already--this part is a cakewalk.

When the audiologist steps into the waiting room and calls his name, Clint shoots to his feet. Coulson catches his eye. "Are you still good with me coming along?"

"Sure, why not?"

He settles into the hot seat, and at first Jenna, the audiologist, fusses with various bits of equipment, chatting as she does. "I'm not used to having this much room to work," she says. "It's usually a full house on activation day."

Defaulting to a smirk, he says, "Well, you've just got me and my plus-one."
She's no idiot, though, and she starts to get why this isn't a family scene as she works with the external tech. He can't stop himself from flinching as she reaches toward his ear, which rattles her. She fumbles the earpiece.

"These are smaller than the ones I'm familiar with," Jenna tells him, but the way her chattiness suddenly dries up gives away that it's more than that.

Clint keeps his gaze from connecting with Coulson's, watching the audiologist for further questions or information.

Finally she says, "Let's get you switched on."

The world, which has been almost completely silent for years--and even more so since the operation--suddenly becomes LOUD.

Clint startles. "Shit!" he yelps. He claps a shaking hand over his mouth.

"You heard your voice then, didn't you?"

He nods, afraid that speaking again will split him right in two.

"Can you hear my voice?"

_Goddammit, she's going to make him talk._ "A little." He has to force the words through the tightness in his throat. "It's kind of lost in all the other sounds." His eyes sting, and he blinks hard against the threatening tears. He's afraid he will crack open and sob, and if anything in his childhood was more dangerous than laughter, it was that.

Her fingers dance over her computer, making tweaks. "Right now your brain is giving every sound equal importance. Soon you'll learn to filter out things like the air conditioning and the laptop fan. When you've had a chance to adjust, we'll do more tweaking of the volume. Is this better, though?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, what I want you to do now is look toward your friend while I keep talking."

Looking at his "friend" is pretty much a thing that Clint does not want to do, because he's certain Coulson hasn't missed the fact that he'd been about to start crying, because the man misses fucking _nothing_. But Clint does as he's told, finding Coulson looking at him with this crazy crooked smile and--no fucking shit--a glimmer of tears in his own eyes.

Then Clint finds himself laughing and crying at the same time, which is without question the ugliest sound imaginable, and unbelievably loud to him now. "Fuck!" he says, mortified, but Coulson is laughing too, but it's not mocking laughter, and yeah, he's palming tears from his eyes too. Neither one of them can stop, it seems, the laughter looping between them and building in intensity. It's giddy and weird and more unrestrained than Clint has let himself be in a decade or more. When he finally gets himself in hand, he turns back toward Jenna, apologizing, but he finds her wearing a wavering grin, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

"Let's try that again, but maybe you should look somewhere else."

Clint settles his gaze on the office door, listening intently, with growing distress. "I can hear your voice, but it doesn't make any sense." He knows the rhythms of spoken sentences, and the cadence is right, but she might as well be calling out random words.
"That's very common," she says. "Your brain will relearn, same as it will learn to filter out noises. Keep lipreading, and you'll make those connections. And spend some time before our next appointment familiarizing yourself with various sounds in your environment. It'll help you begin to sort out the more important ones and filter out the rest. You'll be amazed at how far you come by next time you see me."

Jenna hands Clint a sheaf of papers as he leaves, some to leave at the front desk and some to take home. Behind him, he hears a sudden, violent sound.

"Get down!" he shouts, pulling Jenna down and crouching over her.

"It's okay, it's okay," she says.

He follows her gaze to find Coulson looking sheepish, a linen handkerchief cradled in his hands.

"That," Jenna says, "was the sound of someone blowing their nose."

"Oh my god, that was horrible." That was uglier than any sound Clint's ever made (he hopes). He helps Jenna to her feet.

"Sorry," Coulson says. "I didn't think."

Jenna starts to laugh then, and then Coulson, who also turns a deep red, and Clint can't help joining in. Finally Clint gathers his scattered papers and they leave.

As they wait for the elevator, Coulson turns so that Clint has a good view for lip-reading. Suddenly serious, he says, "Thank you, Barton, for letting me come. I've never witnessed something so extraordinary."

Clint has no idea of what to say, or how to be. "Yeah," he finally says to his shoes. "It's fine."

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Clint sees Coulson only briefly during the next ten days, just long enough for Coulson to deliver the news that he'll be away on a mission and introduce Clint to an agent named--no actual shit--Jasper. Jasper--Agent Sitwell--has been assigned to tutor Clint and get him up to speed on the classwork he's missed so far so he can join this group of recruits instead of waiting for the next one. Clint's all for that plan.

Clint has the first weekend to himself, which he spends exploring the sounds around him. He runs the water in every faucet in the suite, brews coffee and makes toast just to listen to the machines, listens to the hum of the fridge, watches a metric shit-ton of television to take in a multitude of voices and the sounds of basketball, baseball and NASCAR races. Though he's always thought it boring as fuck, he decides he likes the sounds of baseball best: the murmur of the crowd, the crack of the bat, the announcers' voices--though he can make out little of what they say. He hates the roar of auto racing, and equally loathes the piercing screech of ref whistles and basketball shoes on hardwood, which makes him think of hordes of mutant rats. He's always liked playing and watching, but he can't imagine finding it bearable to watch anymore without muting the TV--and he's had more than enough muting in his life.

During the week he works with Sitwell on Academy coursework. He hates all the rules bullshit, but Jasper tells him he's got great instincts, and the fact that this is valued as much as the rule-following helps drag him through the work. Halfway through the week, Sitwell invites Clint to his apartment to watch a ballgame. After a couple of beers it doesn't seem like such a huge thing to tell Sitwell about his problems sorting out what the announcers are saying. This has remained an issue,
even though Clint has grown more comfortable with televised speech in other contexts.

Jasper thinks it's the words themselves. It's a specialized form of speech, he says, and Clint hasn't had years to grow familiar with it. As they watch, Jasper repeats some of the phrases, translating if needed, and gradually the smear of unintelligible voices resolves into words. *Here's the windup and the pitch. Low and away, ball two.* Clint likes the rhythm of it.

"In my opinion, it's even better on the radio," Jasper says. "They're usually so busy telling you what's happening that they don't have time to say the moronic shit these guys do. The rhythm's good there, too."

Clint side-eyes him, looking for any hint of mockery in that last sentence, but he seems totally sincere.

By the end of the week, Clint's generally comfortable having meals in the SHIELD cafeteria, despite the murmur of multiple voices and clatter of dishes and silverware. Jasper finds Clint there on Monday morning, lingering over his coffee, the remains of his omelet pushed aside for a newspaper he's pretending to read.

Jasper sits without waiting for an invitation. Leaning across the table, he says softly, "Are you *eavesdropping,* man?"

Grinning, Clint says, "Trying to. Still too much noise to find my way through, unless I'm facing people." He points behind Jasper. "I can tell you what those guys are talking about two tables away, but not the ones directly behind me."

"Keep at it," Jasper says. "It'll come." He downs about half his mug of coffee in one go. "Coulson's back today. I'm updating him at oh-nine-thirty. He wants to see you right after."

As he waits for Sitwell to emerge from Coulson's office, Clint finds himself on edge at the prospect of his own meeting. He already knows Jasper is recommending that he join the other recruits in the classroom this week, so it's not uncertainty. It's Coulson himself that's giving him pause— or rather, knowing the emotional state he was in when Coulson last spent any real time with him. He's not quite sure how he's feeling—embarrassed, exposed— but he knows he doesn't like it.

Though Jasper gives him a fist-bump on his way out, he's still feeling twitchy. He settles back into his old persona, slouching in the chair he's offered. Coulson looks a little worse for wear, a nasty abrasion along one cheek and knuckles that look like they've seen a recent fistfight. There's nothing about his habitually mild expression that would betray any of this.

"How did it go this week?"

"Well sir, I made some discoveries. Farts are funny as fuck."

Coulson regards him for a moment, all business. "Mr. Barton, there are no circumstances under which farts are not completely hilarious."

Somehow Clint manages to maintain a straight face. "I'm glad that we're clear, sir." He moves on to asking about Coulson's op and his injuries, mostly to keep him talking. Not that he's uninterested in those details, but he's fascinated to hear Coulson's voice, now that the extraneous noise is pushed to the background. Coulson sounds nothing like what he'd expected— higher in pitch, with hint of raspiness. Yet his delivery is as smooth as his demeanor, adding to his bland government drone persona.

Before too long Coulson calls him on it. "Is there a reason you're stalling? Something go wrong this
"No. No, it went fine, I just--" Fuck it. Why not tell part of the truth, anyway. "I just wanted to get familiar with your voice, now that it's not lost in a general roar." He decides that's enough; Coulson's not going to want to hear Clint's assessment of the manliness of his pitch. He recounts his progress with the implants, his appointment with Jenna, and his work with Sitwell. Coulson fills him in on the next phase of his training--joining in the classroom and weapons training. Hand-to-hand will wait until after the second implant is placed and the healing period is well past. That's fine with Clint, who prefers his violence long-distance.

At last the debrief is done and they stand. Coulson reaches across his desk, but Clint's confused. Instead of offering a handshake, he's extended his index finger, and Clint's unsure what to do. Coulson says, "Pull my finger."

"I don't get it," Clint says. "That red hair is like a beacon." It's unbelievable how easy it is to track his quarry through the street from his high perch. He's been waiting for a few hours now,

'True." Coulson's voice comes through his comm link, jacked directly into his second implant. This is how they work, Clint tethered to his handler's voice the way he's tethered to the world and its sounds. Except when they're in the field, Coulson's voice is realer than other sounds, traveling straight into the tech wired into Clint's skull instead of passing through the air first. Weirdly, when they're in the same room or car, Clint misses the experience of hearing him through the link, direct and somehow intimate. "But it attracts her targets as much as it does her enemies. And as skilled as she is, both tend to end up just as dead."

"Thanks for that, sir."

Coulson chuckles. "You wouldn't be here if we didn't think you were different."

Despite the target's high visibility, she's adept at not making herself an easy one. She dodges in and out of the pedestrian stream so Clint can't get a clear shot. Suddenly there's some kind of kerfuffle on the sidewalk, a woman pulling the baby-toss scam on a man who looks like an American businessman, while three small kids mob him to rifle his pockets. The pedestrians surge into a knot and then scatter, the kids tearing off in different directions and people running after them, shouting. After a moment of strangers excitedly chattering to one another, they separate and continue on their way. But the target is gone. There's no one in sight with red hair, no one in the iridescent green raincoat she'd been wearing.

"Fuck! Shit!"

"Barton, report!"

"I lost her. Big fucking diversion, and by the time it cleared, she just disappeared. No sign of red hair or the coat she had on. There are people--a couple of them women--heading for the entrance. Fuck, I can't tell. I can't take a shot."

"Get clear, Barton."

Clint wastes no time scrambling out of position and dismantling down the takedown bow. He's shocked to find his hands shaking slightly with relief. He'd told Coulson at his mission briefing that his prior history with the Black Widow wouldn't affect his ability to do his job any more than his deafness had. It was just a fact that he could work around, that was all. Clint had met her when
they both were going after the same target; he had backed off and she'd done the job.

"Wisely, no doubt," Coulson had said at the time.

Coulson had no idea.

Clint felt no twinges of reluctance as he'd trained his bow on her, only the horrible nausea-inducing relief when Coulson called him off.

Despite a few fumbles, he gets his bow stowed in its case, then uses the stairs and then the elevator. He arrives looking like any other businessman leaving an appointment, with suit, tie and briefcase. A guard meets the elevator, directing its passengers away from the main entrance and a sudden emergency in the street.

As he exits onto a side street already jammed with people, more police and emergency vehicles are screaming toward the scene, including a big black panel truck that suggests bomb squad.

"I've unassed the A.O.," Clint says under his breath. "Nice diversion."

"Thank you, Barton," he says drily. "I'll see you in ten."

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They've settled back into their seats on the flight home, their mission not a complete cluster-fuck. They hadn't gotten the Black Widow, but she hadn't gotten the minister she was after.

Coulson gives him a twitch of a smile. "I'm sorry to report it wasn't remotely as satisfying as that. I called a contact and suggested it. We were after controlled chaos and a diversion to help our side, not the Black Widow."

Sobering, Clint says, "Yeah, I think we need to have a talk about the Black Widow."

Though Coulson says nothing, Clint sees the microscopic change in expression that means he's listening intently.

Clint continues, "I'm not the one you want for this job."

"Are you saying you're compromised?"

"I'm saying I don't want to kill her. I was prepared to, and I think I would have, if it hadn't been for the shit show that just happened. But when you called me off, I was so relieved I thought I would puke."

Coulson nods. "I thought there was more to the story."

"Not really, sir. We met, we fucked a few times."

"But you backed off the target you were both going for."

Clint uses the laugh he's learned from Sitwell, the slight puff of air through his nostrils. "She tied me to the bed. To be fair, I think she'd slipped me something first. Believe me, though, I took credit for the job with my people, same as she did with hers."

Coulson regards him for a long moment. "Barton, something tells me it's a miracle you're still
"breathing."

He offers a half grin. "You're not wrong, sir."

"So tell me. Why such a strong aversion to the thought of taking Black Widow out?"

Settling back into his seat, Clint closes his eyes. Though it's a long while before he speaks, Coulson waits him out. "When she came back, she looked so fucking weary." He hears the weariness in his own voice as he says this, as if there's weight to the last three words that he can scarcely bear.

"'When she came back'?" Coulson echoes, surprised.

"To untie me." Managing a smirk, Clint shrugs a shoulder. "I can be charming as fuck."

"I'll take your word for it."

Their habitual banter—and this cocky vs. dry exchange is how they banter—lets him relax fractionally. "She wanted me out of her way, not permanently maimed. The woman knows her knots. I didn't lie when I said I thought I could do this job, but it would be a lie if I said it now."

"How would you choose to handle this?"

Irritated, he snaps, "I told you. Get someone else."

"That's not what I asked," Coulson says mildly. He doesn't repeat what he said, which forces Clint to rewind and examine each word, which he hates. Coulson knows he hates it but also knows he's exceptionally good at it, because it's a survival skill Clint learned long before he got into the spy racket.

"If it were up to me, I'd try to bring her in," Clint says at last.

Coulson nods. "Then we need to develop a strategy."

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If anyone had ever told Clint in his youth that one day he'd be decked out in formal wear with tails and the whole works, he'd never have believed it. He'd have actually have mistaken it for some variation of a ringmaster's equestrian tails, a little less colorful, and pictured himself as ringmaster of a classier circus than Carson's—but there was no way he'd have believed it. Yet here he is in Coulson's hotel room, having his bow tie expertly done up by his handler.

"We couldn't have lured her to a Texas barbecue?" he asks. "I feel like a complete idiot."

"You look fine," Coulson says.

"'Fine.' Isn't that the one that means 'You look barely passable, but you put me on the spot'?"

Coulson glowers. "More than fine."

No, it's Coulson who looks fine, as in *damn, you look fine*, in his own formal gear. But then, he's the man who ignited an unexpected suit fetish in Clint, so it's not such a surprise.

Coulson will be around as backup, but the approach to the Black Widow is all Clint's. She's only at tonight's gala for surveillance, on the lookout for a target who doesn't actually exist.
Clint mentally snaps to attention when Coulson starts fiddling with Clint's cummerbund. "Jesus," he yelps. "Personal space."

"Sorry. You're a little twisted."

"I thought that was what you liked about me."

Clint would swear Coulson's smothering a crooked little grin as he orders, "Stand back and let me look."

Clint does as he's told, striking a showman's pose and proclaiming, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, prepare to marvel at these magnificent beasts from deepest Africa. Captured on the pitiless savannas by the man you see before you, the Amazing Reynaldo, who will now astound you with death-defying feats of daring." He sweeps his arm toward an imaginary scene behind him. "Meet the most fearsome lions in the Western hemisphere, Sheba and Balthazar!"

Coulson gazes at him, rapt, and suddenly Clint is embarrassed as hell.

Letting his arm fall to his side, he says, "Actually I don't know if I got the intonation right. I've never heard that spiel, only lip-read it. I can do the whole performance."

"I'm astounded," Coulson says, and Clint thinks he notices a spark.

"I did say you would be astounded."

"Did the lion tamer actually capture them?"

"Oh hell no. The owner bought two sad-ass old lions from a little shithole zoo in Missouri. The main thing death-defying about that act was the likelihood of one of the lions dropping dead from old age in the middle."

This time Coulson makes no effort to hide his grin. "Someday I have to get you drunk enough to tell more of these stories. But right now--"

"Speaking of death-defying acts."

"On to the pitiless ballroom for a daring capture of the Black Widow."

* 

If Clint thought Coulson made a pretty good transformation dressed in formal wear, he has to admit that's nothing on Romanova. She's wearing an emerald backless number that pours like liquid down her body, and diamonds in her hair.

He watches from the loggia above as she works the room below, smiling, charming, gently redirecting advances so smoothly the rejection barely registers. All the while, she's scanning the room around her, looking for her target.

Of course she takes in the loggia above, and as her gaze comes to Clint, he takes a quick step backward into shadow, knowing that's sure to catch her notice. Making his way to a staircase that leads outside, he murmurs into his comm, "She's spotted me."

As he's about to emerge onto the terrace, Clint finds himself slammed into the stone arch.

"You're fast," he says. "And I even bet you're wearing ridiculous shoes."
"You," she spits.

Clint grins. "You remember. I'm touched."

Her beautiful mouth twists in a scowl. "This is my job. If you're smart you'll walk away."

"I need to talk to you."

"Your needs are irrelevant."

"I don't think so. Can I say 'Come with me if you want to live'? I've always wanted to say 'Come with me if you want to live,' but how often do you get a chance?" Especially when you're an assassin, but he doesn't add that. She's just staring at him like he's insane, so he says, "Okay. I'm going for it. Come with me if you want to live." He takes her by the forearm, but she jerks it away.

"What bullshit is this?"

"This job, it's a set-up." One hundred percent true, even if he was involved in setting it up. "There's a kill order on you." Also one hundred percent true, though of course the set-up is not in service of the kill order.

"How do you know this?"

Feeling a pinpoint of pain just below his left nipple, Clint realizes she's got her hands slipped inside his fancy jacket, leaning into him, her face turned up toward his. He's certain that, to any onlookers, they look like a couple who have sneaked away for a romantic moment. He could be dead and she could be gone before he even dropped to the ground. "I work for people now who do a heavy trade in information."

"And why would you tell me about this without asking for something first?"

"I think you know." There's a trickle down the left side of his chest, and he doesn't think it's sweat. "Hey. I'll lose my deposit."

The Black Widow scoffs. "That's no rental."

"I owe you. You could have killed me, or left me hog-tied until I lost my hands. I have no idea why you didn't do either one of those things. So I can tell you from experience, not knowing why is survivable."

At the sound of footfalls on the marble walkway, Clint dips his head to kiss her. If she's going to use that ruse, after all, he should have access to it too.

When the footsteps die away he pulls back he says, "The people you work for--the ones I used to work for--all you are to them is a gun that shoots where they point it. You deserve to be more."

"Let me guess. You want me to work for you. You'll treat me so much better, right?" It would take a complete idiot not to read the scorn in her words, her face.

Clint laughs. "That's not really what I aspire to. I'm still working for others. I just upgraded."

"And these people, they have the utmost respect for you."

"The ones who matter do."

The Black Widow's mouth quirks up in a cold smile. "You know this because they tell you."
"I know this because I have the freedom to disagree with a mission and say so. If I can make a compelling case for trying it my way, they let me do that. Say this op, for example. They said to kill you. I said, what if I tried to bring you in instead."

She spits something in Russian, following up with "You're fucking crazy!"

"It's been said." He shows his hands in the international "hey, I'm harmless" gesture. "My mistake. If you've never had a job that made you want to puke, that made you feel evil, rock on. Oh, and watch your back. I won't be coming for you--I made that clear--but someone will. Or maybe you want to at least talk to the guy who made a sales pitch to me."

The Black Widow, she's badass, but she's practical. She eyes Clint for a long moment, then says, "Let's go."

"Come with--"

"Don't say it. I will cut your heart out."

Clint offers her his arm, and with his free hand, covers the grin he can't stop.
Chapter 2

The heat of the desert envelops Clint as he waits for the helo's blades to slow to a near stop, fifty miles from Outer Bumfuck, New Mexico. The pause gives him the opportunity to enjoy the scenery—which is to say Coulson, standing just beyond the LZ in his habitual dark suit, hands clasped in front of him. Coulson is the still point at the far edge of a swarm of activity, looking no more bothered by the heat than if it were a cool September day in New York.

Once the noise dies down, Clint readjusts his receivers and grabs his gear, then crosses to where Coulson waits. "Aw, sir. You take me to the best places. You could turn a girl's head."

"If you're impressed now, wait until dark. The club scene is stupendous."

Clint takes in the crew swarming over the crater in the distance, setting up scaffolding. "What have we got?"

"Technically, it's an 0-8-4. But it sure as hell looks like an enormous hammer."

"Huh. So what's with the tinkertoy city going up and the extra personnel and overtime to bring a few dozen Mohammeds to this not-exactly-a-mountain?"

"Now you sound like Director Fury."

"Sir. There is no call to be insulting."

Clint's rewarded by a twitch of a smile.

"No one can move the hammer. A civilian tried to pry it loose with a pickup. Tore the back end right off the truck."

"Sword in the stone deal, huh?"

"Seems like. Why, are you thinking of giving it a whirl, Wart?"

Clint shoots Coulson a sidelong glance, surprised and pleased. "Oh hell yes. Unless it's radioactive or something."

"No hotter than your average Fiestaware collection."

"Sir. How did you know about my Fiestaware collection? Natasha told you, didn't she? And I resent the implication that it's merely average. Oh hey, speaking of Nat, how's she getting along with the Prince of Snide?"

"She hasn't killed him yet, so I'm calling it a success so far."

"That shit in Monaco was insane."

"Well," Coulson says drily, "we are talking about Stark."

The Stark-snark always gets a grin from Coulson at the very least, a laugh at best, so Clint often thinks up little tidbits during long hours in a sniper's nest, or while traveling. The next night after his arrival, they sit out behind SHIELD's trailer city drinking Mexican beer as the squints continue crawling over the hammer like ants on a lollypop. There's enough light pollution from the structure and the trailers that the night sky's pretty sparse on visible stars. Someone in a nearby trailer's
playing music, mostly Marvin Gaye, the OJays and the like. The theme from *Shaft* comes on, and Clint croons (badly--he's never bothered to learn to carry a tune, figuring it's a lost cause) "Who's the arrogant billionaire prick who's a sex machine to all the chicks?"

"Stark," Coulson chimes in at the appropriate time, his voice completely inflectionless.

"Damn right." They laugh quietly, and Clint says, "Sorry I couldn't do anything about the sex machine part."

"It is what it is," Coulson says. "Another?"

"Sure," Clint says, and Coulson bends to retrieve two beers from the cooler at his feet.

"Do you mind if I ask what happened with your hearing? Meningitis?"

Clint shakes his head. "Nah. Happened a lot slower. I was prone to ear infections when I was little. My old man was prone to smacking me in the head when I 'didn't listen.' Punching might be more accurate, but he prefers understatement when it comes to the autobiographical stuff.

"Jesus, Clint. I'm sorry."

Clint's more taken with the fact that Coulson just called him Clint than with his own tragic family sob story. He shrugs. "It is what it is."

"I was afraid that was the case when I saw your discomfort when the receivers were activated."

"Yeah, I don't think anyone in the room missed that."

"How old were you when your hearing was essentially gone?"

"It was pretty well shot before my parents died, but I had a few more ear infections in the orphanage."

"They didn't treat you?" Coulson's face darkens in that way Clint knows means *Someone is putting my people at risk.*

"Not their fault," Clint assures him. "By then I'd learned to keep my trap shut."

This information in no way pacifies Coulson, who looks like he'd enjoy getting his hands on anyone he deems responsible.

Clint becomes aware of an accumulation of crud under his nails and realizes he's clawed off most of the bottles label in mouse-nibble sized pieces. "Enough with this Dickensian shit," he says airily. "Tell me what famous writer coughed up your childhood story."

"Wow. Great question, but a tough one." Coulson takes a long pull at his beer, then stares up at the sky. Clouds have moved in, obliterating the scattering of stars they could see earlier. "James Thurber, I think."

Clint frowns. "Don't know him."

"You should read him. Funny as hell. And he illustrated his stories--his dogs just crack my shit up. I don't even need to read the story that goes with them. I keep wondering--"

"What?"
"He was writing in Captain America's era. I imagine him loving those drawings and stories as much as I do."

"You are such a fanboy, sir." He hopes he managed to convey affection in his tone--getting non-snark tone right is the one skill he's still uncertain of in his post-deafness life.

A small flurry of embarrassed fidgeting from Coulson indicates maybe not. Acting purely on instinct, Clint leans in toward him, touching callused fingers to his jawline, and kisses him lightly on the lips.

Just then a honking siren sounds, pulling them both from their loose-limbed relaxation.

"Perimeter breach," Coulson says shortly.

"You could've just said 'No thanks.'"

Clint sees a twitch of real humor before Coulson turns to run for the structure housing the hammer. "Eyes up high. With a gun."

* 

Clint has to admit that being cockblocked by a Norse god makes one helluva story--if anyone would believe it. Or if he could tell it. Of course, he had no idea at the time of said blocking that the intruder was Thor. At first he just thought of him as Drunken Surfer Dude, then Steroid-Crazed Surfer Dude, then I'm-Starting-to-Like-This-Crazy-Motherfucker.

He had no idea what the fuck was going on when the guy, soaked to the skin and caked in mud, dropped to his knees and screamed at the sky, but it sent a hard shiver through him.

"What the fuck," he said under his breath, but Coulson didn't have an answer.

Clint was present at the fight with the giant fire robot too, watched that thing back-hand Thor into the next county. Clint knows dead when he sees it--his life often depends on it--and that crazy bastard was dead. Then that huge hammer that Clint hadn't been able to budge (of course he tried it, mostly to show off his arms for a couple of junior agents who were nearby) had come rocketing from 50 miles away and planted itself right in Thor's hand, then boom, not dead, not to mention the total change in wardrobe.

All this is going through Clint's head as he packs up his weapons. He's just finishing putting the bow in its case when Coulson steps into the trailer, lingering at the entrance with his back against the door.

"That was one hell of an op, sir. Gods and aliens and giant robots. Can you imagine the boner Tony Stark would have gotten from seeing the way that crazy-ass thing flipped around on Xena when she jumped on its back?"

"The really sad part is how very classified this all is."

Clint nods. "The curse of this life. The coolest stuff always is."

Coulson hesitates for a moment, then says, "So, where were we when we were so rudely interrupted?"

He feels just a stutter of his heartbeat. They aren't just going to pretend it never happened? Holy shit. "I believe I had just breached your perimeter."
"I think the incident warrants further exploration. Perhaps a reenactment."

"Should we sit to recreate it exactly?"

"I think the chairs are still damp from the rain storm."

Clint steps in closer then, raising a hand to Coulson's jawline and pressing a soft kiss on his lips. Coulson--Phil--opens to him and makes his own tentative explorations. This is nothing like other encounters he's had, all of them fast, hungry and reckless. He's almost afraid of how much he likes this.

Pulling back from the kiss, he asks, "Should I prepare to be debriefed?"

Coulson begins to answer, but cracks up before he gets more than a word out. "I should have seen that coming."

"You should see me--" Clint begins, but Phil stops him with a kiss. It's got a touch more intent, but still soft and exploratory.

"Well sir, that's not an exact reenactment."

Phil holds up a hand. "Enough with the sir in this context. It makes me feel unbelievably skeevy."

A joke flits across Clint's mind, about finding him believably skeevy, but he realizes just in time that putting Phil off this entirely isn't the best remedy for Clint's own discomfort. "Phil," he says softly, just testing the sound of it, the feel of his name in his mouth. The part he didn't think to test was the look it brings to Phil's face. Happy. Weirdly shy. It wipes away all desire to joke about hierarchy and skeeviness. It wipes away pretty much everything but the urge to kiss him again.

***

"I think the game is on, if you want to watch," Phil says. "Remote's on the coffee table. I'll grab a couple of beers."

This is Clint's first time in Phil's apartment, so he's caught up in looking around. The living room looks classy, to Clint's eye, and comfortable, with leather sofa and chairs and a glass coffee table. There's art on the walls (he recognizes a couple of Thurber dogs and another cartoon dog), which aren't what Clint calls landlord-white, and hardwood floors partially covered by a carpet that looks more like modern art than the sort of rug he'd have expected Phil to own. What draws Clint's attention, however, is the pair of double-wide bookcases. He's never been in a home that's had this many books.

Instead of the neat rows of book spines he'd expect from seeing Phil's office, his bookshelves are controlled chaos. There are books lying on top of the vertical rows, piled in front of them and a few tall books stacked horizontally on the bottom shelf. Head cocked sideways to read the spines, Clint browses the titles.

Almost an entire shelf is taken up by books on Captain America alone, mostly histories, but one that looks to be a novel and a couple of memorabilia price guides. Not surprisingly, there are also some titles on World War II, the Howling Commandos, Howard Stark.

It's not just a history library, though. There are several editions of an annual collection of travel essays, a worn copy of Robert Pelton's The World's Most Dangerous Places, a couple of books on cartography, a shit-ton of novels that aren't just the ordnance porn favored by SHIELD agents who use the book swap.
"So that's a no vote on the game?" Phil asks from behind him.

Clint turns, color rising in his face. "Sorry, game's fine. I just got distracted. I was snooping your bookshelves."

Phil sets two beers and a large bowl of popcorn on the coffee table. "That's not snooping. I consider bookshelves fair game. Besides, it reveals almost as much about you as it does about me."

"Yeah?"

Smiling, Phil says, "Last date I had here took one glance at my bookshelves and said, 'Somebody sure reads a lot.' It was the last date in more than one sense."

Clint is surprised at the little flare of jealousy that rises up in him at the thought of someone else being in Phil's space this way, mixed as it is with smug gladness that they failed the test.

"It never really occurred to me that I could keep all the books I've read." He's littered planes, airports, hotels and cafes around the world with books he's just finished.

Phil gestures to Clint to join him on the sofa. "This is nowhere near all of them. Just the ones I want to keep, or the ones I haven't gotten to yet."

Shelves full of books you haven't gotten to yet. That's some crazy shit.

As Clint settles next to him on the sofa, Phil says, "Anytime you want to borrow any of my books, just ask."

"Actually, I had my eye on that Captain America sketchbook repro. My sofa has a busted leg, and it's just the right--"

"Barton, you are a horrible person."

Clint grins. "That's what makes me so great at what I do. Seriously, though. Thanks for the offer." The last thing he expects is the wave of emotion that surges through him. They've just come off a mission a few days ago, one that was long and intense. He can't be sure of anything he feels right now. Grabbing for the remote, he turns on the game and does what he does best. Deflects. "How the hell do we have popcorn? I didn't hear the microwave." Clint loathes the beeps the ovens make, piercing enough to make him flinch. Not only that, but he's been spoiled by the taste of popcorn from a big popper, drenched in butter and sold to the circus-goers at $6 a bag.

"I made it on the stove top," Phil responds. "I've always made it that way. It tastes better, I think."

Huh. Clint had been so intent on scoping out the books that he'd missed the tiny fireworks sound of the corn popping.

He digs in and of course the result is a shower of popcorn all over his chest and lap and Phil's sofa. It does taste better, but maybe that's just the spice mix Phil liberally sprinkled on it. The cayenne in it makes his lips tingle just a bit, like they do after a makeout session. Deflect. "Aw shit, this mook," he says to the TV screen and the pinch hitter coming up to bat. "Try and tell me the last time this bastard didn't choke in the clutch."

Phil doesn't answer, just settles the bowl in his own lap so they can both reach it more easily and begins massaging Clint's neck and shoulders with one hand. Clint can't suppress a soft animal noise as he leans into Phil's touch.
"This op was a tough one," Phil says.

By sheer force of will Clint stops himself from making a joke. A little shiver runs through him. From the effort, he tells himself.

"It helped me clarify some things." Phil moves the bowl of popcorn onto the table and turns toward Clint.

Oh fuck. Shit just got real. "Okay."

"There's nothing like a handful of near-death experiences on an op to get you thinking," Phil says.

"I try to avoid that whenever possible. Especially after one of those ops." *Fuck, Clint. Just shut UP.*

Phil smiles. "Specifically, I've been thinking about us. What we've had going has been--"

Clint blurts, "You didn't have to invite me here to tell me this. I mean--"

"Clint?"

"We never put any labels on this, or made any promises. So if you--"

Phil puts two gentle fingers to Clint's lips. "Clint. That's just it. I want to. These last few weeks made me admit to myself that I love you. It's not exactly our style to make declarations, but I want to put it out there."

And just like that, Clint finds himself unable to breathe. Reeling, he puts a hand on Phil's shoulder to steady himself, turning his face away.

"Clint?"

"Jesus, Phil."

He can feel Phil's shoulder tense beneath his hand as Phil says, "This wasn't something you were prepared to hear."

The quiet disappointment in his voice makes Clint look up. "Phil," he says slowly, making sure to give each word the weight it deserves, "I have never heard someone say those words to me."

He waits for this to sink in. Phil, as always, is quick on the uptake. So many emotions pass over his face, subtle flickers of feelings that Clint reads as well as he reads lips. A shimmer of liquid light in his eyes reminds Clint of the day his implants were activated.

Phil slides his hand along Clint's jawline, curling his fingers into the short hairs at the nape of his neck. "I plan to make the wait worthwhile."

He leans in for a kiss, but Clint takes the move farther, turning it into a clumsy hug. Phil's lips graze his hair, which will do for now.

"Love you too," he says into Phil's shoulder.

Phil suddenly stills. "You're not obligated to say it just because I did. No pressure."

"I'm not. I mean, I didn't. Shit, I've been thinking pretty much the same thing. Only I thought I was confused, having an emotional reaction to being in the shit."
"It's been known to happen."

"Not this time. Now that I know it's not just me, this feels right."

Phil brushes his lips across Clint's temple and into his hair, a whisper of sound that grows louder as he passes closer to the implant's microphone. Clint shivers at the sensation and the sound.

"Now that you've confessed your feelings to my shoulder, why don't we do something about them," Phil suggests.

Abandoning the game and the popcorn, Clint lets Phil lead him by the hand to his bedroom.

***

"I don't do presents," Clint says abruptly.

"I'm sorry, what?" It's no wonder Phil looks up in confusion. He's lounging on his sofa doing paperwork while Clint lies on the floor listening to Phil's stereo. These last few months he's been working through the music he's missed, based on Phil's recommendations.

"I don't do presents," he says again. "I don't know how." The building anxiety that prompted this admission is a direct result of the fresh pine scent permeating Phil's apartment since they brought the tree in that they'd bought from a guy selling them on the sidewalk on the West Side. Since Clint likes the surprise of smelling cut Christmas trees when he rounds a street corner, he wasn't exactly prepared for the claustrophobia-like feeling of that same outdoor fragrance here in Phil's apartment.

Phil considers for a moment. "Giving or receiving?"

"Either. Anyway, I just wanted to say so before you go to any trouble."

Phil's crow's feet deepen with his warm smile. "Clint, it's December 18."

"Right. I figured you'd be getting started, so just don't bother."

Taking off his glasses, Phil lets them dangle from his fingertips. "I happen to be one of those annoying people who buy Christmas presents all year long. It's already done."

Clint's face falls. "That's--that's cool. Tell me what you'd like for Christmas."

"You don't need to give me anything. It makes me happy to give presents, so I do. But I don't expect you to take on the stress of last-minute shopping. We do have an op tomorrow."

True, but it should be a cakewalk. They'll spend more time in airports--they're going civilian-style on this one--and planes than actually on the ground. Maybe Clint can make a stealth attack on the duty-free store and grab a bottle of booze or cologne for Phil.

Setting his folder of paperwork aside, Phil shifts until his feet are settled on the floor. "C'mon over here."

Clint grabs the remote and shuts off the stereo. "I hope you didn't buy me any Neil Young."

"Tell me." He's been soliciting Clint's opinions on his suggestions.

"Well, for starters there's his voice." Clint settles in at Phil's feet, leaning back against the sofa as Phil begins massaging his shoulders. "Then the endless masturbatory screechy basketball-shoe guitar solos." Phil knows about Clint's deep hatred of basketball shoes. It's become code for any
annoying, high-pitched sound. "Plus 7-minute songs about fish fucking."

Phil laughs softly and Clint relaxes into his touch. "Fortunately I kept all the receipts." His sure fingers work into the knots at the base of Clint's neck, and they both sink into companionable silence. After a while Phil settles back into the sofa and Clint rises to get them both a beer. When he returns and joins him on the sofa, Phil says, "There is one thing you could give me, and it doesn't even require descending into the hell of Macy's in December."

"Sure, what?"

"I'd like you to think about moving in with me. You're here three or four nights out of the week anyway. We wouldn't have to pretend we don't mean anything to each other when we're working. And I can't tell you how much it would mean to wake up next to you every day."

"But they wouldn't let you be my handler anymore."

"There's that. But you and Sitwell get along well. I know he'd appreciate an asset like you." Phil makes a face. "Because he constantly says so. So. That's what I want for Christmas. Not necessarily your suitcases all under my tree--I wouldn't put that pressure on you. But I'd like you to think about it."

He thinks about it. Phil's place--with the goofy framed dog cartoons, the overflow of books, the old Captain America poster Phil's vaguely self-conscious about at the end of the hallway--this would be home. He's never hung that word on any place he's lived. Even his apartment down on Bedford Street, that's just where he keeps his stuff, where he sleeps. He only ever calls it "my place." This, he knows without a doubt, would be worthy of the word home.

But to give up Phil as his handler feels like a huge price to pay for something he's never dreamed of wanting. When he's on an op, when things can get very life-and-death very suddenly, Phil is his home. His lifeline. He doesn't know if he can give that up.

"There's something else you could do for me," Phil says, his voice as warm as ever. "Stop thinking about it right now, and slide over closer to me."

In a moment Phil makes it very easy to stop thinking at all.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Warning for isolation and sensory deprivation as torture techniques.

Interlude: Silence (part 1):

Clint wakes in a white room. The first thought in his head is *Fuck, now what?* He takes a quick inventory to determine why he might be in medical, but nothing hurts except a dull ache in his head. He doesn't hear any monitors beeping, which he supposes is a good sign. Then he realizes he doesn't hear *anything*, which he's fairly sure is a bad sign. Reaching up to feel for a receiver yields no information whatsoever, except he apparently still has a head (yes, well, he would if it hurts), because *something* stops his hand from making contact.

He brings his hands within view and sees that his hands aren't wrapped in bandages, but covered with thick white gloves. "What the hell?" he mutters, shoving himself upright to look around. Not just the walls and ceiling are white, but the floor, the door, the bed frame and bedding, the thick jumpsuit and soft boots Clint finds himself wearing. "Aw, fuck this shit sideways," he groans, but doesn't hear. He tucks one of his hands beneath his thigh and tries to yank off the glove, but it's securely fastened on, leaving no bare skin between it and the cuff of the jumpsuit. "*Fuck!*"

Clint knows what's going on now. SHIELD covered this in training. It's what's known as white torture--though some varieties are less literal with the white. Isolation, disorientation, sensory deprivation. Some of the trainees who thought of themselves as big swinging dicks scoffed at the idea that it could be as effective as extreme pain, until the classroom visit from an analyst who used to be a field agent who went through a few weeks of this shit. His story shut the swinging dicks up fast.

"This is *not* my idea of a white Christmas," he says to anyone who might be listening. "Hell, I don't even like it when it's just snow."

So all right. The first thing is to look for a way out. Not that he expects much--the people who go in for this form of torture are pretty damn detail oriented. But snipers are detail oriented too. He can't spot any signs of surveillance tech, but it would be white too. Like searching for a ping pong ball in an avalanche. A closer inspection of his surroundings reveals no weaknesses in the white door or the smaller floor level door (for food delivery, he suspects), nothing he can pry loose from the bed to use as a weapon or tool. His best chance is if someone steps into his cell--not that he expects it to be a *good* chance. Sometimes you take the shitty chance because that's the only one there is.

Okay. So he's thoroughly explored his situation. Now all that other shit--who and why and how. There's a gap in his memory, which doesn't help. Clint's not sure if he's lost hours or as much as a day or two. Last thing he remembers is setting out on an op he thought of as a cakewalk. *Goddamnit, Barton, way to jinx a mission all to hell.* He can't remember any of the mission, or even if he managed to buy Phil's present in the airport.

He wonders if it was a set-up. It's easy to be suspicious of the easy ops, but he gets a not inconsiderable percentage of those. Watch, wait, make certain that nothing goes wrong. Sometimes...
he doesn't even draw his bow. Someone might have arranged this whole thing as a trap, but they might just as easily have lucked into an opportunity to capture Clint. He hopes Phil and Tasha managed not to get caught up in this clusterfuck. If not, Phil will be eaten up with guilt. The sooner he gets Clint out of this--or the sooner Clint gets himself out of it--the less lousy Phil will feel. As for the asswipes who got him--they want something, which means they'll show themselves sooner or later. In the meantime, there's keeping them out of his head as much as possible.

Clint knows what they'll do and how it works. But he also has an idea how to fight this. He knows focusing on something besides the nothing surrounding him will help him fight until Phil and Tasha spring him from this place. The guy who had spoken to his class had designed and built a summer home, all in his head.

Clint hasn't built so much as a birdhouse in his entire life. But he has, it occurs to him, spent a helluva lot of time watching (and later helping) the circus riggers and roustabouts set up in new towns. It's no stretch to picture the entire process from every vantage point. He takes his time imagining each step, calling up the feel of rope in his hands, the scents of earth, cigarette smoke and animal shit and piss (and the ammonia-triggered headaches that caused), the burn of his muscles. Fuck you, white torture assholes, he thinks, then moves on to the next logical step.

He pictures himself walking the grounds. Before he started his apprenticeship with Trick Shot, he used to tag along with the manager on his rounds, the same route every time. The first stop was the biggest of the trailers, which belonged to Irina, the fat lady. Her name was really Irene, but she preferred the Russian persona for the exotic flair, and to keep audience interaction to a minimum. Clint continued the habit of checking in on her to see if there was anything she needed. Usually she gave him a few bucks to get her books from the nearest thrift store. The deal was, he got to pick out one for himself as payment for the errand, but they always ended up swapping the books back and forth. She was a fast and voracious reader who could segue straight from *Les Miserables* to *The Valley of the Dolls* if that was all that could be had. It meant Clint always had a small stack of books waiting to be read. She fed his interest in heroes and all kinds of science fiction, but taught him to try anything.

In his head Clint walks up the ramp to Irene's trailer and knocks on her door. He watches for the red feather boa she shakes in the window as her silent invitation to Clint to come inside. As always, he puts a kettle of water on her propane cooktop and settles in across from her. When he admits to stumbling into a tent stake the night before, she tells him to get his first aid kit and tends to the gash on his shin. She always remembers to look up from her task when she speaks to him. With Clint patched up and the tea poured, they settle in for the book swap. Irene has some books to dispose of, which she's sorted into piles. He quickly looks over the ones she thinks he'll be uninterested in--she's right about 99% of the time.

She holds out one she's set aside on its own, saying, "This one has sex, but it's hilariously bad. Just don't get any ideas that this is how it really works, and you'll be fine. The rest is mildly entertaining, but if you just want to skip to the sex, you won't be missing a lot." The first time she ever gave this type of review Clint, who had just turned 13, was mortified, but her matter-of-fact commentary got him over it in short order. It came to be one of the things he loved about her, that she knew and accepted that he'd be skimming through the cheesier books for sex scenes, and would answer questions like "Okay, what was ridiculous about that scene?"

God, he misses her. Clint has no idea where he'd be without her friendship and her encouragement to read everything he could get his hands on. And just like that, the sharp pang of emotion takes him out of the circus yard and back into the white room.

While his attention was turned inward, a white bowl and white cup appeared on the floor in front
of the small door. Clint approaches and reaches out a gloved hand. Raising the cup, he sniffs at the
clear liquid in it, then tries a sip. The water has not even a trace of a flavor, either of chlorine or
mineral content.

The bowl contains white rice and a spoon, but Clint's attention is diverted by a folded square of
paper beneath the bowl. He slides it out and reads the black sans serif text. It contains instructions
on how to alert them if he needs to use the can--there's a white piece of paper he's to slip under the
entry door. He has to exchange the printed page for the white one. Clint rolls his eyes. *These
fuckers are 100% committed to the zero-stimulation thing, aren't they? But they are seriously
overestimating the distraction value of one terse paragraph (though a serif font--that would have been hella captivating).*

As for gaining any intel from it, Clint can tell it wasn't written by a native speaker of English, but
clearly someone who's educated enough to be fluent. He wonders if Tasha could figure out what
part of the world the writer is from based on the small errors and slightly awkward phrasing. It's
definitely not in his skill set.

Why such an elaborate system, when they could just drag him out of his cell periodically to use the
bathroom? It seems a weird bit of autonomy to leave him. Maybe because applying some kind of
schedule would keep him from losing sense of time? *Yeah, well, chew on this, fuckers. My time
sense is damn good.*

He takes up the spoon and rice, a task made awkward by the goddamn gloves. The spoon, as far as
he can tell with no sense of touch, is a standard piece of flatware covered with a soft coating like
they use on baby spoons. White, of course, because these people aren't even taking the chance that
a spoon can provide stimulation, much less be weaponized to take out a guard's eyeballs.

The rice is pretty much what he expected: room temperature steamed rice with nothing added for
flavor. Clint's actually grateful for the fact that it's edible, if tasteless. Many prisoners get a lot
worse. He knows, though, that the intent is not to do him any favors but to fuck with his mind. The
trick is to get out of here before it gets that far. He knows if Phil's free he's on it; Clint just hopes
his receivers are still intact or at least weren't destroyed before his position could be tracked.

When he finishes, he places the bowl, cup and spoon back where he found them and shoves the
paper under the door, then retreats to his cot to attempt to get some shut-eye. It's fucking hard,
though, with the overhead light set on a constant almost-too-bright. He turns his face toward the
wall and falls into an unsettled doze.

* * *

When he finally rouses himself, the light is the same, the silence (of course) is the same, the cup
and bowl are still where he'd placed them.

No. Their position is slightly different, and when he approaches he sees he's had another delivery
of rice and water, and beneath the entry is the promised sheet of white paper. He would have
sworn he hadn't slept for very long at all, but--*No. This is the whole point, to throw off your sense
of time.* Once they'd managed that, he learned in training, they were close to breaking down your
sense of self. Clint has an eerily accurate sense of time, which helped him when he was in the
circus and is crucial in the field. *Trust it, not them.*

Deciding it's time to do what little exploring he can, Clint slides the white paper beneath the door
and assumes the position he'd been instructed to: arms braced against the wall across from the
door, feet planted back, eyes front. It's about fifteen minutes before someone comes up behind him
and yanks a white hood over his head.
"You know," he says, "The rice could use a little less cilantro. Just sayin'." He has no idea if there's a verbal response, but he's pulled back off the wall and his left arm is brought up behind his back and restrained somehow, and then his right. He's guided out through the door, though he has no sensation of the guard's hands on his body, just the awareness of being steered.

Another door, then he's brought to a stop. His right arm is released from the restraint and then the glove, and some fastener on the jumpsuit is undone. He's pointed in another direction and the hood is yanked off, leaving him staring directly into a naked lightbulb that dazzles him for a moment before he looks down and finds the toilet. He takes care of business, washes his bare hand, finding the hood on the side of the tiny sink. Then Clint puts the hood back on and turns to face the bright light again.

Though there's no chance his next move will go well, it's his one shot, so when the guard comes back to cover and bind Clint's hand, he rams his elbow into the guy's sternum, using the momentum to turn so he can launch an attack. He advances into something that *sizzlebuzznumbpain* drops him like a rock, and a moment later he's out.
Interlude: Silence (part 2):

He wakes with no idea how much time has passed. His head aches exactly as it did when he first awoke here. His arms are no longer bound but his hand is gloved once more. The rice and water are where he left them, but the white paper hasn't been returned to its spot. Maybe he's lost that privilege, or they're withholding it as punishment. Fuckers have no idea how long he can suppress his bodily functions.

He goes for the food, though, then seats himself back on the cot and gets the show underway. As he'd told Phil, he knows every bit of the circus performance by heart. The introduction of the show and each individual act, the actions and rhythms of each, the closing. He could recite the ballyhoo designed to get people into the 10-in-1, the intro speeches about every act inside: the fire-eater, the geek who pounds ten-penny nails up his nose, the sword-swallower, then the freaks who didn't actually perform. The giant, the midget and, of course Irina. After that was the patter about the "educational exhibits with astounding freaks of nature and wondrous babies (two-headed, in a jar) and the terrifying soap lady (a photograph). See, if you dare, the great egress," which was actually a ruse to get the customers (the ones with smaller vocabularies, anyway) out the back door.

He performs both entire shows in his head, then runs through the big top performance again with his sharp-shooter act as the headliner, because why the fuck not?

Then he runs through the breakdown, deconstructing each tent and structure inside, packing it all away and getting back on the road for the next town. While the internal reenactment of performing and traveling with Carson's keeps Clint engaged, it also leaves him exhausted when the load-out is finished. He sprawls on his bunk, asleep before their entourage has gone five miles down the road.

He wakes on a cot in a narrow white room. "Barney?" he calls, trying to keep his voice soft. He can't remember what happened. Maybe he fell from the rigging. Maybe he's sick from some virus--his hearing's worse than usual. Clint struggles to sit up, and as he swings his legs down and his torso up the mental fog breaks up and he curses, taking a tug at the fucking gloves.

It feels like he slept a good many hours, but there's no meal awaiting him by the little door. Once again he tells himself to trust his own instincts, not the fuckers who have him caged. His body craves exercise, but there's damn little room for it. He could walk a tight line from the head of his bed to the end of the room, but there's the risk of stepping right in his food if they shove it through the meal door. He can do pushups and squats against the wall. He does this until he burns off some of the scattered energy.

Settling back onto his cot, back against the wall, he waits. Catches himself absently pulling at the gloves, tucks his hands under his thighs. He wonders what it means that he called out for Barney. His brother hasn't rescued him from anything for a hell of a long time. Clint has managed to wall off his feelings for Barney, both good and bad, for many years now. His transformation from Clint's defender to just another tormentor made him too fucking painful to think about.
And yet, here Clint is, thinking about him, because white walls. He gives his head a hard shake and focuses his attention on setting his circus up on a new lot. This time, however, he feels the presence of his brother throughout the process, steeling himself for an unplanned encounter. Clint's not far into the setting up when he's distracted by the sound of footsteps in the hallway outside his cell. He rises to his feet, thinking *Fuck, yeah* before it hits him that he has heard absolutely nothing up to this point since he woke up in this place.

It's a hallucination.

This realization freaks him out. It's not like he didn't know hallucinations are a common result of the treatment he's getting, but it hadn't occurred to him they might be auditory, or that he'd be in a situation where no other sounds would compete or drown them out. The best he can do is tell himself the sounds aren't real, just in his head.

It doesn't make them go away. It's always the footsteps. The fourth time he hears them, another paper slides under his door, telling him to assume the position. He braces his hands against the wall, endures the arm restraints and the hood. This time he's marched to a room and pushed into a chair facing another bright light. The hood stays in place.

After a pause in which nothing further seems to happen, Clint ventures, "You fucknuggets do know that I'm completely deaf, don't you? If you're interrogating me right now, the effect is a little lost because I don't know what you're saying unless I can see your face, read a question or, in the unlikely event you haven't smashed the tech I was wearing, hear you."

A lot more nothing seems to happen. Some of the time he thinks there may be someone in the room with him, sometimes not. He loses track of the time before he's finally dragged up and guided in the direction he thinks he came from.

"Hey you know you might want to let me make a pit stop," Clint says. "Be a shame to wreck the all-white theme, after all this work."

Unmoved by his logic, Clint's guards shove him back to his cell. When they unbind his arms, the dead weight of their release nearly staggering him. The hood is yanked off once more, and Clint keeps his eyes on the blank wall ahead oh him until he's sure they're gone, then sinks onto the floor as the intense tingling pain of returning feeling overwhelms him.

After this excursion, he finds it harder to remember that the footfalls he hears are nothing more than a trick of his brain. Realizing his sense of time has been slipping, he tries to piece together all he has to work with, but it's like doing an all-white jigsaw puzzle that has large chunks missing, and the attempt only switches his brain into panic mode.

*Breathe, Barton.* He's heard this in Phil's calm voice so many times when he's been bleeding or writhing in pain, either in the field or on the med transport. Clint seizes on those memories now, uses them to guide him out of his tailspin.

Food appears at intervals. Guards escort him to the head when he slides the white paper (which eventually was returned to him) under the door. Clint hangs on as fiercely as he can to his sense of time, but there's little left to grasp. He makes another pass through the old circus routines, but some of the patter has started to slip from his memory, and now he's no longer sure he has the order right.

At one point Clint is dozing when he hears Coulson's voice: "Barton. Talk to me."

"Sir!" He sits bolt upright before remembering where he is, that any sound he hears is a product of
his mind crumbling to bits. Breathing hard, he drops back onto his bed, shaking. "Jesus, Phil," he whispers. "You've gotta get me the fuck out of here."

Clint supposes he gives up after that. He ceases the struggle to keep track of time, stops walking through the circus grounds and running through the performance. He eats when food is provided, uses the head when he has to, sleeps when he can. He drifts.

The first sign he has of the rescue mission is the concussive force of the assault on his door. Clint turns his unfocused gaze on the door, where a black-clad SHIELD agent appears through the smoke of the blown lock. She shoves back the faceplate on her helmet and calls out, "Sir. I've located Barton."

She secures her weapon and approaches carefully. "Barton. Clint. D'you know me? It's Berit."

End of Interlude.
Coulson charges into the room, curses as he sees Clint, who has his back pressed against the wall, his legs drawn up to his chest.

"Clint."

Blinking, Clint works to shift his focus to him. There's something off.

"Talk to me, Barton. Do you have any injuries?"

Clint looks at Berit. She doesn't seem to notice anything wrong. He flicks his gaze back to Coulson, but he can't hold it there.

Coulson kneels in front of him. "Barton. Can you hear me?"

He gives a slight shake of his head.

"I'm going to touch you, okay? See if you have your receivers." Coulson's fingers are gentle when they move over his scalp but the sensation that rolls through Clint is overwhelming. It's rain on parched land, but with it comes the fear of drowning.

*Fuckfuckfuck, don't cry, fucking don't.* Clint turns his head aside, but Coulson gently guides it back so he catches his words: "Clint. Give me your hand."

Coulson isn't right. The corners of his mouth are turned down, and there's a pinched look around his eyes. This is not a look he's ever seen on Phil Coulson's face.

"Your hand, Clint. I can take off those gloves."

Clint thrusts a hand out. Doesn't matter what's off about him, if he'll take off the fucking gloves.

Coulson's hands are shaking so hard, he does nothing more than fumble his attempts.

"Let me, sir," Berit says, kneeling beside him. Clint wants to catch her eye, see if anything registers about this whole fucked up thing, but she's intent on figuring out how to get the glove unfastened.

A medic is hustling into the room as Berit gets the first glove free. Before he can muscle Coulson aside, Clint reaches out to brush his fingers along Coulson's field suit. The feel of the leather and high-performance fabric--and the air on his skin, disturbed by a draft from the corridor--it's almost too much to bear. He wishes Coulson was wearing one of his silk ties.

Coulson catches his hand between both of his. Warm and dry, callused from pushing a pen and firing a gun. "Clint, the med team needs room to work. I'll be just outside where you can see me. Is that okay?"
It's too hard to focus on formulating an answer, with everything going on around him. Another medic has pushed into the room, five fucking people in this broom closet of a cell. Clint can feel the rhythm of his breathing go off-kilter.

"Sir," one of the techs says, "I need you to move aside."

Coulson fixes him with a look. "I need you to back off until Agent Barton says it's okay."

That sharp order, so very Coulson, puts Clint more at ease. "Yeah. I'm okay."

Coulson nods, then tells the medic, "Agent Barton's hearing is compromised. Make sure he can read your lips when you speak to him." He catches Clint's eye and repeats, "I'm right outside," then joins Berit in the hallway.

The medics are careful to do as Coulson said as they begin to check him over, but Clint has trouble focusing on their questions. Before they can do even the most basic check of his vital signs, they have to peel down the top half of the jumpsuit he's worn through this whole shit show. Their hands are gentle and careful, but the moment the air hits his skin, Clint begins shaking violently.

Though they check him over as quickly and minimally as they can, Clint can't control the tremors, and he whimpers "Fuck!" as the blood pressure cuff inflates to a painful compression. Once the medic removes the cuff, Coulson steps into the room with a blanket and a few terse words to the medic that Clint can't read. He has that wrong look on his face again, but he kneels by Clint as the medic pulls the blanket around him.

"They're taking you to the infirmary now. I have to finish up here, but I'll meet you there as soon as I can. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

The wrong look doesn't go away, but Coulson does. Clint whispers to the medic who's packing away his gear, "Does Coulson seem different to you?"

The medic looks at Clint for a moment. "Nope. Bite-mark patterns on my ass match the old ones. C'mon, let's get you up. Gurney's just in the hall. We couldn't fit it in here."

Clint doesn't stop shaking until he's strapped down on the gurney, the blanket tucked tightly around him.

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"Barton, what's your status? Talk to me."

The words jolt Clint awake. "Sir." he responds, but it's not Coulson who comes to his side but Natasha.

"Fuck," he mutters.

"Nice to see you, too," she says. "Are you all right? What do you need?"

"I'm okay, I guess. Auditory hallucination." He looks around. There's not much to see. A space even smaller than the white cell. Curtains with sage green and light purple stripes surrounding his bed, sheets in the same shade of green. "Where am I?"

"SHIELD infirmary."
Frowning, he tucks his right hand beneath his hip, absently tugging at it as he had in the white room. "Doesn't look like it."

"I redecorated. Coulson's orders." She holds up a heavy-duty stapler. "This was the only way I could cover the white curtains, but I was not to be defeated."

Tasha tosses the stapler back into a Bed, Bath & Beyond bag. "Is there something I can get you? Something to eat or drink?"

The question is way more than he can process, but Tasha catches on pretty quick. She grabs a plastic pitcher from his bedside table and fills its matching cup with ice water, then hands it to him. Clint has to take it in both hands to be sure he's got a secure grip on it. She perches on the edge of his bed, facing him.

Clint lifts the water to his lips, takes a drink. It's so fucking cold. He nearly drops the cup, but Tasha's hands close around his, easing the cup away and setting it aside. "Are you okay?"

The violent shivers overtake him again, answering her question. She draws him into her arms, and he can feel words vibrating through her chest, her breath rustling the hairs at the nape of his neck. "Can't hear you," he whispers, "But it feels nice." So she keeps her arms around him, murmuring into his hair.

When he finally manages to formulate a coherent question, he pulls back a little. "Where's Coulson?"

"Debrief with Fury. He'll be here as soon as he's done."

"Something's wrong with him."

"Not that I know of."

"There is." The urgency of making her understand is washed away in a wave of exhaustion, and he releases her, sinking back onto the bed. "Find out."

When he surfaces again, he finds Coulson in the chair beside his bed, magazine open on his lap. He's still wearing his field uniform, but his face is relaxed in sleep. The tension that has kept Clint's muscles tight lessens fractionally at the sight.

Not wanting to wake him, Clint reaches for the water cup that's still sitting where Tasha placed it. The movement alone--and possibly the whisper of the sheets--brings him to full alertness. Clint sinks back against the pillows, wanting his full attention on his handler.

"Hey," says Coulson, with the smile Clint has seen any number of times over the years, both reassuring and relieved. "How are you doing?"

"Dunno, really."

"Can I get you anything? Are you hungry?"

"I guess."

Coulson gently curls a hand around Clint's forearm for a moment, then rises. "Just so you know, I've already put in an expedited order for your new receivers. You'll have your ears back soon."

Clint nods. Coulson returns a moment later with a container of chocolate pudding and a spoon.
"This was the best I could do at 02:00." He peels off the foil lid and hands the cup and spoon over to Clint.

The first bite is creamy and intense and fucking amazing. "Oh God," he blurts, closing his eyes. After the first few tastes, he dips two fingertips into the cup to feel the cool creaminess on his skin before he licks it off. When his tongue encounters the archer's calluses on his fingers, he explores them. He finds Coulson watching him, a smile on his face that he can't describe as anything but fond. It reminds him that this behavior isn't exactly normal. As Clint lowers his hand it brushes against the stubble on his chin, and he passes it over his jaw. "Three days?"

"Four," says Coulson. The smile begins to fade, but with an effort he pastes it up again. It reminds Clint of posting a circus herald that wants to curl in on itself, slapping it up with another swipe of the wheat paste brush. "I'm sorry we didn't get you out of there sooner. We lost your signal."

"I figured."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"This a debrief?"

Coulson shakes his head. "I'm off the clock. Someone will be doing that, but not me. I told Fury we're together."

Clint tucks his hand, tugs. "How'd that go?"

Coulson twitches a smile. "Let's just say my ass has been chewed to a very fine tartare."

"Lot of that going around. So he's pulling you as my handler?" He shouldn't have mixed feelings about this, but he finds a whisper of relief that runs beneath the reluctance to have such a fundamental of his life changed.

"We tabled that discussion until you've recovered."

Right. No sense worrying about that until they know whether or not he's irrevocably broken. He tugs at his hand, still tucked beneath his hip.

"Natasha said you were worried about me," Coulson says. "I'm fine. Not even a scratch."

"She told you that?"

"Yes." His brow furrows subtly. It's definitely a Coulson expression. "Don't worry. I'm fine."

"Nat said it was your idea to redecorate in here."

This smile's his self-effacing model. "I figured you might be done with the all-white color scheme for a while."

"Yeah. I kept waking up thinking I was in medical. When I could think at all."

That wrong look happens again before Coulson manages to suppress it. He reaches out and takes one of Clint's hands in both of his. "You kept yourself together amazingly well, Clint."

"That's the one I was licking," he points out.

"What?"
"My hand."

The light dawns, and Coulson chuckles. "Don't worry, I'll be making further contact with your saliva later on. Why don't you try to rest for a while. I'll be right here when you wake up."

He's about to protest when another wave of exhaustion buffets him. It's a lot, following the thread of a conversation, watching Coulson for signs. He wishes Nat were here to watch Coulson watch over him, but he supposes it will be okay.

"You go home and rest," Clint says, half pulled under already. "You look like shit."

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Coulson's still there when he wakes, face planted in the mattress at Clint's side, a hand resting on Clint's upper arm. Feeling a presence at his other side, he turns to find Tasha perched at his hip.

Smiling down at him, she puts a gentle hand on his chest. "Coulson." She says it forcefully enough that Clint feels it through the mattress. There's a small disturbance at Clint's side as Coulson lifts his head, blinking at her. "You kept your promise to Clint. Now go the fuck home and get some sleep."

Clint strongly suspects this is the continuation of an argument that started while he was asleep. As always, he knows whose side it's smart to take. "What she said."

"Oh right," Coulson says. "Gang up on me." He pushes to his feet. "I'll be back after I've slept."

"And showered," Nat adds.

Coulson narrows his eyes. "That was harsh."

"I sugar-coat for no man," she says, and beams Coulson an angelic smile.

Clint used to be able to keep up with this kind of banter. Other people had to work to keep up with him. Now the attempt to follow the conversation leaves him feeling as exhausted as Coulson looks. Still, he pushes past it once Coulson leaves the room. "What the fuck, Nat? You told Coulson?"

"Told him what?"

"That I thought there was something wrong."

"Sure, I let him know you were worried about him. I didn't think it would be a problem."

"Yeah, it's a problem."

Before he can go on, Natasha says, "Volume" and indicates with a gesture to lower his voice. He's grateful, which annoys the shit out of him.

He drops his voice to a near-whisper. "He worries me, Nat, which is a whole different thing."

Just then a nurse bustles in to check his vitals and inform him of his schedule for debriefing, med and psych evals, and--thank fuck--a shower first of all.

Once the interruption is over, Nat says, "What worries you about Coulson?"

"That's just it. I'm not sure that's really him."
"Wait, what?"

"What I said. I don't think that's Coulson." He tucks his hand, tugs.

Resuming the seat she'd been chased off of by the nurse, she considers him, her expression serious. "Walk me through it."

"Well, his face, for one thing. There's this expression he gets that I've never seen on Phil Coulson." Clint tries to approximate the downward curve of Coulson's mouth. "I keep catching him with that look on his face. And his hands were shaking when he got to me in that cell, Nat."

"He was out of his mind for four days looking for you. And when he saw what they'd done--"

"The real Coulson doesn't show that shit. He does not lose his cool like that."

"He's human, Clint. No matter what the junior agents think." She looks like she wants to say more, but purses her lips.

Clint considers this for a long moment. "I think that's what's bothering me. What if this 'Coulson' isn't human at all. That's what made it clear to me--it's overselling the human bit."

"Clint." Tasha takes both his hands in her own. "The things that were done to you--they used similar tactics on me in the Red Room. They want to take you from yourself, because then you'll be theirs. They want to take Phil Coulson away from you, because he will fight for you. Don't let them have him. Fight for him."

Tasha's eyes glitter with such fierceness he can barely look into them, but he forces himself. "You're certain about him."

"Certain as death." She strokes her thumbs over the backs of his hands, a sensation so intense it makes him shiver. "You trust me, or you wouldn't have told me this. Know that I trust Coulson. It's true, he's been more upset than I've ever seen him, but it's him. Promise you'll remember that, Clint. And that you'll call me if you start to forget." Her grip on his hands tighten. "Promise."

Another nurse comes in then, a burly tattooed dude named Hector. He's Clint's favorite in the SHIELD infirmary, a hardass with a totally soft center. He places himself in optimal lip-reading range and says, "Time to haul your fragrant ass to the shower. You up for a walk?"

"Sure," Clint says, but Natasha will not let go of his hands. She's got an amazingly strong grip for her size.

"Promise."

"I will. I promise."

Tasha nods. "I'll see you when you get back here."

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Complete meltdown in the shower--so that happened.

After the worst of it passes Hector comes in and hauls him up off the tile, draping him in a towel. "Good. That's out of your system before you have to talk to Fury. It's all sunshine and Little Debbie Cakes from here on out."

Clint can't suppress a weak grin. With Hector it's always sunshine and Little Debbie Cakes after
some heinous procedure--lumbar puncture, root canal, whatever.

"Make it the fake Ding Dongs kind," Clint says.

He won't have to show his ass to Fury, either, since Hector hands him a set of scrubs to change into. That's a relief.

Clint gets through the med evaluation with only two bouts of the shakes, and the debrief with Fury, Sitwell and Coulson with only one. Could be worse. They decide the psych eval can wait until tomorrow, so Hector takes him back to his room, Coulson at their side.

Phil, Clint tells himself. He was Phil before all this shit happened.

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Clint never thought he'd see the day when he was thrilled to head toward an infirmary bed, but he's pretty much flattened right now. He has no actual sense of how much time has passed, but it seems like the better part of a day. So when he finds Natasha reading by his bedside, he blurts, "Shit, Tasha, have you been here the whole time?"

She shakes her head, her glossy red hair and her lips the most vivid thing Clint has ever seen. "Your nurse called me when you went in to meet Fury, so I headed back then." A stray curl sticks against her lipstick, and she lifts a hand to free it. "I stopped on the way back and got you something to eat."

That perks him up some. "Did you go to Fuck Yeah, Grilled Cheese?" Which isn't the restaurant's official name, but it's the only name Clint ever calls it.

"I was afraid the fat overload might not sit well on your stomach," she says. "I stopped by Ernie's and got your favorites." As he settles onto the bed and Nat takes two containers from a brown paper bag, the smell of warm food reaches him.

Clint's not so sure he likes it. "What is it?"

"Tomato soup and the half chicken club." She opens the containers and hands him a disposable soup spoon.

She's right, they're comfort go-tos if he's not going for Fuck Yeah or a cheeseburger. The tomato soup at Ernie's is pretty mellow, without a lot of spices or weird pieces floating around. Leaning in, Clint sniffs. "Did they get a new cook?"

"Not that I know."

Clint frowns at the white plastic spoon, but dips it into the soup. Despite his uncertainty he takes a full spoonful into his mouth, but everything in him rebels the second he does so. He spits it back into the styrene bowl, sending a spray of orange-red onto the tabletop and his hand. "Jesus, I can't, I can't." He tucks, tugs.

Phil rises from the seat he'd taken. "Too hot?"

"No. Just too. Too much. I'm sorry, Nat. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter, it's okay." She hands him a napkin, then puts the lid back on the container and sets it back in the bag. "Try the sandwich."
Clint lifts the top piece of bread and peers at the insides. After a moment, he picks off the lettuce, tomato and bacon, then wipes the mayo off with the napkin Natasha handed him. He tries a bite of the marble rye bread, but the taste is too intense. This time, at least, he manages to swallow. Finally he rolls up one of the slices of chicken and tries it, relieved to find he's okay with it. Finishing off the chicken one slice at a time, he finally notices that Phil has missed at least some of this performance. He's not sorry.

"He had a call," Natasha tells him. "How are you doing with what we talked about before?"

"It helped."

She nods her satisfaction. "How did things go with Fury?"

He manages a half grin. "Less terrifying than I expected. He said three of the fuckers who had me were killed, but they captured a couple. He wants to find out their aim. Building their own little assassin army, or just destabilizing the ones they could get their hands on."

"We found another captive," Tasha says. "Did he tell you that?"

"No. Not one of ours?" He hadn't heard anything, not even rumors, of a defection or disappearance. She shakes her head. "We don't know who he's with. Not a merc, or they could just pay him."

Clint smirks. "Unless he's a merc with values."

"Don't laugh. I've met one of those, you know."

"How long did they have him?"

"We don't know." Her expression smooths over into that perfectly bland expression that means she's leaving out a lot. Clint decides in this case he's fine with that. "Longer than you."

She turns her head as Phil comes back into Clint's curtained space.

"How was lunch?"

"Partially successful," Natasha says.

"Sorry," Clint says again.

She shrugs. "It's a process. We'll find what works for you until it all works for you again."

Clint hopes she's not being overly optimistic.

Phil says, "I just had a call from the people working on your receivers. They're finished, so I'm going to pick them up now. I made an appointment for tomorrow with the audiologist."

"Good to hear." Clint offers a smirk as if that horrible pun was intentional. "I'm putting in some rack time anyway."

After gathering up the remains of his sandwich and putting them in the bag with the soup, Natasha settles in with her book at the side of his bed.

"Really?" says Clint.

"Really," she says. "Shut up and sleep."
The next day is pretty much a complete shit show.

After a night of uneasy sleep interrupted by auditory hallucinations, Clint is delivered to his psych eval. The entire thing makes him feel off-balance, and as he leaves he's sure he told them things he never should have and kept to himself things he should have revealed. He can't help wondering if he's screwed the pooch on his whole career. All the doc will say now is that she's recommending medical leave until he's ready to come back. She advises a lot of rest and patience and compassion for himself. And more appointments, of course.

It's gone on longer than expected, so Phil is waiting as he leaves her office. "I brought some clothes you left at my place," he says. "I'd thought you'd have time to change in your room, but the men's room will have to do."

Up to this point Clint has spent his time on the med floors--even Fury had come down there to a conference room to debrief Clint. But the audiologist is across town, so rumpled scrubs won't cut it. Clint pulls on the jeans and hooded sweatshirt Phil brought, only to find that the jeans are loose on him now, and he's uncomfortably aware of the tags in the jeans and the shirt. As he comes out of the men's room, he can see Phil noticing the new fit of his clothes.

Nothing is easy. The elevator ride down makes his head reel, forcing him to clutch the railing at the back wall of the car. Their arrival on the parking level takes him from a closet-sized space to an under-lit area that feels vast to him. "Jesus," he mutters, making himself move forward before Phil's encouraging touch actually makes its landing on his elbow.

The farther they walk into the garage, the more Clint's anxiety amps up. The spaces between the black SUVs and the personal vehicles all seem like ideal hiding spots for assholes like the ones who'd grabbed him, or the same assholes' associates.

Hearing footsteps behind them, matching their pace, Clint whirls toward the sound before remembering, "Oh yeah, still deaf." Phil catches his arm as he staggers from the sudden movement.

"Clint, what is it?"

"Nothing."

Phil gives him a look, complete with raised eyebrow that Clint would swear he picked up from Natasha.

"I'm fine. Let's just unass this place, all right?"

The change from the dark of the garage to the bright, clear day is like an assault. As Phil noses his car toward the street, there are people flooding toward it on either side, crossing in front of and behind it to continue on their way. Clint finds himself sinking deeper into the leather seat, wishing he had a weapon in his hands. Don't be stupid. They're just people on their way somewhere. He's just as single-minded a New York pedestrian as they are, whether he's headed for a briefing or a burger joint. Once the car's cleared the sidewalk, Clint can relax fractionally, but the ride is still too much sensory overload. The constant stop and go, vehicles flashing by, people, buildings, colors, sunlight flaring on windows and chrome. He tucks his hand, tugs.

By the time they reach the audiologist's office, Clint's bathed in a cold sweat. It's good to see Jenna, whom he hasn't met with since the calibration of his first implants was fine-tuned. But he hates letting her see him this twitchy and freaked out.
"Phil told me you've got an issue at the moment with overwhelming sensory input," she says, "so we're going to take it slow and easy today."

Jesus, he feels like an invalid. "Yeah," he says, "I was classified in the classified, and it turned into a total redacted." It's not like she hasn't figured out that he's some kind of spook--his implant tech is classified, and she's not stupid.

She smiles. "I hate when that happens, don't you?"

"I'm afraid that's classified." The snark is a little salve for his pride, which lasts all of two minutes before she starts working and he breaks another cold sweat. Once she has the implants calibrated the world comes rushing in again, all the sounds that have been silenced for a week. Clint's breath goes all haywire, and being able to hear its fucked-up rhythm somehow makes it harder to get the right rhythm back.

Crouching next to his chair, Phil says, "Breathe, Clint. You're doing great."

He chokes out a strangled laugh at this, knowing it sounds more like a sob.

Phil translates it correctly. "You are. You've gone from hearing nothing for a week to hearing everything. This time your brain will remember how to sort out the sounds much faster."

"What if it's broken?" Clint whispers.

"I don't believe it is."

In Clint's opinion, Phil has absolutely no evidence to support that belief, but he lets it slide without comment. Just follows Phil's instruction to breathe, switching into combat breathing mode. In. Count to four. Hold. Onethousandandone, onethousandandtwo, onethousandandthree, onethousandandfour. Out. Hold. It settles him, helps him focus. Finally he's calm enough to let Jenna finish her work. He leaves with a hug from her and his implants recalibrated to a softer volume than even his first visit. Still, it adds a whole new level of Too Much to the drive back to SHIELD. Clint pulls up the hood of his sweatshirt and folds himself down over his knees as they pull out of the parking garage to the street.

"Oh great," Phil says. "Now I look like I'm chauffeuring Justin Bieber to an arraignment."

"Oh, fuck you, Coulson," he says into his knees, but he's managed a partial grin.

"Best idea I've heard all day," Coulson says, still bantering. "We could stop off at my place."

Clint sits up, raising his hands to limit his peripheral vision as he looks toward Phil. "Could we? Not for--I mean, just for a while, so I can have a breather."

"Absolutely," Phil says without a second's hesitation. He makes a creeping lane change with only token horn blasts from nearby cars, and makes the next right turn. Within five minutes he guides the car to its designated parking spot beneath his building.

Releasing a breath, Clint raises back up to prop his elbows on his knees. He rubs at his face.

Phil reaches over and strokes a gentle hand up and down Clint's back. "How are you doing?"

"I've been better." He sits the rest of the way up. "C'mon, let's get upstairs so I can get my nervous collapse over with."
For a moment it seems like Phil is about to say something, but instead he gets out of the car, but he waits until Clint's out to shut the door. Nice thought but it echoes—as does Clint's own door—in the garage.

Clint resolutely stares at his feet during the elevator ride up, hoping to keep his mind off the claustrophobically small elevator that has never bothered him before. When he steps out on Phil's floor the shakes hit him so hard he just folds and lands on his ass on the hallway carpet.

Phil lowers himself to the floor beside him, putting an arm around his shoulders. "You've been doing great, Clint," he murmurs into Clint's hair. "New York City's a pretty big first step."

He lets his world narrow down to just these things: Phil's breath whispering across his scalp and the warm weight of his arm, the sound of Phil's voice and his own breathing, in combat mode at first, gradually dropping into a more natural rhythm. Sounds. "God, I missed your voice."

Gradually the shakes subside and Phil gives him a hand up. Clint blinks as they enter the apartment, the smell of pine reaching him even before Phil switches on the lights. Brown pine needles carpet the floor at the far corner of the living room. "Oh shit, Christmas."

"It'll keep. What can I do for you now? Are you hungry?"

"I just want to go to bed." Without waiting for a response, Clint heads back to Phil's bedroom. He wraps himself tightly in the comforter and curls up with his back to the door.
Clint's much too keyed-up to sleep; he just wants to shut himself down. Stop taking in sound and color, stop shaking, stop thinking. He's had too much motion, too many people watching him, talking to him, expecting him to talk. He settles his gaze on a patch of pale gold wall, letting his eyes go unfocused and his mind drift. Fucked-up as it is, he welcomes the haze that falls over him. It's familiar and it demands nothing from him.

Phil, on the other hand....

"Clint. Clint, talk to me."

He drags himself back from wherever he'd gone, trying to focus on Phil, but it takes more energy than he has left. Phil has that wrong look on his face again, and Clint feels a stab of fear.

Crouching by the bed, Phil asks, "What's wrong, Clint? Tell me." It's Phil's voice that he's come to love, sandpapery and smooth at the same time. It's him. It sounds like him. Nat says it's him.

Clint works a hand out from under the comforter and brushes his fingers along the corner of Phil's mouth. "I've never seen this look on your face, not ever. Not until you found me in there."

"You've never seen me so scared of losing the one thing that matters most to me." Phil strokes Clint's hair, disturbing clumps that had been matted down by his waking nap, a sensation that makes him shudder.

"It scared me," Clint whispers. He didn't plan to say this, but it tumbles out. "I thought you weren't really you."

Phil's long, controlled exhalation contains more emotion than Clint would have believed a breath could hold. His expression, however, is a familiar one—a smile that somehow blends reassurance and worry. "What convinced you?"

"This," Clint says, tracing a finger over Phil's smile. "And Nat."

The smile turns wry beneath his fingertip. "Kind of you to list me first. Seriously, though, I'm glad you talked to Natasha. I'm amazed you could trust anyone so soon after what you've been through."

"I've known you longer. I should--"

"None of that," Phil says firmly. "What these people do is attack the heart of what you believe and what you know. Don't waste your energy blaming yourself. Use it to heal."

Clint pulls the comforter closer. "So that I can be an analyst?" he asks bitterly.

"Are you giving up after you've come this far?"
The phrasing of Phil's question startles him. Not giving up already. Clint meets Phil's steady gaze, reads the belief there. "No."

"Good." Phil rises to his full height. "So come on into the kitchen and keep me company while I make us potato omelets."

***

Phil, it turns out, has cleared Clint's absence from medical with Fury. Not just for the afternoon, but he's okayed Clint's release, and given Phil the green light to work from home. "I'll have enough paperwork to keep me busy for a few days," he says wryly.

After their meal Phil works on a pile of papers sent by courier while Clint sits beside him on the sofa, wrapped in the comforter. Clint tries to watch a movie, but he can't follow the plot. Next he tries a hockey game, but the constantly moving mass of players after an invisible puck is too hard to keep track of. Clint flips around the dial slowly, taking long moments on each to pick up the thread of what's onscreen.

When he pauses on a televangelist in mid-sermon, Phil looks up. "No. I will deny you almost nothing at the moment, but this is my line in the sand."

"You sure? Sand seems pretty erasable to me."

"Not after I fuse it with my robot eyes."

"That fuck. Fury promised those to me."

"You can't have all the bionic parts, Barton."

Clint keeps playing with the remote, finally landing on a home shopping channel. Phil tolerates the gushing praise about old lady pant suits for longer than Clint would have expected before asking if Clint might like to be read to.

"Requisition forms? No thanks."

Phil huffs a laugh. "We're in agreement there. Actually I was thinking of something entertaining."

Clint waves toward the TV. "Half of even this shit is lost on me right now. But it would be cool listening to your voice. I've always loved it."

There's a pause that goes on long enough to make Clint think maybe he said something wrong. Then Phil says, "I didn't know that." He sounds pleased, almost shy about it.

"I have depths," Clint says with a mock-defensive tone.

Rising, Phil goes to the shelves and comes back with a well-worn book. He settles back next to Clint, who slides closer and tips his head back to listen. The story is James Thurber's version of "The Night Before Christmas" as if written by Ernest Hemingway. Even with his difficulty focusing, Clint has no trouble following the short, declarative sentences and repetitive language. He even snorts a time or two at the humor. The whole thing confirms what he'd expected--that Clint would happily listen for hours to Phil read gibberish.

***

Over the next few days, Clint's appetite returns and accepts greater variety. He settles into a
comfortable rhythm of Phil cooking for him and eating with him, Phil reading to him. The less comfortable parts are Phil trying to coax him to unwrap himself from the comforter and take a short walk, Clint attempting to read anything more challenging than a cereal box, Nat or Jasper dropping by, trying so hard to engage him in the outside world. It's fucking exhausting. The nightmares are in a whole separate category. It's not the white room that dominates the dreams, but the chaos of the city or battles and blood.

He stays wrapped in the comforter pretty much any time he's not in the bathroom. Phil's arguments against using it as a shield against sensory input make sense, but the unease he feels without it is nothing compared to the exponential rise in the nightmares' intensity afterward.

They're still postponing Christmas, due to Clint's apathy toward celebrating so he's a little surprised when Phil comes back from the laundry room with a particular kind of expression that in his limited experience has been a precursor to impulsive gifts.

Phil hands Clint a still-warm towel, which Clint buries his face in for the fresh smell and the warmth against his skin. After a moment he wraps it around his neck and pulls the comforter back up over it. "I know that isn't it."

"What isn't what?"

"You've got this sheepish look. Present-face."

Phil's expression goes a little more sheepish. "No, not a present." He sets the laundry basket on the floor and starts folding towels and stacking them on the coffee table. "I kind of agreed to foster a cat for my neighbor. Tentatively agreed, I should say. You've met Mita."

"Sure, yeah." They've met her in the hallway a few times. She knows they're a couple.

"Mita got accepted into an art colony for a month, so she wants someone to take her cat in so he has company. She's bringing him over in a little while so we can all meet."

Less than half an hour goes by before Mita rings the bell. Her entrance is the craziest shit Clint has ever seen, Mita leading a white short-haired housecat on a leash. After she greets them, she asks, "Okay to let him off?"

"Sure," Clint says, as if this is actually his place.

As Mita crouches beside the cat to unclip the leash, Clint settles himself on the floor. "What's his name?"

"Snowball."

"You're shitting me," Clint blurts, then tacks on, "Sorry."

Mita gives him a lopsided grin. "My sister named him when she was six. He's twelve now, so he's a little too old to learn to answer to something else."

Clint lets the comforter slip a bit to extend his index finger toward the cat, presenting his fingertip at nose-level. "Hey, come check me out."

Mita says, "It takes him a while to warm--" She falls silent as Snowball trundles over to Clint, who remains still as the cat conducts his scent investigation. After he thoroughly sniffs the offered finger, Snowball rubs his cheek against the side of Clint's hand.
"Yeah, buddy. I'm your property now." He turns his hand and starts scritching behind the cat's ears, his cheeks, under his chin.

"I have never seen him make friends so fast," Mita says. "You must have a way with cats."

He smiles. "I grew up with a couple. So what's the deal with the leash?"

"He loves going for walks. Mostly in the courtyard, but sometimes we go around the block."

Clint gives Phil the side-eye, the look that means "You are one devious motherfucker," and the sheepish expression steals back over Phil's face. This bit of silent communication is disrupted by Snowball--god, Clint really has to do something about that--who rams his head into Clint's now-unoccupied hand, and Clint returns his attention to his clear duty as Mita fills them in on Snowball's routines and preferences. Clint finds himself focusing on the softness of the cat's fur, the warmth he radiates, seemingly generated by a perpetually idling motor. Snowball's inspection and marking of Clint continues throughout the briefing, with pauses to accept petting. Mita says Snowball's a lap cat once he determines he likes someone, which is pretty much a given at this stage.

When the flow of All Things Snowball intel ceases, Phil asks, "Are you up for this, Clint?"

"This is up to me?"

"You and Snowball, so I'd say now it's just you."

Clint looks down at the blissed-out cat beneath his fingers. "I guess I'm good too." Privately he adds, but that name has got to go.

After some chat about the art colony and the project Mita's working on there, she gathers up her cat and his leash and departs, saying she'll bring him and all his stuff the next afternoon.

Once they're gone, Clint asks, "Kind of waiting until the last minute, isn't she?"

"Her usual arrangement fell through suddenly," Phil says. "She mentioned it while we were doing our laundry, and I thought it could work out."

He nods. "I like him."

"The feeling's definitely mutual. Is this a secret superpower of yours, or does pointing at a cat have some magical effect?"

Clint huffs a laugh. "I wasn't pointing, just offering a finger. Cats investigate everything by scent. So I let him be the one to approach, and offer him a fingertip because it looks kind of like a cat nose, which is what he'd approach with another cat."

"I'll try that with him tomorrow."

Getting to his feet, Clint pulls the comforter back around him. "I know it's early, but I'm wiped out. I'm going to head to bed." Phil's looking at him curiously. "What?"

"That's the first time you've said anything about the time when going to rest, that's all. It's usually early."

"Well, I was thinking-- Maybe you'd want to come back with me for a while? Put an arm around me?"

Phil's smile at this makes Clint wonder how he ever could have doubted that this is truly him. "I'd
Still wrapped in the comforter, it takes Clint a while to relax into Phil's embrace, even longer into sleep. When he does, he dreams it's Bathsheba the lion next to him, warm as a furnace and rumbling softly in contentment.

***

Though Clint usually doesn't get up when Phil does, this morning he rises at the same time and has coffee with him. Well, for a certain value of coffee. He's worked his way from plain tea to weak coffee with a lot of milk. "I've been drinking this shit black since I was eight," he says from the couch, watching as Phil cat-proofs the living room. There's not much to do--Snowball's front claws are gone too, and Phil doesn't have much sitting around the shelves and tables except books and folders. "Actually, more paint thinner than coffee." He shakes his head. "Man, if my brother could see--"

Phil stops what he's doing, no doubt alerted by the gut-punched look on Clint's face. "You never talk about your brother," he says softly.

"There's nothing to talk about," Clint snaps. He pauses, trying to soften his own tone. "I try not to think about him. But all this--" He waves a hand in the air, meant to somehow indicate his abduction and imprisonment, and everything that did to fuck up his head. "I spent a lot of time thinking about the circus. Concentrating on the routines, trying to anchor myself. But that time included dark shit too, so there was Barney--no, that's not right. Not Barney, but the shadow of him. Like I might turn a corner on the lot and run into him."

"You guarded yourself well, even in that place," Phil says with a note of admiration.

"Didn't seem that way."

"It does to me. Tell me how you did that." Phil settles on the sofa, slanting himself toward Clint. "Using your circus background to help ground you."

"I remembered that analyst who talked to us in training about going through this shit, and how he built a summer house. In his head. So I went with the closest thing I had. We tore down the whole lot and set it up again every few days. I went through every detail, then did a mental tour of the grounds. Stopped by to visit an old friend." For some reason this admission makes him feel faintly ridiculous. "Not an imaginary friend. An imaginary visit to a real person."

"Would you tell me about them?"

"I guess. Her name's Irene. She was the fat lady. She took time to talk to me when--other people had stopped bothering. I used to get books for her in second-hand stores, and we swapped them back and forth. She'd go apeshit over your bookshelves. She always had to get rid of old ones to make room for the new."

"I think I'd like her very much."

"She'd like you."

"What was the visit like?"

Clint shrugs, embarrassed again. "Our usual. I'd come in and put water on, and she'd make tea. If I'd cut myself on a tent stake, she'd patch it up. Then we got down to the book talk." He laughs. "I had to make up both sides of the conversation. Anyway," he rushes on, "that kicked up some of the
less fun part of those days."

"Anytime you want to talk about those parts, or your brother, I'm here."

"That day's probably coming." Clint makes a face. "But not right now." He slides toward Phil, who opens his arms to take him in, and they spend a long while there, breathing in the quiet of the morning.

***

The load-in for Snowball nearly rivals Carson's Carnival. His baggage includes a bed, a litter box, a couple of large bins of litter, another bin of special dry food, a basket of toys, a tall bucket of toys on sticks, a jar of organic catnip and a 3-story climber.

As Phil's bland smile reflects increasing (to Clint's practiced eye) dismay, Clint finds himself starting to laugh. The first honk, so spontaneous that Clint forgets to shape it into a socially acceptable sound, startles Phil, which completely destroys Clint's composure. Once Phil figures out what's going on, he starts laughing too. It's an echo of their first visit to the audiologist, except now Clint leans into Phil as they both struggle to regain control, slinging his arm over Phil's neck. When he finally draws back with a quick kiss to Phil's cheek his face--or maybe it's Phil's--is wet and salty.

When Mita and her girlfriend make their last trip in with the center-ring attraction on his leash, Mita asks, "Are you guys okay?"

"Just a little punchy," Phil says as smoothly as he can.

Mita's running late for the airport, so she departs after a mere dozen reminders and the presentation of a binder full of instructions and phone numbers.

When the whirlwind has subsided and Snowball is starting to explore the apartment, the sight of Phil's bemused expression makes Clint laugh again. Hooking an arm through Phil's, he says, "Fuck, babe, this is gonna be awesome."

***

Exploration gets done, humans are sniffed, overtures are made. A long nap ensues. The cat also requires a nap, aligned on the back of the sofa just above Clint. Phil spends the afternoon rattling around the kitchen. Whatever he's up to in there, it seems to be a project. As he drifts in and out of sleep, Clint hears the ongoing sounds of cutting board, stovetop, oven door and sink (because Phil, inevitably, is a wash-as-you-go cook). Though the idea crosses his mind now and then to get up and see what's up, he keeps opening his eyes to the example of the perfect state of being, tucked up into a fluffy white ball of zen.

Finally Clint surfaces again, this time to the smell of food--foods, plural--and the sound of Phil washing the dishes and quite possibly humming. Flipping back the comforter, Clint wanders into the kitchen, where every burner is covered with a pan or pot. The counter has a pie sitting on a rack to cool.

"Holy shit, what happened in here?"

Phil turns, lighting up as he takes in Clint. "I hope you don't mind me making a unilateral decision, but it just seemed like a good day for Christmas."

"Yeah, I think you're right." Clint's not even sure what day it actually is, but he doesn't want to
Time he's lost isn't important. Right now is. "I still don't have a present for you. Unless there was a duty-free bag with my stuff wherever. That would've been for you."

"Right now I have the best present I've had in my entire life."

"I never even knew you wanted a cat."

"Very funny," Phil says drily. He starts to reach a hand toward Clint, then hesitates. Clint closes the distance between them, offering up a kiss. "Second-best present," Phil murmurs against his skin.

* 

In honor of the occasion, Clint takes a brief shower and gets dressed--nothing spectacular, just clean sweats. The dinner is the most kickass Christmas meal Clint has ever had: warm spinach salad, roast chicken with some kind of seasoning he's never tasted before, mashed potatoes with fucking amazing gravy, carrots. Cherry pie and whipped cream that didn't squirt out of a can. As they settle in the living room with their pie and coffee, the cat shakes off his nap and strolls toward them, tail upright and quivering.

Pausing with a forkful midway to his mouth, Phil asks, "Is he angry about something?"

"Nope. He's copacetic. Aren't you, No-Balls?" Clint reaches down to scritch his chin.

"Did you just call our foster cat No-Balls?"

"A man's gotta live with himself, Phil. Anyway, the quiver-tail is cat speak for, 'Fuck yeah! Great to see you!' On the other hand, if they flop over and show their belly, it's pretty much, 'Heya.'" Clint demonstrates a lazy little wave. "'Don't get up.' Taking that as an invitation to rub their belly is usually a pretty good way to test your clotting factor."

"That's completely counter-intuitive." Phil sounds slightly affronted.

"Yeah, that's cats. Their motto is, 'You want easy? Go fuck yourself.'"

"I have absolutely zero experience with that worldview," Phil says, completely deadpan.


***

Thanks to his theory of life as a roller coaster, Clint is expecting the downward turn that comes after their Christmas celebration. Not that it's a sharp plunge, but it's a downward ride with a few rough stretches until the next upswing.

There's the morning stroll he and Phil take with the cat. It's Clint's first trip outside Phil's apartment since his panic attack in the hallway. The stress of this outing includes the elevator ride, while adding in the factor of new people, who all have to come check out No-Balls. Clint doesn't come completely unglued this time, but it takes a while to regain his equilibrium.

Two days later it's his session with the shrink. Phil also arranges for an official vehicle with dark tinted windows and armored plating, both of which effectively dampen the sensory overload. Clint is equal parts grateful, humiliated and resentful, so he keeps his mouth shut on the ride over.

He endures his first session raking over some of the worst days of his life with a fine-tooth comb
like a pair of archaeologists. Every shard they find she has to pick up and examine from every fucking angle. At the end of their appointment, the therapist sends him to the psychiatrist for a scrip for anxiety drugs, which he promptly crumples into a ball and stuffs into his pocket the second the door closes behind him. He texts Phil, who's in his office after meeting with Fury.

"Want me to come down and meet you?" Phil texts.

Though he feels like one giant raw nerve at this point, Clint responds, "That's OK. I'll come up."

He spends the entire elevator ride silently telling himself that he is a stupid asshole, possibly the stupidest asshole in an organization full of stupid swinging dick assholes, because that's worlds better than having a screaming panic attack in an elevator car full of 17 people (capacity: 16 max.) because someone had to wedge his lazy ass in rather than take two flights of stairs. When the occupants rearrange themselves and an agent spots him and says, "Hey, Barton, how are you doing?" he says, "I dunno, man. I think I had some bad shrimp at lunch, and it's comin'--" Suddenly thirteen people have sudden urgent business on the next floor.

Sitwell, one of the three brave Americans who stay, grins at Clint. "Nice move."

"Don't be so sure I won't actually puke."

"Nah, you're doing fine." He exits the elevator with Clint when it reaches Phil's floor.

It's bullshit, but it's the sort of bullshit Clint wants to believe right now, so he nods and heads toward Phil's office. Brent, Phil's assistant, scurries down the hall toward him, calling out, "Agent Barton!" God, does he not want to deal with gate-keeping right now; he just wants to park himself in a peaceful corner of Phil's office before he starts shaking.

"I was just getting this for you," Brent says, holding out a can of soda. "Agent Coulson said you were on your way."

Clint blinks. "Thanks." It's his favorite from the break room soda machine, which Phil sometimes asks Brent to fetch if Clint is nursing an injury in his office. "Exactly what I need right now."

He heads inside, settling himself quietly as Phil finishes a phone conversation. After a moment of fumbling with the pull tab, he gives up and sets it on the floor, then lets himself fall apart. After a few moments, he realizes Phil is sitting next to him. Drawing in a long, shaky breath, Clint sits up straight. Phil hands him the opened soda can and he takes a grateful pull.

"Thanks. Jesus."

"Rough session?"

"Better than the goddamn elevator ride from there to here. Next time it's the air ducts. Oh yeah--awesome news. They want to see me twice a week."

"We'll find a way to get through it."

"This isn't a 'we' thing, Phil," he snaps. "I'm the one who has to get through it. The glib shit about how we'll manage really isn't helping." Clint rubs a hand over his face. "Fuck, Phil. I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

"It's okay. You're dealing with a lot. It would have been less presumptuous to say I'll help you get through this in any way I can."
"You've helped a lot already. I'm not doing a great job appreciating that because it pisses me off that I need it so much. I fucking hate feeling helpless."

"What do you need right now?"

"I just want to go home. Your place, I mean." Ideally, to grab the comforter and roll himself into a human-and-cat burrito, but he leaves that part unsaid.

"Ready when you are," Phil says, rising to toss a pile of folders into his briefcase and snap it closed.

And so it goes. He makes the trek to SHIELD twice a week, comes home and falls apart, but each time it's a little less bad, requiring less recovery time. In between he manages a few walks with No-Balls out in the courtyard and even endures conversing with building residents. But he avoids the elevator when he can and trains the cat to ride on his shoulder when he takes the stairs.

***

Clint wakes to a loud rumble just behind his head, his face pressed into a solid but yielding source of warmth. "What?" he mutters stupidly. Hoisting himself up on an elbow, he sees he'd had his face mashed into Phil's thigh, and the vigorous thwack of a tail across his cheek explains the source of the sound.

"Morning, sleepyhead. Bring you some coffee?" Phil starts to peel the covers back, but Clint puts an arm across his legs.

"Not yet. Hang out for a while."

Phil immediately rearranges the covers. "Seems like you slept pretty well."

"Yeah. Was I wearing this fur hat all night?"

"Only since about 6 a.m. It's very becoming."

"What have you been doing all this time?"

"Paperwork. Reading the news. Taking creeper pictures with my StarkPad." He picks up the tablet and skates his fingers across the screen until he comes to a shot of the three of them in bed: Coulson with the Sunday paper and coffee, Clint asleep beside him with No-Balls curled over his head, paw stretched out to touch Phil.

"That's fucking adorable," Clint says.

"I thought you'd tell me to delete it."

"Don't you dare." He settles his hand over Phil's, two fingers tapping the side of the tablet. "I haven't seen one of these."

"It's not on the market yet. Stark gave me this one to beta-test."

"What, you guys are BFFs now?"

Phil laughs. "I gave him some feedback on some other tech. I think he found it valuable."

"Was it the 12-page report or the 17 appendices?"
Phil's mouth quirks up. "You two assholes really need to meet. You'd hit it off, I'm sure." Setting the pad aside, he takes Clint's hand in his, feathering his thumb over the planes and ridges. He pauses for just a heartbeat, a slight frown passing over his face as he encounters smoother skin than he's used to.

"I'm losing them," Clint says, and he doesn't have to say what he means. "I have to get back to the range."

"We both should."

"Tuesday. I'll go in early and put in a couple of hours before my session."

"I'll put us on the schedule."

Clint shifts in bed, throwing a leg over Phil's. "Put this on the schedule, too, while you're at it."

"Mm." Phil slides down from his propped-up position, disregarding No-Balls' yowl of protest. "Does now look good for you?"

"Now? I think I could work you in."
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Warning for events of "The Avengers" and aftermath.

It's beginning to snow as Clint and No-Balls make their final circuit of the courtyard. The cat doesn't actually mind falling snow, or even walking through slush, especially since Clint started following his paw-rinse with a towel that's been warming in a laundry-room dryer while they've been walking.

When he finishes drying No-Balls' feet, Clint arranges the towel on his shoulder and hoists the cat on top of it, then makes the climb up eight flights of stairs to Phil's apartment. He lets himself in to find Phil and Mita in the living room, each with a glass of wine.

Fuck. It wasn't like he didn't know this day was coming, but he'd put off every conversation about it that Phil had tried to start.

"Oh," he says stupidly. His heart plummets somewhere near the sub-basement as Mita gets up and heads for them. "Hey, Mita."

"Snowball," she says, lifting him off Clint's shoulder. "Hey baby, are you happy to see me?"

Mita doesn't look that happy, he can't help noticing. In fact, her eyes are red-rimmed. As she buries her face in the cat's fur, Clint looks toward Phil, eyebrows raised questioningly.

Before Phil can do more than make a helpless "where do I start?" gesture, Mita sniffles and raises her head. "Sorry. I was just telling Phil that Ginger and I decided to get married. Ginger, Clint recalls, is the girlfriend who helped with the load-in. "But she's got horrible allergies and even if she didn't, her landlord is a dick, pardon my French. I can't bring Snowball with me. Phil's sent me some pictures while I was away, and it looks like--" She buries her face in No-Balls' fur again before she can go on. "Maybe you guys would want him?"

"Fuck yeah," Clint says fervently. Belatedly, he looks over at Phil. "I mean--"

"That's definitely two fuck-yeahs," Phil says. "I just wanted to make sure you got a chance to answer without feeling pressured."

"What about travel?" Mita asks. "I know you travel a lot for work, Phil. What about you, Clint?"

Before Clint can even stumble over the unknown answer to that one, Phil says, "Brent volunteered the moment I said we were fostering a cat." To Mita he clarifies, "My assistant."

"Brent is freakishly reliable," Clint adds.

Mita walks them through everything they need to know about Snowball, disregarding the fact that she's given them this entire rundown before, plus left them a binder with color-coded divider tabs covering every possible contingency. But hell, Clint knows he'd be an even worse mess if he were giving up a cat he'd had for over a decade, so he's not going to stop her, and neither, apparently, is Phil. When she winds down, there are teary hugs between the humans and a long goodbye between
Mita and Snowball that Clint has to walk out on.

Phil finds him in the bedroom after she's gone, managing to catch him wiping his eyes.

"Thank fuck, Phil," he says. "Because that was one mental health crisis I was really dreading."

"So was I. Mine, I mean, not yours." He settles onto the bed next to Clint, wrapping an arm around him.

Clint burrows into the contact. "Perfect how it all worked out. If I was paranoid I'd worry we had a sleeper cat infiltrating the household and sending all kinds of intel to his handlers."

"I swept the apartment for bugs during that epic nap of yours the day he moved in. And had a background check run on Mita and Ginger. They're all clean. No-Balls is no more a sleeper than any other cat." Someone listening might read it as banter, but Clint knows Phil is completely serious. He never jokes about shit like this.

"How could I forget?"

"Forget what?"

"You are paranoid."

Clint feels more than hears Phil's low laughter. "That's why they pay me the big bucks."

No-Balls stalks into the bedroom and gives them the stink-eye for abandoning him to his fancy food, carpeted jungle gym and metric shit-ton of toys.

Clint pats the mattress by his leg. "C'mon then, ya fuckin' pasha. Get your hairy ass up here." No-Balls bounds onto the bed, burrowing between them. Clint flips up the comforter, setting about arranging a cat-and-two-human burrito.

***

Two seconds before his watch alarm goes off, Clint lowers his bow and begins dismantling it. At the first chirp of his watch, he smiles. He's been working on unfucking his sense of time. While it's true that he can lose himself and a large stretch of time on the range, the steady rhythm of pull and release can provide a framework if he chooses to pay attention.

As he turns from pulling arrows from the target, an unmistakable voice rings out from the shadows. "Nice pattern, Barton."

Nodding his thanks, he says, "If I was still a junior agent, I'd have pissed myself just now."

Fury chuckles. "Even then I couldn't have made you piss yourself on my best day."

Clint inspects each arrow before he puts it away, because that's his routine and sometimes routine is what gets him through a day. "Maybe on my worst."

"Your worst is in the rear view mirror and getting smaller every day," Fury says. "Doesn't take two eyes to see that."

Clint looks up at that, taking in Fury's absolute certainty, and for once he can think of absolutely nothing to say.

"You took a hard knock, son," Fury goes on. "But you're one hell of a fighter."
Praise from Fury. Surely this is a sign that the world is coming to an end. "Explains why I feel punch-drunk most of the time," he says.

"Many have done worse."

"I had good training. How about the other guy you pulled out of there? How's he doing?" Clint has heard nothing about him or the assholes who kept them both captive. Probably top secret, need-to-know shit, and Clint hasn't exactly been operating at the top of his clearance level.

"Not well, from all reports."

It's too easy to imagine the poor bastard's state of mind—or lack of any. The calm and focus that had settled over Clint as he'd let arrow after arrow fly deserts him as he remembers the absolute blankness of his own cell.

"I'd like to talk to you about an assignment," Fury says, dragging Clint out of his thoughts. "If you're thinking you might be ready, or near it."

This startles him. He knows he's better than he was, but it's a surprise that Fury thinks the prospect is even on the horizon. "What do you have in mind?"

"We have an artifact that Howard Stark discovered before his death. We've recently come to have some ideas about what it might be, and Dr. Erik Selvig has signed on to work with it. It's in a secure SHIELD facility, but we'd like to have eyes on what's going on."

Clint scowls. "Sure you don't want to just park me behind a desk and have me lip-reading surveillance tapes?"

"Oh, I'm not planning to keep our hawk grounded forever. But I could use you there until you're ready to go back into the field. You have some time to think about it. They're still setting up the lab and the specialized equipment Selvig needs."

'I'll do that," Clint says. He finishes packing up his gear. "With all due respect, sir, I'm running late for an appointment. Mandatory."

Fury nods. "Don't let me keep you then. But think on it."

Clint hits the vents and makes it to the shrink's office only a couple of minutes late. He sits in the chair across from her, slightly disheveled. Amelia's gaze, as always, is warm yet assessing.

"How are you doing today, Clint?"

"I think I'm having a complete break with reality."

Her brows shoot up. "Tell me what's going on."

"I just hallucinated Nick Fury calling me 'son.'"

Her whole-hearted laughter prompts his own, and then they get down to the business of processing Fury's compliments and his suggestion.

***

The detail in the lab is pretty much what Clint expected, which is to say about as exciting as watching Phil's screensaver. That is, until the glowy blue cube Selvig's been studying decides it's Kevin Bacon in Footloose and starts to boogie.
It would be almost hilarious watching the lab coats go into a tizzy, if not for, well, alien artifact throwing off radiation. He came down from his perch to get Selvig's report on the situation early on, but he had no answers.

"Did you try turning it off and turning it on again?" Clint joked.

Selvig gave him the stink-eye, and the lady lab coat working with him muttered, "Asshole."

Clint liked that Lewis girl from the previous New Mexico gig a whole lot better. He returned to his roost then, smirking in triumph when Selvig said, "Let's try shutting her down."

It's a lot less funny when the goddamn thing (no way Clint's going to call it "she") turns itself back on. Clint hits the comm and tells Sitwell what's going on. Jasper and Phil are on the next helo out of SHIELD, and by the end of the hour the whole facility's on alert for a potential evacuation, with some non-essential personnel getting the go-ahead to leave.

"Selvig's pretty pissed off," Clint tells Phil, who has joined him on the catwalk.

"As you've been known to say a time or two, zero fucks now being given. You made the right call."

"I've been bored out of my fucking mind, but this isn't exactly the change I was hoping for."

"How's your focus?"

"It's good. I haven't really needed it until now, but I've been playing little sniper games up here to keep it sharp. This hasn't been the greatest for my sense of time, because there's a whole fuck-ton of nothing going on. Or was, until tonight."

"Is that creating any other problems for you?" 

"What, kicking up any white room weirdness? All I have to do is touch something, or focus on what I can hear or smell or feel, I can ground myself."

"Good," Phil says. He shifts his focus back to the controlled chaos on the lab floor below. "I'm calling Fury on this one. He's too invested in this project to keep him in the dark." Heaving a sigh, he starts toward the catwalk stairs.

"How's the pasha?" Clint asks.

"He's fine, but he misses you. My shoulders aren't as broad as yours. He takes that as a personal affront."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine, but I miss you. There's an important ingredient missing from the burrito."

"Yeah," Clint says softly. "Miss you too."

Phil turns to leave then, and it's the last Clint sees of him before Loki makes the scene.

***

From the moment Loki's scepter touches his chest, Clint's head is filled with the god's voice. It's more intimate even than Coulson's voice through the comm link to his implants. What's more, the sound of Loki's speech is clearer than any sound Clint has heard since he was three, possibly in his
entire life. Each syllable rings crisp and distinct, Loki's tone of voice perfectly readable, no nuance lost. The difference is almost as dramatic as the change from deafness to implant-aided hearing.

Loki's voice fills him, pushing aside all else but what the god might need from him. What Loki needs is a lot: soldier, bodyguard, assassin, general. Loki's presence in his mind burns like ice, pushes him through pain and exhaustion and (on some deeply buried level) horror.

He would gladly let Loki use him up, if he could have that voice ringing within him at the end.

***

When Clint comes to, he's strapped down in the med bay, his head throbbing. This is nothing new, but there's something else that's missing, something important. He shakes his head to clear it and instantly regrets the impulse.

"Fuck!"

"Clint." He looks up to see Natasha regarding him solemnly. "You're going to be all right."

He realizes then. Loki's voice, his presence, are gone. The sound of Natasha's voice is a distorted, imperfect parody of normal sound, just as it's been since he got the implants. "You know that? Is that what you know?"

She moves out of his line of sight then, but he keeps talking, asking if she's ever had someone fuck with her head, push her out, unmake her.

"You know that I have," she says simply, and he curses himself silently for forgetting the history she'd trusted him with.

It all flashes through his head, the whole shit show while he was under Loki's control. Shooting Fury. Trying to shoot Hill. The explosions and gunfire, either by his own hand or by those of the merc team he'd assembled. So many of them his own comrades, and plenty of civilians too.

"Don't." Tasha tells him. "This is Loki. This is monsters and magic and nothing we were ever trained for."

He pushes these thoughts to be back of his head, but he knows this is not the last of them.

Something's off with Tasha. He asks and she tells him she's compromised, has red in her ledger. But he knows when her face smooths over into an unreadable mask, she's usually shielding some part of herself. This isn't the time to push, since they've got Loki ass to kick. Clint goes to the head to wash up, and when he steps back into the med bay a tall blonde guy in a blue uniform with a star on it is asking Tasha if she can fly one of the jets. He figures out the outfit in an instant—you can't live with the world's biggest Captain America fanboy without recognizing the suit, even updated. But he even looks like Steve Rogers.

The guy dashes out, and as Clint and Natasha gear up, Clint asks, "So who's the Captain America clone?"

"It's him," Tasha says. "He was buried in ice since the plane crash, and survived somehow."

"Holy shit. Phil must have peed his pants."

Tasha turns and heads for the door. "Let's move."
Shit gets real after that, then it gets surreal, then hyperreal.

It's tough to sort out the voices coming over his comm, but he has plenty to do without needing orders. Gradually they start making sense, and Clint determines the voice giving intel from above must be Iron Man, and the guy making tactical decisions must be Captain America. He has the sound and sense of a natural leader, someone who's been in the shit and survived. Sitwell makes occasional responses or adds bits of intel, but so far nothing from Phil. He's not Clint's handler anymore, but given the size of this shit show, his voice would not be unexpected.

This is new: airborne attackers that are organic, not mechanized. This is a kind of fighting he doesn't do with bow and arrow, but he sees it may be useful to take the fight to them, so he gets a boost from Iron Man. It doesn't take long before he adjusts to the speed and angles of the beasts, allowing instinct and his years of practice to take over.

When the whole thing is done, with Loki somehow magically cockblocked and cooling his heels in a SHIELD supermax cell, Tasha takes Clint aside.

"We have to talk," she says, her voice low and tense. Her expression is a particular kind of blank that Clint associates with seriously bad shit.

Stark is busy rounding up everyone for the shwarma run, which is distracting as hell, but when she seizes Clint's wrist, his attention focuses on her.

"Clint," she says.

Suddenly all the subtly wrong details he'd pushed away in the heat of battle come back to him with a rush of dread. "Tasha," he whispers. Pleading with her not to say what he knows is coming.

"It's Coulson," she goes on.

"Fuck." It's a moment before he can force out the next words. "Was it--?"

"No," she says firmly. "It was Loki himself."

"Well, that's a fucking relief. I just let him in the door."

"Agent 99," Stark calls out. "Are you and Maxwell--" He cuts himself off as he gets the drift of what's going on.

"He didn't know," Natasha says quietly.

"About Phil?" Phil? Seriously? When did Phil get to be Phil for Stark?

At Natasha's tight nod, Stark claps a hand on Clint's shoulder. "Fuck," he says, with a surprising amount of feeling. "Come out with us."

Clint feels like snarling that he's not exactly in the mood for a celebration, but he can't say Stark looks like he's ready for one either. Clint's seen a good half billion photos of the guy in his lifetime, but for the first time he looks like a grownup, not an overaged frat-boy asshole. Plus: "Phil."

"Yeah," Clint says. "I could use something to eat." It occurs to him that he can't remember eating during the time he was Loki's bitch. The realization--and the reminder--actually dampens his appetite some, but he's already agreed, so what the hell.
He's bringing everyone down; he's sure of it. Or -- no. Not so sure. Maybe it's sharing a table with the guy who'd tried to kill them all just hours before. Either way, most of the meal passes without any sound but the rustle of paper wrappers as the Avengers work their way through their meal, and the sounds of the restaurant staff cleaning up around them.

Clint thinks again of Loki's voice, the clarity and immediacy of it ringing in his head. He gives his head a hard shake to dislodge the memory, the resulting dizziness nearly knocking him off his chair.

Banner reaches out a hand to steady him. "You okay?"

The idea that he will ever be okay again tears a harsh laugh from him. "Just peachy."

"He had a knock on the head, Doc," Natasha says.

*Doc. That's right. He was doing some sort of Mother Teresa gig in Calcutta before SHIELD brought him in. When did SHIELD bring him in?*

Banner pulls his chair closer to Clint's. "Let me see," he murmurs. His touch is unbelievable gentle as he examines Clint, considering the brutal strength of the Hulk.

Clint submits only because Natasha's got him hemmed in from behind. "They took me to the med bay, so I've already--"

"It wasn't like they could take a lot of time with you," Natasha says.

"You have any kind of flashlight in that belt of yours?" Banner asks her.

When she produces a small one, he puts a hand to Clint's face. "I'm just going to check your pupils now--"

As Banner shifts his hand, it triggers a memory in Clint: *Phil feathering his fingertips along Clint's skin.*

Clint stands up abruptly, his chair clattering to the floor. "I can't do this." Before anyone can react, he steps out from the chair legs and away from the table. "I can't."

With that, he turns and bolts out into the ruined streets.

***

He walks all through the fucking war zone--or as much of it as he can go. Whole blocks are cordoned off due to precarious chunks of rubble perched like ancient standing stones in the worst-hit areas. Some of these blocks are blacked out, but there are flatbed trucks with klieg lights turning everything into harsh daylight. Some have cops waving people away from casualties; others have SHIELD agents guarding bits of Chitauri tech. Either way, Clint knows how to avoid being seen, how to get into places where he's not supposed to be.

When it belatedly occurs to him to think of the cat, he calls Sitwell, then realizes just how late it is. "Fuck, Jasper. I woke you. I'm sorry."

"No man, I wasn't asleep, believe me. How are you?"

"About how you'd think, and then some."

"Yeah. Fuck. Fuckin' space alien gods and their butthurt internal politics. If there's anything I can
do, Barton--and I mean that, I'm not just saying it."

"There is, actually. I need someone to look after No-Balls for a couple of days. I can't deal with going--" he almost says home, but then he quickly changes it to "to Phil's place right now. I'll come and get him, but right now I can't. You have Phil's keys, right?"

"Sure, I can do that. Where are you gonna stay tonight?"

Clint ends the call without responding. He doesn't actually have an answer--he can't face going back to his solo life in his old place either. "Some air vent somewhere" isn't going to put anyone's mind at ease, but it's the most likely answer. Knowing Jasper, an invitation would be forthcoming, and he's not up for that.

Shortly before dawn, Clint makes his way to SHIELD, where he hoists himself into an air vent and takes the familiar path to the duct above Phil's office. He dreams about Loki, the crisp sound of his insinuating voice, the glorious beauty of the Tesseract and the perfect clarity the two created.

***

The next two days are almost entirely taken up by examinations by medical and psych -- not to mention a long session with Amelia--and debriefings with Fury and assorted other SHIELD high-clearance types. He holds it together, at least until he makes his way up into the ductwork at night. He holds it together during Phil's memorial, where he sits in the back row, his hand so tightly clenched with Natasha's that it hurts.

He can't imagine that mingling with SHIELD personnel at the gathering afterward will end in anything but him being shot in the face. Though he'd much rather be alone, Nat drags him along to Tony Stark's place for an Avengers-only version. Well, Avengers plus a strawberry-blond chick who works for Stark and was friendly with Phil. It's a helluva lot more subdued an event than Clint would have expected, considering the Page Six fodder Stark's known for.

Clint mostly sits in a corner of the room. He barely knows any of these people, can hardly claim to have fought beside them. He's not even sure which of them he may or may not have shot at.

"I wish I'd gotten to know Phil better," Captain America says. Obviously he's wearing a charcoal suit instead of the Captain gear, but Clint can't help thinking of him that way. He's not a real person to Clint yet. He knows the Norse god better than Rogers. "I never got comfortable with that hero thing."

"Same here," Stark says. "Not the hero part, Pepper can tell you I eat that up with a spoon."

Captain America gets a constipated look on his face at that, but Stark is oblivious as he goes on.

"But the part about wishing I'd gotten to know Phil better too. All the stories they were telling back there--the bits that didn't go through some obvious in-brain redaction before they came out of their mouths--they made him sound like a serious badass."

"He was a serious badass," Clint says. His voice sounds chipped from flint.

"Jesus," Stark says. "I would have been a lot more scared when he threatened to taze the shit out of me. Especially considering--he was such a still guy. He moved unnecessarily about as often as I stand still. But when he made that threat, he was vibrating all over the place. In retrospect, that's kind of terrifying."

That's a danger sign Clint saw only twice in the years he knew Phil, and Stark's not wrong about
the fear factor. The idea of Phil turning that bowel-freezing move on Stark makes Clint's lips twitch in a near smile.

"What made him so angry?" Banner wants to know. As well he might.

"Like I can keep track of every time I've pissed someone off?" Stark retorts, but his tone is light. "I happened to be--" he casts a furtive look toward Pepper, the strawberry-blonde, then away-- "well, dying at the time. I was pretty much an all-around mess and general-purpose asshole."

That's a piece of intel Clint hadn't known, and he's pretty sure Phil hadn't either. He's not--he wasn't so much a bastard he'd laugh at Clint's jokes if he'd known Stark was dying.

"Seriously, Cap, you didn't really see it, but he had this bland-guy poker face down," Stark says.

"He was pretty nervous whenever we spoke," Rogers says.

Nat's lips quirk up in a smile. "After he brought you to the helicarrier, he muttered, 'Einstein! Jesus Christ, I'm an idiot."

That surprises a laugh from Rogers. "I know just what he was talking about. He compared someone to a guy I'd never heard of, Stephen something. I guess I gave him the world's blankest stare, because he just said, 'A really smart person.'"

"Phil said that about me?" Stark asks, not really asking. He radiates smug satisfaction. "Though Edison or Tesla might be more--"

"Actually, he was talking about Dr. Banner," Rogers says.

Even Clint can't stifle a laugh at Stark's crestfallen expression.

Stark turns it into a scowl. "Enough of his dorkier moments. Let's remember him for his badassery. Barton, Ms. Rushman--spill. I think we've all leveled up, clearance-wise."

Clint lets Nat take the lead, telling slightly less redacted stories while he knocks back more of Stark's serious top-shelf booze.

"Barton," Stark prompts after a while. "You haven't had much to say."

Clint might have given him the death stare and said, "That's right, I haven't," except it had hurt so fucking much to keep silent during the SHIELD memorial. There's a hell of a lot he can't say here either, but he can manage one story.

"Sure," he says. "One story and I'm out."

He launches into one of his favorites, the one where Phil, armed with a sack of flour, disarmed and knocked out a pair of mooks robbing a gas station. Two sentences in, he recalls that this was when Phil was on his way to New Mexico for the whole Thor thing, where he kissed Phil for the first time. Clint stumbles in the telling, but suspects stopping will cause Stark to dig harder for the story, so he refills his glass and presses on.

When he's done with the story, he sets down his empty glass and stands, wobbling precariously. Thor rises and steadies him, then gives him one of his patented sincere looks. "I cannot equal your grief for the son of Coul, but I share it. He was a good man and a worthy warrior."

Clint nods, because what the fuck else is he supposed to do? He sways again, and the next thing he
knows, Thor has picked him up like a child and soon he's being deposited in a bed somewhere in Stark's ridiculous phallus of a building.

***

When Clint awakens, he has no idea where he is. A very pricy hotel, it looks like. As he rolls over to reach for his phone on the nightstand, he sees the pen and scratch pad there have the Stark Industries logo, and it comes back to him. His phone, however, isn't there, but since it's gouging him from inside his pocket, that's not an issue. He hauls it out and calls Nat, who sounds a lot more awake than he feels.

"I seem to be in Stark's place."

"We all are," she replies. "Except Steve, who didn't need either a bed or a designated driver. Breakfast is happening. I'll come and get you."

"Give me ten," he tells her. "I smell like ass." He stumbles into the en suite bathroom and discovers a shower stall he could hose down a yak in, as well as a gift bag with some pretty high-end toiletries, cologne, a silk Brioni necktie and--no lie--a Movado watch. A shower makes him feel slightly more human, and a spritz of the cologne even more so. He gets back into his suit pants and untucked white shirt, but leaves the rest of the funeral outfit behind. The watch stays behind too, because that shit is just weird.

As he and Natasha head for the elevator, he asks, "Did you get a goodie bag, or is Stark trying to tell me something?"

Tasha snorts. "These are the Stark Industries VIP suites."

"I get it. More of the 'rich, powerful people need free shit' philosophy. Like the swag bag actors get for appearing at the Academy Awards."

"Just say thank you to the nice man," she says blandly. "You smell nice."

When Nat leads him to the others, everyone's there but Rogers. There's a breakfast spread to rival a Vegas buffet, and Stark is showing off the schematics he worked on all night: potential living quarters for the Avengers, which he's ready to have built concurrently with the reconstruction work. As he talks and points out various spaces and features, Stark makes additions until there are firearms and archery ranges, a gym and a lab for Banner. Voices rise in excitement around him but Clint feels too overwhelmed to join in, or even to focus on the shimmering graphics Stark sends into the air to illustrate his thoughts.

It turns out that Banner's already moved in. Thor's delighted by the prospect of living among his warrior brethren--which of course includes Lady Natasha--when he is on Midgard (and makes the suggestion that Stark might want to build a mead hall while he's at it). That leaves Rogers, who's absent, and Clint and Natasha.

She looks at him--actually they're all looking at him--and he murmurs, "I'm good with whatever you want, Tasha." Clinton Francis Barton, Clean Start Number 273; he wonders if this one will go any better than the others.

He endures a moment of more intense scrutiny until she's satisfied that he meant what he said. "We're in," she says at last.

"Wait," says Stark. "Do I need to reconfigure your spaces? I didn't realize--" His hands are already moving through the air, bringing up Clint and Tasha's suites.
"We're not," she says easily. "We just like living near one another."

"Any special requests?"

"No white walls," Clint says.

The specificity of this request seems to take Stark aback slightly. "What about antique white? Or chalk? Or picket fence? Or maybe cream? Ecru?"

Next to him, Clint feels rather than sees Tasha's tight head shake, which sends a hint of her own VIP goodie-bag perfume wafting his way.

"Sage," Clint says. "Apart from the walls, I don't care." Which does nothing to satisfy Stark's curiosity, but at least he moves on with the planning.

In the afternoon, Stark's limo driver drops Clint and Nat at her place, where Clint helps her gather her belongings. It's good to be nothing more than a strong back and a pair of arms for a while. Though she offers her help with his things, he refuses. "I'm not bringing much from my old place. Jasper's letting me in to get the cat from Phil's, and he'll bring me to Stark's. You get settled in at the tower. I'll call Happy and tell him to bring the van."

He takes the subway to his sixth-floor walkup on Bedford Street and gathers his weapons, his clothes and two milk crates of books. The furniture gets redistributed in the same fashion that he collected it: He leaves them curbside for the next day's big trash pickup.

Sitwell gives him and his stuff a ride up to Phil's place to pick up No-Balls and the few of Clint's things that he hadn't taken with him on the mission. The sight of Phil's place, with its sage-colored walls, profusion of books and framed cartoon dogs, brings him perilously close to an emotional display, but he's distracted by No-Balls' yowling demands for attention. Clint picks the cat up and buries his face in his fur.

"Hey, ya fuckin' pasha. How are you?" No-Balls rumbles his reply. "I think I'm gonna need to leave most of the royal chattel here for now, until I'm out of the guest suite." He looks toward Jasper. "Is that gonna be a problem? Will his place have to be cleared out?"

"No. Phil owns this apartment, and it's all automatic payments for mortgage and maintenance."

So Clint's not the only one having trouble with past-tense Phil.

"We need to talk soon," Jasper says. "Phil made me his executor, and we should go over the will."

"I don't give a shit about his will. I don't want stuff." Well, maybe a few things: Phil's favorite robe, his preferred coffee mug, maybe one of the Thurber dogs. The comforter.

With that, he puts No-Balls down and heads for the bedroom, tossing his few things from there and the bathroom onto the comforter, along with the robe. Folding the comforter around it all, he carries it out into the living room.

Jasper, who's seen him wrapped in that comforter on a number of visits during Clint's recovery, makes no comment. Together, they get the cat's essentials together, get the indignant creature into his carrier, and get on their way to Stark's place.
By the next morning Clint realizes he really hadn't thought this through. Construction crews start banging and sawing on several different levels at an ungodly hour, accompanied by different musical soundtracks and a lot of shouted conversations. The only relief he has is a ten-minute shower with the external receivers in their case on the nightstand. It's not what he'd call blissful silence, because he's too aware of four crews of unknowns on the upper levels and thousands more on all the lower floors. No doubt Stark's people vetted them thoroughly, but that's nothing like going through a SHIELD background check.

Once he's dressed and has the receivers back in place, he scrawls a note to slip under Natasha's door, gets No-Balls on his leash and leaves the tower. Clint finds the city itself is a construction zone, on a level that makes the work at Stark's place look like kids digging in a sandbox. He hoists the cat onto his shoulder and continues to make his way through midtown, which seems to be a traffic jam of heavy machinery shifting rubble. Jackhammers bear down into the asphalt, tearing up big chunks of the street to restore water mains.

If the racket in Stark Tower was nightmarish, the streets outside are hellish. But if anyone deserves to be in hell, it's Clint. He helped make this happen. He should bear witness to the devastation Loki caused with his aid, but the noise is intolerable. No-Balls agrees, hunching next to his head and emitting a low growl. Clint takes him back to his suite and sits with the cat until he finds a satisfactory place to curl up and sleep.

When he reemerges from the tower, Clint passes through the torn-up streets as quickly as he can to the High Line and climbs the stairs to the park. He finds a place to settle that's far enough from the battle zone to lessen the din, and adjusts the volume and sensitivity on his receivers just enough to ease his headache. By the time they roust visitors from the park at 7 pm, all but the most essential work crews in Midtown have packed it in for the day.

What Clint isn't prepared for is his homecoming, if you could call it that. As he's crossing Midtown, Natasha calls to tell him the team, including Steve, is gathered for dinner before Thor takes Loki back to Asgard.

"Already on my way," he tells her.

The word "team" makes him feel unexpectedly raw. Tasha and Phil and Clint were a team--are a team, though a broken one. Just like that, she's adopted a new one?

Well, he was playing for the other side during a lot of that bonding. And hell, who wouldn't want to sign up with a shiny golden supersoldier, a god, and a billionaire genius, even if he's an asshole? And Banner--he's part of the package deal, but maybe there's also some draw there that Clint hasn't seen yet. Still, Tasha guards her heart, though she doesn't like to admit she has one. She doesn't give it rashly, doesn't form attachments readily. Yet here she is with a new team, while Clint feels he's got just the one.
If he hadn't thought the hole in him could be torn any wider or deeper, he was wrong.

Clint uses the private elevator to Stark's residence, to be greeted by minimal lighting, tarps and curtains of plastic sheeting. "Shit," he mutters. "Where is everyone?"

Before he can remove his phone from his pocket, a disembodied British-accented voice says, "Agent Barton, the others have gathered in the kitchen. If you'll turn to your left, you'll find the easiest way through the plastic tarp, and the hallway will be before you."

"This isn't creepy at all," Clint mutters as he approaches the filmy barrier. The sound of stiff plastic being parted sets him on edge.

He finds the others in the kitchen where they'd had their breakfast the morning before, some sitting at the island, some leaning against the counter by the cabinets.

Stark presses a cold longneck into his hand. "Glad you could make it, Neytiri."

That shit is definitely going to get old. "What's with the invisible butler?"

"That's Jarvis. He runs the house. He's an A.I."

Clint's not sure he heard right. Any eye? Makes no sense. Enayi? It rubs him the wrong way to ask, but he sucks it up. "He's a what?"

"He's like a robot," Rogers says.

Stark shakes his head. "Robots have bodies. He's an A.I. Artificial intelligence. Closer to a computer, but an AI can learn and adapt. So like I said, Jarvis runs the house. If you need anything, just let Jarvis know."

Clint doesn't think so, but he keeps that to himself.

Stark runs through the whole slew of schematics for Rogers' benefit, including the new suite for his use. There's been some serious upgrading to the others' living quarters in the last few hours, and the firing range has acquired a state-of-the-art simulation room with interactive video projected on a 300-degree screen. It's crazy, seeing just how fast Stark's mind works and how many different things he can have percolating there at the same time. Clint suspects there's even more going on in his head simultaneously, like robotics and armor upgrades and ways of getting around Fury. Stark can hardly finish getting one idea fully explained before he's on some other track. No wonder he needs an A.I. to run his house--and probably make sure he eats and is wearing pants.

It occurs to Clint that, while he's paying attention to Stark, he's doing it wrong. He's feeling none of the excitement the others are showing about Stark's plans. Excitement being a relative thing, of course. Thor, of course, wins the excitement gold medal, even over Stark himself, but he gets excited over the vast range of flavors PopTarts come in. After Stark, it seems Rogers is next in enthusiasm level, talking about team building and how sharing quarters helps foster blah blah blah. Banner seems to have a nature almost as reserved as Tasha's, but his interest sharpens whenever Stark ventures onto the topic of Hey, Science! Tasha's face gives little away, but she's asking questions and contributing to the discussion, so she's in. So it's just Clint on the outside of Stark's Magnificent Plans.

When Happy comes in bearing a huge box filled with containers of Thai takeout, Clint has his chance to slip out. Instead of heading straight for the elevator down to the guest suites floor, he pushes his way through scrims of plastic sheeting toward where the windows used to be. Though most of the view is blocked by plywood, one glass door to the balcony is still intact, so Clint heads
for it.

He can see a few signs of the battle that took place up here, but the damage is pretty contained. Gravitating toward a spot he'd choose if he were here as a sniper, he does the counterintuitive thing and sits on the ground, head lowered. He wants his old team back. Phil and Tasha and the Clint that he used to be with them. He's not the equal of a god and these super-humans, and he doesn't know where his place with them is. Phil might have guided him--and Natasha--to that place, but he doesn't know that there's another handler who can cope with the god and the god-like but still understands who he and Tasha are and what they can bring to the Avengers. Hell, Clint isn't even sure.

He straightens when he hears footsteps approaching. Someone solidly built, wearing boots, so it's either Rogers or Thor.

"Some view out here." Rogers squats, sitting on his heels catcher-style next to Clint, who's kind of surprised Rogers' tree-trunk legs are that bendable.

"Yeah. A little worse for wear."

"I feel kinda bad admitting it, but I'm glad the Chrysler Building came out of this intact."

They're discussing architecture? Well, he's got taste anyway. "I've always liked it."

"It's not just that," Rogers says. "It's one thing that hasn't changed. Well, it's not the world's tallest building anymore, but that changed when I was a kid."

Clint hadn't considered that.

Rogers goes on. "Well, I was a big--well, I can't think of the darn word everyone uses now. I spent a lot of time reading up on the biggest, tallest, strongest--have you ever heard of Ripley's Believe It Or Not?"

"Well, sure."

That seems to gratify him. "I loved that stuff. There was a big race on to build the world's tallest skyscraper, and I followed it like people ate up Ruth and Gehrig's home run race, except it was on a much grander scale, if you can imagine that. There was a building on Wall Street that got there first, but the Chrysler architect secretly had that spire made and delivered in several pieces. They got it mounted and riveted together in ninety minutes to break the record."

"No shit," Clint murmurs.

"It's true," Rogers says. "Less than a week later, the stock market crashed."

It's stunning to think that the guy gazing out at the building with him was around for both of these things. For Ruth and Gehrig. Holy shit.

"My ma took me to see it on my twelfth birthday. Then we went to the Automat."

Clint eyes him. "She took you to a laundry?"

"No, it was a Horn & Hardart." At Clint's blank look, he adds, "A cafeteria. All the food was behind little windows. You'd put your money in the slot and take out a sandwich or a bowl of soup or a piece of pie. They don't have those anymore?"
"Nope."

"Huh."

"You'll like seeing the Chrysler from here," Clint says, suddenly feeling charitable. "The light on the crown changes from minute to minute some days, especially when a storm's moving in."

They settle into silence for a while, and Clint's shoulders begin to unclench. Then Rogers says quietly, "How are you?" and the muscles seize right back up again.

"What, Cap, are you worried I've still got Loki running around in my head? If that's what you came out here for, just drop the bonding bullshit and come out with it."

He can sense Rogers bristling, but after a moment he relaxes. "Not worried, I just know you've had a rough time of it. If there's anything I can--"

*Bring Phil back from the dead? Go back in time and shoot Loki in the fucking face? Fuck off with the sensitive leader crap?* "I'm fine," Clint snaps.

There's a moment that stretches out while Rogers damps down his irritation. Finally he rises and says evenly, "If you want some dinner, you might want to get at it. Thor was putting away his fourth helping when I came out here." He doesn't wait for a response before turning and heading back inside.

It's not long before Thor makes an appearance, bearing a plate--no, make that a platter--piled high with food. "My friend, you must not miss this feast. These foods are like nothing I have ever tasted in any realm." He offers the platter to Clint, and in his other massive hand, a Singha beer.

"Thanks," Clint says. He's not much in a feasting mood, but he realizes he hasn't eaten all day, so he digs into a mound of spicy basil chicken. To his dismay, Thor lowers himself to the balcony paving next to him.

"I did not wish to leave Midgard without bidding you farewell."

"I'm not good company right now. I've already harshed Cap's welcome."

Hint repelled by magic armor. Somberly, Thor says, "We have battled for our lives, and for this realm. There are many churning emotions that come in times of war, and oftentimes there is no opportunity to allow them until peace has dawned. Every one of us understands that, Hawkeye. You have lost brothers-in-arms, most especially the son of Coul. I did not come here that you might be good company and pass the time idly with me. I wish to sit with you, to share your burdens in whatever way I can."

This plain speaking shit, flowery though it is, is not what Clint's used to. He and Tasha have a tacit agreement that they can work out their feelings but for god's sake they don't talk about them. With Coulson he might have said a little more about them, but they had a way of playing it light. The rare times they spoke in complete seriousness they always found something else to focus their attention on. Thor's direct attention makes him want to squirm.

"I'm fine," Clint lies again, though without the accompanying snarl he'd used with Rogers. Who the fuck could snarl at Thor?

Thor allows that to sit between them for a long moment, and Clint turns his attention back to the food.
"I will say again, I share your grief for Phil Coulson. He was a good man, and I considered him a friend. He acted quickly to protect my Jane once Loki placed Erik Selvig under his thrall, which eased my mind greatly during the battle. You have known him longer than any among us, have you not?"

"Yeah."

Again, Thor seems in no way thrown off by the long silence that follows, while Clint keeps working on his food. At last Thor tells him, "I am heartily sorry for what my brother did to you, Dr. Selvig and the others. I had no knowledge that he had such abilities. He has long been able to influence others' minds or trick them, but--"

Clint slaps the platter down so hard he hears a crack. "I can't listen to this." He rises with a swiftness that clearly startles Thor and strides across the balcony to the elevator.

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The Stark tower construction crews are going at it with an evangelical's fervor by the time Clint pries himself out of sleep. Obviously the noise has been working on him even in his sleep, because he has a massive circus headache searing the inside of his skull. He gets the coffeemaker set up, then gets ready to shower. As he settles the receivers into their case, the solution occurs to him, so simple that he feels like an idiot for taking an entire day to think of it. He tucks the cases into the top drawer of the night stand, then decides Y'know what? Fuck the shower. He shuts off the coffeemaker in its first gurgling breaths, folds Phil's robe up to pillow under his head, then pulls the comforter around himself and the cat and goes back to sleep.

Interlude 2:

When he awakens again he can tell the crews are still there, feeling some of the sounds as vibrations. He lingers in bed, idly scratching the cat's chest and throat, considering what he really wants to do. Take a long leave from SHIELD and go on an epic road trip, maybe. Or hell, just quit altogether. Changing identities is child's play--he's even got a few sets stashed here and there that (he thinks) SHIELD doesn't know about. But what the fuck would he do with himself when being a sniper would give him away? He'd end up with a bullet in his skull before a month went by. Shit, he couldn't even join a circus. And that's not even taking into account the paranoid thought that SHIELD might have placed a Lojack in his skull when the implants were placed.

Even as he contemplates this, he knows he won't cut out on SHIELD--he owes them too much, especially now. And what he does here suits him.

Eventually Clint gets sick of malingering and heads back to the shower. When he wanders up to Stark's kitchen with No-Balls to take advantage of the open invitation to scrounge up a meal, he doesn't bother reattaching the receivers. He's not sure what the others have been doing in construction hell, but he's just planning a quick hit and run on the enormous fridge.

Clint's in the middle of making a sandwich when someone aims a friendly swat at his biceps. The surprise makes him whirl, knife in hand, but he stops short of planting it in Stark's chest.

"Whoa, I taste much better with a nice cayenne butter than mustard," Stark says, stepping out of range.

"Sorry."

"Happens. That's how I am when I'm working or have a project percolating. Speaking of which,
I've got some new ideas on the archery range I want to run past you. C'mon down to the workshop and I'll show you."

Clint just wants to eat his fuckin' sandwich. But Stark's already walking out of the kitchen (still talking, he'd bet), so Clint abandons it on the counter, scoops up the cat and follows. As he anticipated, Stark is talking at warp speed when Clint gets onto the elevator with him. He doesn't seem to need a response--at least not until he stops dead and blurts, "What is that?"

"It's a cat. They didn't teach you common domestic animals in genius school?"

"It's a cat that's in my home."

"Give him a chance. You'll like him; he owns almost as many toys as you do."

That sets Stark off on a new tangent, considering space requirements for No-Balls. Once the elevator doors open, Clint's once again lost as Stark steams ahead of him, yammering nonstop. If Clint feels left in the dust at this point, it only gets worse once Stark leads him into his workshop. The man strides to one of the work tables and starts tossing schematics and holograms into the air, all the while keeping up the monologue. Clint can't watch both the display and Stark's mouth. He tries switching his attention from one to the other and back, but it's a losing battle. Clint may have lost some of his deaf-guy skills in the years since the implants, but he never had to deal with input like this--images ranging along a 180 degree visual field, appearing, changing or winking out of existence. And at the same time he's trying to follow a narrator whose quick mind sends his speech caroming off in so many directions that Tasha had said he could be maddening. Hard as he tries to follow, Clint gets hopelessly lost in a short time, and not long after a headache starts drilling into his skull. There's a pause in the hand-waving, hologram-moving and monologue self-interrupted by random riffing, and after it stretches out, Clint realizes he must have missed a question.

Shrugging, he slides back into his pre-Coulson persona. "Do whatever you want. It's your place, your money." Suspecting Stark's sharp gaze means his complete lack of comprehension of the entire discourse is about to be blown, Clint adds, "I've gotta jet. Places to be."

Soured for any other interactions, Clint drops No-Balls back in his room, then takes the elevator straight down to the street. Hell, if he wants food, the dirty-water hot dog carts are out in force again--salvage and construction crews have to eat, after all. The only conversation it'll take is holding up two fingers and saying " Extra mustard." Then it's straight to the High Line until the park closes.

Avoidance becomes Clint's default mode for the next couple of days. He stocks the mini-fridge in his suite or grabs meals outside the tower. He curls up with the cat until he's too restless to stay in bed, then kills time in museums and parks. He tries a movie theater, an action movie that has a lot of concussive sound and vibration going for it, but finds he's lost his appetite for explosions and wholesale death--so has the rest of New York, judging by the emptiness of most seats around him. Twenty minutes in he gets up and leaves.

At night he climbs to the High Line, now closed and cleared of other people, finding a hidden vantage point for gazing out over the city. It's easier to look at in the dark of night, though some of the more devastated blocks are still without power and lights.

This self-isolation works for three days, until Clint returns to his suite at 3 a.m. and reaches for the Chinese leftovers in the fridge. When he lifts the lid, the stink of spoiled poultry assaults him. Reaching in and touching other containers, he finds them all completely warm to the touch.

"You're shitting me!" he blurts. There's nothing else in the suite, nothing open remotely nearby, as
the nightlife in the area has dried up for the time being. Sighing, Clint decides to take his chances and loot Stark's kitchen for something to eat.

Dropping to his haunches in front of the Subzero, Clint rummages through the lower shelves, absentely scratching No-Balls with his free hand. When he finds something promising, he turns to lob it onto the island counter behind him. The third time he turns, he finds Tony Stark leaning against the counter, arms and ankles crossed. Lifting one arm, Stark waggles his fingers in a wave. Startled, Clint overbalances and lands on his ass, nearly dropping the container in his hand. The cat scurries away, despite his previous interest in the entire production.

Stark deftly snags the container, but before Clint can say thanks, he's got the lid off and has produced a pair of chopsticks from the stoneware crock of them that sits out on the island. Stark tweezers a shrimp and pauses with it halfway to its target. "To what do we owe the extreme pleasure of your company?" Then he pops the shrimp into his mouth.

"My fridge is broken."

"Huh," Stark says. "I'll have Jarvis get right on that."

Suddenly Clint feels like a complete idiot. The coincidence of Stark appearing in the kitchen just as Clint's there to scrounge some food after something went wrong in his quarters. Which are presumably, as is everything in Stark's home, run by the damn AI. "You had Jervis kill the power to it."

"Jarvis," Stark says, enunciating carefully so Clint can read his lips. Ooh, good. A touchy point. Clint files that away. "I figured it was time we had a talk."

Clint rises to his feet quickly, with the athletic grace his fall had lacked completely. He comes to a rest just within Stark's personal space, gratified to see a flicker of reaction before Stark shuts it down.

"Sure," Clint says. "What about?"

"That tech you've got in your skull, and sitting in a drawer somewhere. There's a fuck-ton of deaf people who'd love to have access to that, if it was even on the market. You're the only one in the world who has it, and you're wasting it."

"What the fuck would you know ab--"Fuck. I really am a simpleton. "You made it."

"I did. And I get just a little pissed off when someone disrespects my work."

Clint blinks, trying to wrap his mind around this. "But you didn't even know me then."

Stark spears a shrimp on the end of a chopstick. "Yeah, well, maybe that was a lucky thing for you."

Anger spiking, Clint steps in toward Stark, veering at the last moment to reach around and grab the food he'd put on the counter. He grabs a pair of chopsticks from the crock and stalks out of the kitchen, No-Balls trailing behind.

"Fuck you, Jervis," he says once he's installed back in his quarters.
Chapter 9

It doesn't take the ability to hear--either natural or genius-created--to know when Natasha comes to say her piece. Clint's asleep when a panel of the bedroom ceiling crashes in, landing next to him in bed, and a concussive blow shakes the room. That would be Natasha making her emphatic landing next to the bed. The cat, who'd been sleeping on his chest, launches himself across the room and into the bathroom with the cat equivalent of burnt rubber, which leaves two bleeding furrows across Clint's left pec. Clint comes off the bed, blade in hand before he's even fully awake, but Tasha wrests it from him before he even thinks to drop it.

"What the hell?" he yelps.

"We are going to have a talk," she tells him.

"Sorry," he says, pointedly looking away. "Only one talk per 24 hours, and Stark beat you to it."

She grabs his face and forces his gaze back on her. "We. Are. Having. A. Talk."

Clint wrenches away from her again, and finds himself sprawled across the bed with Tasha straddling him, taking his face between her hands.

"I know this is hard for you," she says. "You have the right to mourn. But I can't watch you doing this to yourself any longer."

"Nobody's forcing you to watch."

Anger flashing across her features, she shouts, so loud he can feel the force of it against his face: "Do you think Coulson would want this?"

"Fuck you!" he shouts back, shoving at her shoulders and sending her stumbling back. She rushes at him as he's rising, and it's on. They grapple, each trying to trip up the other, crashing into furniture and the walls, cursing and grunting.

At last Natasha has him pinned to the carpet by the shoulders, her knee in a place that promises exquisite pain if Clint tries to twist free. She seems about to speak when her muscles tense and her eyes flick away from him for an instant, then she says, "We're fine, Cap. Leave us."

Despite the interruption, none of the intensity has drained from her gaze when she turns her attention back to him. "Clint. I lost Phil too. I can't stand losing you too. Especially like this."

Of all the blows she's ever landed on Clint, either while sparring or in the bowels of the helicarrier when he was under Loki's sway, this is the hardest. It knocks the breath--and the fight--out of him.

"Come back to us, Clint. We need you. I need you."

"Nat," he says thickly, but that's all he can squeeze out before his throat closes.

She releases him then, kneeling beside him on the carpet as he curls in toward her, trying to get his breath under control. "I'm sorry," he murmurs, and his chest is so tight he feels he could die from it. Tasha folds him into her arms then, and he can feel her whispering into his hair. Whether it's little nothings of comfort or her actual feelings, he doesn't know. He's certain, though, that the only reason she's expressing them at all is that she knows he can't hear.
When Clint wakes, he's a little surprised to find Natasha still lying on the bed beside him, curled into a tight ball facing away from him. They had retreated there after Clint replaced his receivers, curled against one another in a cuddle pile (eventually joined by No-Balls) that they would likely never speak of again. They had just talked—about Phil, about the battle and all that happened while Clint was...otherwise engaged. All the team bonding he'd thought had been going on, well—not so much. Loki had affected the others too, setting Tony Stark and Captain America at each other's throats, and bringing the Hulk's rage down on Tasha. Clint pulled her close against him as she talked about that, and she didn't resist.

"Do you remember what happened while you were with Loki?" she asked.

"Every bit of it," Clint said. "I don't think I can talk about it yet."

So instead she offered little bits of gossip about their new teammates, nothing malicious, just little things she'd discovered. Clint noted a definite thaw in her tone when she talked about Tony Stark.

Now, next to him, Nat says, "And why are you not bringing me a mug of coffee?"

Clint huffs a laugh as she uncurls herself. "I'll make some." Halfway across the room, he mutters, "Shit. The milk's gone bad. I'll go up to Stark's and get us a couple of mugs. There's always coffee on up there."

"Don't bother coming down. I'll meet you up there in five." She makes the little face he's seen on countless ops together, the one that means _Something must have crawled inside my mouth and died last night._

After she heads for her quarters he performs his own quick cleanup, then heads up to the big kitchen. Stark's already there, but this time he's not lying in wait, or else he was but he got caught up in something. His fingers are flying across the face of a tablet, while a half-eaten sandwich rests on a plate by its side.

"Hey," Clint says in greeting, though he doubts Stark will even notice.

To his surprise, Stark looks up. "That was a dick thing to say."

"'Hey'?"

Rubbing at bleary eyes, Stark clarifies, "What I said. About not making the implants if I'd known you."

Clint shrugs. "There's a distinct possibility I've said a dick thing or two in my life. Probably more, if you ask Natasha."

"Where's your familiar?"

"He had a stressful night. He's sleeping it off."

"Does he have a name, this creature?"

"No-Balls."

Stark fixes him with a look. "You named your cat No-Balls."

"He came pre-named Snowball. I just made a slight adjustment." Clint gets down a pair of mugs
and pours coffee into one, fumbling for what to say next. There seems to be a conversation happening that might actually turn into the first positive bonding experience he's had with these people so far.

He sucks at bonding, he always has.

It feels ridiculously presumptuous and greedy to ask about a project Stark had proposed for his benefit, yet it seems rude not to show interest. "So how are the plans coming for the range?"

Stark scratches his scalp with a vigor that would make Clint suspect headlice, if he weren't one of the richest men in the universe. "Ah. I got a little distracted. Happens."

Well, fuck. Of course. Why shouldn't Stark let himself get "distracted" when his attempt to get Clint involved in his own practice range design was, well, shot down? Clint fucked that up, the way he's fucked up his chances at being accepted into this team.

"Well here, let me show you," Stark says. His fingers dance across the face of the tablet, and once again glowing schematics fly up into the air. "Let me know if you'd rather just look on the tablet screen, or if I'm making things harder to follow."

Clint is too busy staring at the image in the air to respond. It's not a firing/archery range at all, but he recognizes it instantly. It's the external unit of a cochlear implant, slightly different from the ones Clint now wears.

"I've been playing around with this off and on." He pushes up another diagram.

"Is that an iPod?"

"Hush your mouth," Stark says in mock offense. "This is Stark tech. It's a media player, yeah, but it would jack directly into the receiver, the way your comm link does. It will kind of overwhelm environmental sounds, so it's more for when you really want to listen to music, not just have something on in the background. Phil told me you like doing that, back when I made your second set of receivers. And come to think of it, you're probably not much of a background noise kind of guy."

"Nah, it takes away from the foreground."

Stark nods. "Something else that occurred to me. Not that SHIELD has called us in since the anti-thor hit town, but it could happen any time. If you're in the shower or pool or have your receivers off for any other reason, there should be a way for the alert to reach you, short of Natasha kicking down your door. Do you have any issue with flashing lights?"

"Nope."

"Good. Well, then, that's pretty obvious. We can rig that up in your bathroom, down by the pool. Do you sleep with 'em in or out?"

"In. Spy-slash-assassin, you know."

"Okay. So that's a simple fix, then. And important, so that takes priority. We'll get that set up in your current space, as well as the one we're building. You might want to tuck away any spycraft-slash-assassincraft tools you might have lying around. I'm guessing there might be some repairs needed down there too?"

Clint rubs at his neck. "Sorry about that."
"Pff," Stark scoffs. "I threw myself a birthday party once where the damage was half a million. Not that it's a yearly occurrence--"

"Milestone birthday?" Clint asks wryly.

"Something like that. So. Thoughts on the media player idea?"

"Fuck yeah."

"Bring 'em on."

"Oh," Clint said. "That was my thought. I don't know what to-- um, thanks. It would be amazing."

That seems a pitiful excuse for a thank you, considering the extent of everything Stark's offering, so he tries again. "This all is, um, unbelievably generous. A place for the team, the range, the media player--hell, the implants I already have."

Stark waves a hand, and Clint pictures his thanks as glowing words in the air, swiped out of sight like a completed schematic. "It makes my brain happy to be making shit. Especially when it distracts me from other shit." He takes a long drink of coffee. "I'm sorry about Phil. Natalie says you worked with him a long time." Stark does this now and then, referring to Tasha as Natalie. Sometimes he corrects himself, sometimes he seems not to notice. "I know I was an enormous pain in his ass, but that's me and my issues with authority. He was a decent guy."

"Thanks," Clint says, and that's as effusive as he can get.

By the time Natasha appears in the kitchen, Stark has become Tony. But Clint still works in a reference to Jervis, just to wind Tony up.

***

In his next session with Amelia, she gently suggests that Clint might find some distraction and healing by getting involved with some of the clean-up efforts.

By happenstance, the next day Director Fury gently suggests the Avengers might want to get their asses out in public and generate some good will by helping the city the fuck out.

Clint consults the list Amelia gave him of non-profit organizations and community groups that were hit hard but are low on the city's priority list. Tony, he decides, can take the PR hit for the rest of the team, or at least for Clint; he heads out without giving his plan. The animal shelter he contacts sends him to a cat rescue lady who lives beyond the destruction zone, but is trying to round up any lost and injured cats or dogs that might be still at large. Once she gets a look at his arms and shoulders, she scratches her plan to send him out on his own and gets him to accompany her to some rubble-piles where she's heard some pathetic mewing. Fury would probably shit a basket of kittens if he could see one of his assets risking life and limb doing this, but Clint finds it does do him good. At the end of the day, they've delivered three cats to a vet that Debra--the cat lady--takes her strays to, bathed two uninjured but seriously pissed-off cats, and notified the owners of the three cats who were wearing ID tags.

Clint and Debra have a beer on her stoop while waiting for the owners of the two uninjured cats, each cuddling a purring, mostly dry, furball. Clint has a few bruises, scrapes and scatches, more from the cat-bathing than shifting rubble. Debra's a little more banged up, having been at this longer. Bruises mottle the pale, freckled arms that show past her rolled up sleeves. A moment ago she took off her hard hat and set it next to her work-booted foot, leaving her rust colored hair sweat-damp where it isn't flying frizz.
"You're obviously a cat person," she says. "You have some?"

"One. Adopted him shortly after Christmas."

"What's his name?"

Should have seen that one coming. Clint stammers for a moment. If Tony Stark disapproved of naming his cat No-Balls, the Cat Lady of Clinton sure won't like it. "I call him Pasha," he says, which is not entirely untrue. "The people who gave him to me brought along more baggage than the average circus hauls."

The conversation's interrupted by one of the cat owners, then the other, each heaping praise on Debra and Clint that's even more profuse--and feels more earned--than any Clint got for helping repel the invasion. Clint refuses a reward from the second owner, jerking a thumb toward Debra. "Give it all to her. She's paying for medical treatment for three other cats," which gets the owner to double the total reward and hand it all to Debra.

By the time he takes his leave of Debra, they've made a plan to resume the search the next day, and he's emptied his own wallet and pressed the contents onto her. Clint realizes on his way home that he feels better. He hates the word healing in the context Amelia uses it in--he can't even say why it annoys the shit out of him, but it does. But he'll admit he feels better than he has since he left Phil's apartment for the assignment in Selvig's lab.

***

A week into the Avengers Rebuild Initiative, as Clint privately calls it, it seems to be going well. Rogers visits kids and first responders in the hospital when he's not hauling and hammering, and he's fucking genius with the press. He's self-effacing and sincere and always manages to say, "We're New Yorkers. By birth or by choice. That's why we're here, and that's why we were there against the Chitauri." Even the most paranoia-monging news outlets have been finding less to mong.

Tony is a glib smartass 75% of the time he's talking to the media, which everyone seems to view as Things Getting Back to Normal, so he's a success too. He sends food, water and supplies to the workers still undertaking rescue and recovery as well as rubble-clearing. He even suits up on occasion to help shift rubble that needs a delicate hand due to its proximity to some tricky bit of infrastructure--or to humans, alive or dead.

Nobody wants to think about Bruce Banner dropping a large chunk of rubble on his toe, so he organizes the on-site donations of food and water, and takes charge of first aid for minor wounds. Thor's off-world dealing with his asshole brother, and Nat and Clint are staying as much on the periphery as possible.

After a day tracking down animals that owners and vets have alerted Debra to, she and Clint are once again having beer on her stoop, a large shoebox of small kittens on the step between them. The mother cat, who'd had them in a half-caved in basement storage area, had inflicted a fair bit of damage on parts of Clint that his protective gloves don't cover, so he's shiny with globs of triple-antibiotic ointment.

In the middle of a story Debra breaks off and says, "Don't look now, but there's a guy across the street who's been staring at us for maybe ten minutes. This is gonna sound racist, and I swear to God I'm not, but he's kind of scary."

Clint doesn't look now, but he doesn't need to. "Oh, he's legit terrifying. That's my boss." He looks
over to where Fury is standing and waves him over.

Fury crosses the street like an approaching storm cloud. That might explain why he's not sweating to death in his habitual leather coat.

"Sir, this is Debra. We've been rescuing animals that got trapped or lost." He holds out the little calico he's been cradling in his lap. "Have a kitten, Sir?"

If Fury only had laser vision (something the junior agents have been telling the probies for years), the little cat would be a smoking crater. He schools his features before turning his gaze on Debra, offering his hand. "Nick. Nice meeting you, ma'am."

"Good to meet you. Clint has a real gift for calming distressed animals. I appreciate his volunteering."

"Good to hear." The storm cloud returns after that brief sun break, as he turns to Clint. "If I may request the pleasure of your ass in my vehicle--" This is a Nick Fury specialty--saying whatever's on his mind with a screaming double-entendre and daring his subordinates to laugh or comment on it.

"Sir yes sir." Clint gently settles the kitten back in the box. "I'll give you a call about tomorrow," he tells Debra. He gives her a thumbs-up to let her know he's not in serious trouble, which he hopes is true. He follows Fury to the SUV with smoked windows and settles himself in the passenger seat.

Fury gets right to it. "I sent you all out here to help with the cleanup, not to be chasing pussy."

"Yes sir."

He thinks he did a respectable job of keeping the smirk out of his voice, but Fury spears him with a look. "What the fuck is so got-damn funny?"

"Just wondering how long it took you to think that up, sir."

Fury mutters something, but whatever comes after "motherfucking" is lost in the sound of the engine starting.

"Sir?" Clint asks as Fury pulls out into traffic. "Do you hate puppies too, or just kitties?"

The only response is a growl, but Clint thinks, My work here is done.

"Report. What exactly have you been volunteering at?"

"Just what she said. Your basic rescue and recovery, only with animals. Digging in rubble piles, crawling into some tight spaces. The animal shelter sent me to Debra when I checked in with them about volunteering. She's pretty well known in the rescue community and with the local vets. We've found about two dozen cats, four dogs and a python."

Fury grunts in reply--or non-reply, Clint isn't sure which. After a while, he asks, "How are you settling in to stately Wayne Manor?"

Clint makes no effort to smother his laugh. "Not bad, I guess. Stark and I are getting on okay. The others I haven't talked to all that much." He wonders all of a sudden if Rogers has reported his state of mind to Fury. Seems like the sort of leadery bullshit he might do.

"Who could possibly have predicted you and Stark would discover you were separated at birth?"
The man does have an impressive Sarcastic Voice. Even early on when Clint was first learning to process tone of voice, he couldn't miss that one. Fury drops the snark. "How are things going with Captain Rogers?"

Clint's glibness deserts him. He can't bring himself to badmouth Phil's lifelong man-crush, even if he personally thinks the man takes himself too damn seriously. "He seems to be a good tactician," he finally allows.

Nodding, Fury said, "He is that. Cap can be a little...intense, I guess is a good way to put it. Give him a chance. He's dealing with a lot."

"Who isn't?" Clint blurs. Watching out for someone else's feelings are a little more than he can handle right now.

"I'll give you that," Fury says easily. "It's just everyone he knows is dead, and the world he knew is gone. And as far as he's concerned, it happened all at once, just months ago."

"Oh Jesus Christ! You fight dirtier than Natasha."

The grin that spreads over Fury's face is a wonder to behold. "Hawkeye, that's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me."

Clint laughs. Today's a serious red letter day, considering he has laughed in front of Nick Fury more than once--and this time Fury joins in.

"I'll give it my best shot, sir," he finally says. "It's hard. I've lost one-third of my team. It's a little tough to jump right into the next one."

Fury nods. "I lost a third of mine, too."

Clint remembers now that Fury had said something of the kind at Phil's memorial, but it hadn't really sunk in--or he'd chosen (as far as he'd had any capacity to choose anything) to read it as standard rhetoric. He realizes he's done both Fury and Phil a disservice. "Yeah," Clint says. His voice sounds rusty. "There's nobody else like Phil."

Fury drives in silence for a while, and Clint's content to follow his example. Midtown traffic is completely congealed, of course, where it's allowed at all. Once they reach the western border of the damage zone, the license plate and windshield sticker on Fury's vehicle give them a pass onto roads that are deserted except by city crews and heavy machinery. And of course the obligatory herd of official limousines waiting for the mayor, who's conducting a press conference wearing a suit, reflective vest and hard hat, which has become a daily event.

Fury snorts. "I think that sonofabitch does this just to make the news crews hump their equipment on foot for three long blocks."

The thought makes Clint laugh--and maybe like the mayor a little more than he has in the last four years.

The thought makes Clint laugh--and maybe like the mayor a little more than he has in the last four years.

The SUV swerves around a chunk of rubble from the top of the Stark Tower and pulls up to the entrance. "Well, this is your stop."

"Thanks for the ride," Clint says, as if it had been offered, not ordered. "So, about the volunteer work--"

"You rescue all the motherfuckin' kittens you like, I don't mind." His voice gentles. "I think it's
doing you good. I see some glimpses of the Hawkeye I know. Now unass my vehicle."

As Clint alights on the sidewalk, he can't help thinking, 'Wonders never cease.'
Chapter 10

Gradually the city moves from rubble-clearing to rebuilding, leaving less for brute force to accomplish and more for demolition and construction crews. The city and the Avengers start looking for the new normal.

God knows Clint has waited plenty during his life: hours and days at a time, in freezing cold, blistering heat, pissing rain. Or waiting to be handed his next mission. This feels different to him--like his status has changed, but he's not certain how. It might be tempting to fall into paranoia that he'll never be reactivated after Loki, but for the fact that Nat is as idle as he is.

Since Stark's superhero fun palace is still in progress, Clint uses the gym and the range at SHIELD, trying to burn off his excess energy. One morning he's at especially loose ends, waiting at the gym for Natasha, who's uncharacteristically late. Ten minutes, which isn't enough to set off alarm bells, but since he's itching to get going, it's plenty to irritate him. He pulls out his phone, texts. Ur I8.

After a long pause, his phone chirps. Nails.

Clint frowns at the screen. He has no idea what that's supposed to mean. One of the constants about Nat is her absolute insistence on spelling out words and using grammatically correct sentences when she texts. She's the only person he knows who's never had an unfortunate autocorrect incident. And that includes Phil Coulson.

Is this some kind of code? It's not one they've established. He's wondering if he should respond with the one they've set up to mean "Are you compromised?" when Steve Rogers appears at his side.

"Is something going on? I keep forgetting the stupid phone."

Clint hadn't noticed him here, but Rogers has a damp V at the neckline of his T-shirt, so he must have been around. "Dunno. Nat's late, and I'm not sure what the hell she means."

He tilts the phone toward Rogers just as another text comes through. I TOLD YOU.

"Maybe she's getting a manicure?"

Clint smacks his palm against his forehead. "Christ, I'm a dope."

Rogers quirks a half-grin. "I keep seeing all these storefronts now that say NAILS. I had to do some exploring." He raises one hand for his own inspection. The nails look suspiciously shiny.

"Is that polish?"

"No," Rogers says, sounding mildly defensive. "They just buffed them. Howard Stark used to have it done all the time." The grin turns rueful. "Actually, I only went in to have a look, but those ladies were really insistent. Anyway, if you came to spar, I've got some time."

"I dunno. I wouldn't want to wreck your pretty nails."

Rogers swats him on his shoulder, which actually forces Clint to take a step to keep his balance. "Go pound salt, Barton."

The playful shit-talking tone is unmistakable, but "What?"
"You never heard that?"

"Nope. God, old people say the weirdest shit."

Rogers flicks a hand toward Clint's midsection. It barely lands, but it stings. "How about 'Go piss up a rope'?"

"You mean like 'Get bent'?" Clint accepts the invitation of Rogers' "come at me" gesture and counters with his own attack. Like Rogers' moves, it's more schoolyard bullshit than fighting or even sparring.

"I wonder which would be more painful," Rogers says as they circle and feint at one another. "Pounding salt or getting bent."

And yeah, Clint has seen Captain America in battle and heard tales of his glory—*god*, has he heard tales of his glory, and seen footage, thanks to Phil—but for the first time he really takes in that Rogers has lived this, the waiting and waiting and filling the time with talk about stupid shit like this. "Depends where you pound the salt, I guess." He aims a kick at Rogers, who evades it with ease and launches a counter.

"*You're* the one Fiorello LaGuardia read the funnies to, not me," Clint adds.

A quick flash of expression crosses Rogers' face. Surprise that Clint would come out with that nugget of trivia. Gratification, maybe. He sweeps a leg out, knocking Clint's out from under him, then says, "It was either 'down a rat hole' or 'up your ass.'" He dodges another charge from Clint. "Depended on how, well, salty a guy was."

Clint turns and comes at him again, aiming a foot to the back of Rogers' knee, sending the bigger man sprawling on the mat. "Well, salt in the ass sounds hella painful, but I still gotta think getting bent is worse."

"Agreed," Rogers says as he comes to his feet. "But it has to be close." And with that important bit of consensus, they're adequately warmed up and begin the full-on sparring, street-fighter style, exchanging only grunts, wordless yells and occasional laughter. Finally, gasping "*No mas,*" Clint collapses bonelessly onto the mat.

Rogers drops down beside him, panting and grinning. The grin is genuine, but Clint really suspects the breathlessness is for show. "Damn, that felt good. Did that help any?"

"Help what?"

"You've seemed pretty edgy lately."

Oh *fuck*..More of this leadership crap. Though it's the last thing he wants to do, Clint heaves himself up into a sitting position. He refuses to lie on a couch to talk about his feelings with his therapist, so he's sure as hell not doing it with Captain America.

"I know I've been," Rogers goes on. "I'm lousy at waiting for things to happen. Not that I'm looking for another world-ending threat. One was enough. But we met the enemy, we beat 'em back, and now what?"

"Yeah." Clint heaves a breath. "I'm not even sure if I'm active or not. I -- went through some shit a few months back. Took a lot of recovery time. The mission that brought me in contact with Loki -- that was meant to ease me back in." He laughs, but it comes out sounding like the harsh scrape of metal against wood. "Great tactical move, Fury."
Rogers doesn't reflect Clint's sardonic amusement, just regards him solemnly. "Rough re-entry."

"Yeah," Clint says. "Crash and burn. So I don't know. You and I might be sitting here with our thumbs up our asses for entirely different reasons."

"You're here in the tower. You're part of the team."

"Yeah but that was Stark. That was Stark on adrenaline."

"You think SHIELD wouldn't have prevented that if they weren't for it?"

He has a point, Clint guesses. Hell, he had Sitwell, an L8, helping him move his cat.

"When you said 'Great move, Fury," did you mean he made that decision himself?"

"Yeah," Clint says slowly. "He came down and told me himself."

"He values you," Rogers says. "You are part of this team."

Something in his tone makes Clint think of Phil, always so certain of Clint's place in SHIELD, much sooner than Clint himself was. It warms him and makes him ache at the same time.

"Thanks," he finally says, after a silence that falls just this side of awkward. "I appreciate it. Snipers aren't much used to teamwork, but I'll do my best to make it work."

"You'll do fine," Rogers says. "My pal Bucky was a sniper, and I couldn't have asked for a better man on my squad."

Clint remembers the name Bucky from some of Phil's geekier moments when they were killing time on a mission, but the last name won't come to mind. Clint has no idea what to say, and Rogers applies the conversational bootlegger's turn. "I think maybe as a team we've performed ourselves completely off the playing field."

Despite his frown, Clint thinks Rogers is as grateful for a change in topic as he is. "What do you mean?"

"You and I and Nat, we're weapons. And Tony's made himself into one. Put us together the way Fury did, and we're the nuclear option. That's something you don't use on Batman-level shit. Could be they're going to keep us in reserve for the big world-ending threats. God knows I don't want to see one of those come along anytime soon, but I don't want to spend my career waiting for it. I'm used to being a weapon. Aim me, keep me at full draw for the whole damn mission until I'm released to go after my target. I'm good with that. Between deployments, I'm ready but relaxed. This, though. Sitting in a silo waiting for someone to push the button--it's not what I'm built for."

Rogers takes this in, thoughtful and solemn. Or maybe just trying to sort out the half dozen metaphors Clint just mixed. Finally he nods. "I get what you're saying. We're pretty alike in that way. You have a good point." A slight smile breaks his solemnity. "To push the archery metaphor a little farther. I'll talk to Fury about our role. Until we get this all settled, how about the occasional street brawl sparring session?"

Clint grins as he gets to his feet. "Hell yeah. Captain America fights dirty. Wait till I tell--Fuck!"

"Agent Coulson," Rogers, who has also risen to his feet, puts a hand on Clint's shoulder. "I know how it is. What a shock it is to remember--"
Sidestepping the comforting hand, Clint drops his voice to a near whisper, but it's no less viciously angry. "You don't know how it is. Agent Coulson was my lover, my partner." He doesn't give a shit. Nat knows, Sitwell knows, Fury knows. He's pretty damn sure Phil's assistant Brent knows. He's tired of pussy-footing around it for anyone else, even if they were born in the Dark Ages. "Every morning I wake up and he's not beside me, I'm gutted all over again." Okay, that was more personal than he'd meant to get.

"Clint--"

Clint waves him off with a slash of his hand, stalking out of the gym. Without even pausing to take a shower or even towel off, he heads on out of SHIELD and back to the tower.

***

Despite the cleanup efforts, the sidewalks around Stark Tower are still too littered with small debris and contaminants to take the cat walking in the neighborhood, so Clint takes him up to the balcony so they can walk off a little bit of the claustrophobia. The penthouse and terrace have been restored, with the outside no less pristine than Stark's living space. When they've exercised to the cat's satisfaction, Clint settles in with No-Balls stretched across his lap and purring loud enough to be heard over the traffic below. Sitting with his back against the riser of Iron Man's own personal LZ, he bends over No-Balls, softly crooning nonsense to him. With Phil gone, the cat is the only creature who's ever heard Clint's attempts at singing. Like Phil, he doesn't seem to mind.

The quiet glide of the glass door alerts Clint to someone's arrival, so he cuts off the singing but remains curled over the ecstatic cat, rubbing his ears between gentle fingers.

Footsteps approach, then falter. "Barton?" Shit. It's Rogers, who's probably come to soothe the Hawk's ruffled feathers. Because he never fucking stops being the Captain.

Suppressing a sigh, he straightens up, turning his attention to Rogers, who makes his own shift, from furrowed brow to a relieved expression. Clint imagines the picture he must have presented after his speech and flounce from the gym. Did Rogers suppose he'd hidden himself away out here to weep salty, salty tears?

Before Clint can think of something snotty to say, the cat rams his head into his hand, so he resumes petting the demanding bastard.

Rogers crouches facing them. "So this is the cat that's got Tony so worked up."

Clint reflexively draws the cat in closer, but after all their burrito time, No-Balls makes no protest. "Tony's upset about him?" That fall from grace didn't take long. Now Clint's going to have to dig up a new place to live, unless by some miracle his downtown hovel hasn't been rented yet.

"No, no," Rogers reassures him. "He's just shifted into overdrive to design the perfect living space for the cat, too."

"Tony does know cats don't need their own apartment, doesn't he?"

On anyone but Rogers, Clint would call his expression a smirk. "Who knows. I don't think Tony's had any experience with pets, except the mechanical ones." He huffs a laugh. "Probably for the best, considering how often he forgets to feed himself." Gesturing at the cat, he asks, "So what's his name?"

"Pasha," Clint says, mildly surprised at how quickly that slips out. He suspects it's a decision that's been simmering for a while, maybe even since he first told Debra that lie. He really should have
made the change sooner--he knows from experience how shitty it is to get tagged with a name or nickname that labels you as damaged goods. No-Balls wasn't any cooler than Dummy had been.

"Is it okay to pet him?"

"Let him check you out first. Give him a finger to sniff."

Pasha takes his sweet time turning his head for a whiff of Rogers' offered finger, but once he does, he slides bonelessly off Clint's lap onto the balcony floor between them to give better access to Cap.

"Fickle bastard," Clint says, but he's happy enough to let Rogers take over a shift.

Rogers adjusts to a more comfortable sitting position, and for a long moment he tends to Pasha's insatiable desire for petting. Clint waits. He's got a good sense of when he's being sought out, and Rogers is clearly on a mission.

Finally looking up from the cat, Rogers says, "Clint, I didn't want to leave things where they were after our conversation this morning."

"Listen, it's no big thing." He's pretty sure Rogers recognizes it for a lie.

"No call insulting my intelligence, Barton." There's a quirk of a smile softening the statement, but it's the statement itself that--dammit--makes Clint like him just that little bit more. "There's something I should tell you." Pasha delivers his most bruising bunt, which prompts Rogers to grin and scratch behind the cat's ears. Finally he raises his head and meets Clint's gaze. "My friend Bucky--" What's meant to follow seems to get stuck.

"The sniper, yeah."

"Well, he was more than a friend--at least on my end. I described him as my pal because that was the safe thing to say back in the day."

Clint has never, for obvious reasons, liked the phrase struck dumb, but it sure as hell applies right now. It takes him a moment to recover. "You guys were together?"

Clint's certain it's a wince that he sees before Rogers turns his attention back to Pasha, scratching softly in the cat's favored spots with long, graceful fingers. An artist's hands, Clint thinks, remembering the book of sketches Phil had. Clint had spent a lot of time looking at those drawings when he'd been trying to drive the white room from his head.

"No," Rogers says. He looks up then, as if belatedly remembering Clint's recent few days of complete deafness, giving him a better line of sight. "No, we weren't--" He pauses briefly then pushes on. "Lovers. I never told him I was interested that way."

Clint's breath gusts out of him. "Shit."

"I thought--sometimes--he might feel the same way. But the risk in those days--"

"Yeah." Clint feels vaguely sick. "Jesus, man, I'm sorry I gave you shit about this."

Shrugging a massive shoulder, Rogers says, "You didn't know. Nobody knows. You were right. I had no idea what I was talking about. I don't know what it's like to wake up every morning next to someone and then have them gone."
"I think that's even worse." The statement slips past his filter and out into the air before Clint even thinks. "Fuck, I'm sorry. That was horrible."

"No, it-- I don't know that it's worse than losing what you had, but it's huge, having someone acknowledge it." He looks down at his hand, buried in Pasha's fur. "He makes it easier, doesn't he? Talking about these things."

"More than just talking, yeah." He feels a flicker of resistance to revealing too much of himself, but realizes it's a fair exchange for the trust Rogers just gave him. "Phil got him for me. I came back from an op--from being captured--and I was all kinds of fucked up. Pasha helped drag me out of my head and back into the world."

"Is that a leash?"

Clint laughs at Rogers' incredulous tone. "Yeah. He likes being taken for walks. I wasn't kidding about being dragged out into the world."

Before long a light rain starts pattering on the balcony, and Pasha drags them back into the penthouse. Clint leaves the cat with Steve--who, yeah, is Steve now--and goes to snag a couple of beers from the kitchen. When he returns he points out to Steve what he'd meant about the way the light reacts with the ridges in the Chrysler Building's crown, and they stand in the windows, watching as the storm gathers and breaks over the city.

"Have you ever been inside it?" Steve asks, and Clint says that he hasn't. "We'll have to go sometime soon. It's really beautiful."

Belatedly Clint realizes he's made another connection to the team, attained another first name (collect 'em all!). He'd had Thor's from the start--apart from several days where he was that arrogant, meddling fool. He's not sure he's likely to unlock Banner's, but Clint will do what he's done his whole life.

He'll take whatever he can get.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Usually I go by release dates in weaving in movie canon, but I'm using Iron Man 3's original Christmas release plan (and all those Christmas details) for working with IM3.

Happy holidays chapter! (Except Clint, not so into it.)

Life goes on.

Thanks to Tony's construction crews, the Avengers all move into their permanent quarters around the same time. Clint and Nat share a floor, which blows his mind. They each have a private suite with a common area in between, and there's also a common area on Tony's floor where some or all of the team can be found hanging out. True to Steve's prediction, Tony designed a cat's paradise running through Clint's suite and the common area, with a course of ramps and steps and high vantage points hugging the inner walls. It's somehow like a modern design element (at least according to the home design magazine Nat's been collecting lately), of sleek, expensive wood, with a shelf running directly below and parallel to it, for knick-knacks (yeah, fat chance) or books. The thought of collecting enough books to pack that long expanse fills him with glee, yet also makes him ache, missing Phil intensely.

Tony has also provided a fancy feeding set-up capable of being run by Jarvis whenever Clint and Tasha are both out of town, and a reminder system to ensure that whoever is around provides Pasha with some company.

"I dunno, Nat," he tells her on their first night in their shared area, as they sprawl on pricy but ridiculously comfortable sofas. "I didn't think any place but Phil's apartment would ever feel like home, but this might prove me wrong."

A week after he's in, Sitwell meets him in the lobby of Phil's building to help him haul Pasha's caravan of belongings to Stark Tower. "You look good, man," Jasper tells him when they're in the elevator. "I'm looking forward to running ops with you again."

"Tell that to Fury," Clint says. "Or maybe not--he's the one who sent me to babysit the blue cube of doom."

Jasper eyes him. "Sounds like you might be getting your sense of humor back."

"It's self-preservation when you live with Tony Stark."

Jasper utters a soft curse as he struggles with the key in the top lock.

"Little more pressure toward the top edge of the key usually does it," Clint says automatically. It makes his breath catch to be reminded how readily this detail came back to him. He sucks in a breath, holds it as the lock clicks and Jasper swings the door open.

It's like a kick in the gut, seeing the place again. This time without the very real sense of Phil's presence. The subtle scent of his cologne has been filtered away by the air conditioner.
"Sorry again that this has been taking so long to get settled," Jasper says. "Who'd think such a careful guy would have such a complex estate?"

The word estate throws Clint. It's so far removed from what his and Phil's daily lives were, it's a foreign concept.

"You guys neer talked about this? It all goes to you."

The idea just floors him. It's what married couples do. They hadn't been together long enough for Phil to do something like that. Stupidly, he feels like a shit that he never did the same for Phil. "I don't care about his stuff--" As he winds up to this rant (which is not unfamiliar to Jasper), his gaze lands on Phil's arrangement of framed cartoon dogs and he falters. He remembers the conversation he and Phil had, that night in New Mexico when they first kissed. How Thurber's dogs made him laugh. Suddenly he's overwhelmed by the most intense longing.

"You want something of his?" Jasper asks softly. "One of those dogs, maybe?"

His mouth suddenly dry, Clint swallows with difficulty. "Wouldn't you get into all kinds of trouble? I mean, I know you're the executor, but--"

"Only if some idiot opens his big yap," Jasper says, his bland expression paired with the Sitwell Stare that freezes the balls off probie agents.

Clint can't even laugh, which is his usual response to the Stare. "Yeah," he says, his voice rough. "I'd like one of the Thurber dogs. That one." He points. "And if it's not too much, that coffee table book with Steve Rogers' sketches."

A soft sigh gusts from Jasper, who puts a hand on his shoulder. "It's not too much, Clint. Not by a long stretch."

***

Life goes on going on.

Nothing requires a nuclear option, but the Smithsonian requires Captain America as a consultant for some World War II exhibit they're doing in a year or so. He moves down to DC and only visits occasionally. Thor's back in Asgard; Banner keeps his head down, which generally means spending too much time in his lab. Clint and Tasha have been on a couple of ops together, milk runs that don't end up with him locked in a cell slowly losing his mind or having it yanked abruptly away by a demi-god. Currently, Nat's on a solo mission somewhere highly classified, Tony's off in Malibu tending to something or other; even Pepper Potts is gone. Clint's left rattling around the tower with Pasha. He gets occasional glimpses of Banner, but the truth is, he exchanges more words with Jarvis.

At first he thinks the mood that's stealing over him has something to do with the scattering of the team and the quiet that's descended over the tower. He seeks out Berit to see if she wants to go out dancing, but she's been reassigned to the London office. He goes out dancing on his own, but discovers he doesn't like the music when he's got the implants in, and he's got no intention of removing them again.

He's out wrangling strays with Debra when he realizes what's going on. Thanks to the influx of donations after the alien shit-show (and the New York Daily News' feel-good page one photo and headline: THE HAWK AND THE KITTEN, thanks a fuck of a lot, Fury), she's taken on more. She has more helpers too, but Clint still enjoys the kitten wrangling now and again while he's waiting
for a mission.

He's accompanying her on a home visit to a potential cat adopter in the Village when they round a corner and the smell of evergreens assaults him. The sidewalk has been turned into an improvised Christmas tree lot, with netting wrapped trees leaning against a chain-link fence on one side, and a truck with Maine plates on the other. Debra automatically adjusts to single-file mode, slipping on ahead of him, still talking about the phone conversation she'd had with the NYU grad student they're going to see. It takes her a moment to notice that he's stopped dead at the end of the tree-tunnel.

The overwhelming scent of pine and spruce (something he's always liked) puts him back in the doorway of Phil's apartment, just moments past a major panic attack. He remembers a browning Christmas trees with a scattering of dropped needles at its base. His senses vibrating with too much too much too much after days of minimal input. There's something missing, though. Warmth, a presence, Phil.

The narrow path in between the tree bundles, just wide enough for one-way foot traffic but somehow accommodating a two-way stream of pedestrians, sets off a wave of claustrophobia. Two impatient walkers shove their way past him without a word, and a third grunts, "Move it, asshole." Clint whirls, snarling, "Fuck off" into the guy's face. It's a voice he doesn't use often, promising violence. He rarely gets to judge its scare factor because issuing warnings is not in his job description. The man takes what looks to be an involuntary step back. Clint shifts his stance, ready for a fight, as he's well aware of the ingrained response of assholes to having flinched.

Before the man can react to reclaim his man-cred, Debra steams up and hooks her arm through Clint's. "There you are," she says breezily, with all the fearlessness of a woman who routinely wrangles feral cats. "Pardon us, sir." She leads Clint back the way he'd come, and marches him across the avenue as if it's crucial that they make this traffic light. Once they're across, she draws him toward a store window full of ornaments and bows and signs about great gifts. It's Clint she turns her keen assessing gaze on. "What's going on?"

"Little macho display, that's all," he says, but his voice sounds all wrong.

"Bullshit," she shoots back, but her tone is as warm as usual. "I saw you even before that guy walked up to you."

He feels a little like a cornered stray, but he fights the impulse to lash out. She's shown the same care with Clint, leaving it up to him to approach at his own pace--even after she discovered who he was (thanks a fuck of a lot, Daily News). Maybe he owes her something.

"It just hit me that it's almost Christmas."

"Have you been off-world since October?"

Clint manages to scrape up a half-grin. "Afraid that's classified." He's pulled that joke out a few times, often to deflect from something he'd rather not talk about.

Debra assumes her Decisive Face, a look Clint has gotten to know well. "Let's go grab a coffee."

He lets himself be pulled to the nearest diner, where they settle into a booth that suits him. Once they have mugs and a dish of creamer containers in front of them, she says, "It's your first Christmas without Phil."

Clint has told her about him. His grief had been too raw in those first weeks to conceal it for long,
and she had gently teased trust from him just as she did her cats. "Yeah. This time last year we were talking about--"

Moving in together. Which he actually had, but the circumstances had been so different, so much darker than what Phil had been proposing.

"Listen, something happened last year at Christmas. I can't talk about it because it fucking is classified. But believe me, it was horrible and it skewed everything that happened after. I got back home and the first thing I saw was a dead Christmas tree. I'm not exactly up for it this year."

"If you'd like, you can join me. I don't do Christmas, but I'll be spending the day with cats, wine, expensive takeout and Netflix. I'd be delighted to have you join me. No tree, no Christmas lights."

"Sounds nice." Clint means it, but he's not sure his tone or expression manages to get that across. "I'll let you know if it's a yes, okay?" He makes his excuses and goes, hyper-aware of every holiday window, Christmas song and Salvation Army bell ringer along the way.

***

Clint's lizard brain takes over, sending him to his suite to sling clothes into a bag while flicking through his mental rolodex for his best personal cache of IDs, money and weapons. The thing that breaks his grim flurry of activity is Pasha sashaying into the room and yawning extravagantly.

Shit. Clint's well aware that Jarvis and the auto-feeder will make sure Pasha's taken care of, but Clint wants him to have the thing he thrives on--attention. He gathers the cat up in his arms and sits on the bed, curling himself over Pasha's rumbling warmth.

"Hey, Jarvis," he says after a while. "Do you know where Dr. Banner is?"

"He is meditating at the moment, but if he holds to his routine, he will be finished in fewer than five minutes. He typically appears in the shared kitchen shortly thereafter."

"Uh, thanks." God, he hates to think of someone asking Jarvis how to find him. *Mr. Barton is currently experiencing an existential crisis. If he follows his routine, he will be cuddled with his blanky and his kitty for another hour, then spend five hours at the range, then go hang out at the High Line or hunch on the rooftop like a gargoyl.* "Shut up, Jervis," he mutters under his breath.

"Sir?"

*Shit. I swear that fuckin' A.I. can hear me think.* "Uh, do you give out that level of detail when someone asks where I am?"

"No sir. I merely wished to indicate in this case that Dr. Banner was not available at the moment, but most probably would be shortly. My apologies for offering information in a manner that was unnecessarily intrusive."

"Forget it, we're cool."

A short while later, Clint appears in the kitchen, where he finds Banner, as advertised. "Hey," he says in greeting, as if he hasn't just stalked him via A.I.--though he didn't descend to confirming Banner's presence with Jarvis before going to the kitchen. Because that would be creepy.

"Hey," Banner responds. He's piling takeout containers on the countertop. "I'm getting ready to heat up some of that Tibetan food from the other night. There's enough, if you want some."
"Yeah, sure. The perfect combination of Chinese-style cooking and potatoes. What's not to love?"

"And yak butter."

"Oh fuck yeah, yak butter. I wonder if we could convince Tony to get a yak. He could give it its own floor. You know he could figure out how to grow grass inside a high-rise."

Banner smiles. "I think you're right, if he put his mind to it. And he'd come up with some groundbreaking biofuel from methane and yak shit." He dumps various containers into baking dishes. "Are you in a hurry to eat? I was going to reheat this in the oven. I don't like the microwave for that."

"I'm good with that," Clint says. As Banner continues his work Clint summages in the fridge for an open container of cat milk, which he pours into a saucer for Pasha. He walks it to an out-of-the-way corner of the kitchen, Pasha protesting loudly at his heels the whole way until he sets the saucer down.

When he straightens, Banner is watching him, bemused.

"So, what's your position on cats?" Clint asks. "Adorable or irritating as fuck?"

"Yes," Banner says.

"Yeah, okay, that's the only reasonable answer to that question."

"But you were asking something else. Since you're usually more direct, I'm thinking it might have something to do with the other guy."

"Well, yeah. I'm be gone for a while. I was wondering if you'd mind hanging out with my cat for a while each day."

"Without turning into what Tony calls a giant green rage monster?" he asks wryly.

"Uh, yeah, I guess."

"If 'irritating as fuck' set me off, Tony's workshop would be a smoking ruin by now."

This teases a snort from Clint. "You've got a point."

"I'd be glad to," Banner says. "Mission?"

"Nah, I just--Christmas avoidance. If I hear that fucking McCartney song one more time I might just turn green and--" His brain catches up with his mouth and prompts him to shut it. "Sorry."

The glint of amusement returns. "No worries. Bad associations?"

Clint has to laugh. "Not like you're probably thinking." He had no intention of going into it, but it occurs to him that every time he lets himself be open with one of the other Avengers, he winds up with another teammate in more than name only. So he pushes himself out there. "Well, that too, but a year ago I had an op go FUBAR on me. I'm still not actually sure if I spent Christmas day in captivity or in the hospital after."

Bruce blinks. "That's a little worse than Dad taking the Christmas presents into the back yard and setting them on fire."

"Shit, your old man did that?"
Banner's expression is the only answer he needs.

"Fuck." Shaking his head, Clint says, "All mine did was--" He makes a loose fist, miming cocking his arm to deliver a backhand blow.

"Jesus Christ!" Banner huffs a sound that's almost like a choking laugh.

It sets off Clint's dark sense of humor, and he does laugh. It takes a moment before Banner breaks, but once he does the two of them quickly descend into a giggle-snorting mess. They're still at it when Pasha stalks over to the stool Clint has collapsed onto and registers a loud, strident complaint.

By the time Clint bends to pick him up and rises with an armload of cat, Banner has reined himself in somewhat, pulling in a stuttering breath to say, "Jesus, that's fucked up."

Clint smirks. "It is what it is." The memory of saying the same thing for the same reason to Phil rises up, but he pushes it aside to be dealt with later. In great fucking depth. Instead he introduces Pasha to Bruce--what the fuck, they've had a laughing jag over their brutal childhoods, so he's definitely Bruce now--and proceeds to tell him of his sacred obligations in attending the royal presence.

***

Clint spends the next three weeks as far from Christmas cheer and white rooms as he can possibly get. He feels a bit like an asshole spending an obscene amount of money on a luxury cabin built into treetops in Thailand, but since he's spending money he made taking out a particularly ruthless band of rebels back in his merc days, he can live with it.

The jungle is a constant buzz of noise, a riot of color and movement. Smells of earth and plant life and cooking food. After a week it occurs to him there's one other thing he'd been denied in the white room, and he takes to appearing at an occasional meal with other guests, taking the field trips to learn about the creatures making the constant racket. The social shit wears thin after a while, though, so he takes advantage of what he's learned about his surroundings to take off on his own. He spends as much time scaling to treetops as he does on the ground. The forest canopy stretches far enough that there's not much to be seen but more trees, and he's fine with that. After his first excursion, the hotel manager warns him about "wandering off"--actually, scolding is a more accurate description. Clint pries some details out of the man in between exclamations of "very dangerous!" and swears he'll stay on the hotel compound or travel with an approved tour, but he just becomes cagier about his comings and goings.

He's not without weapons, of course, despite traveling by a commercial airline. Stark's 3-D printer is even more sophisticated than the ones on the market, so he's got a sweet bow, a metric fuck-ton of arrows, a pistol and a couple of knives. He encounters nothing that requires their use, however. His vacation is nothing but vacation.

It's good, he supposes. The wild beauty and color wherever he looks, the unceasing song of the jungle, the food--Clint even tries and approves of the jasmine rice that accompanies each meal. The other travelers are generally pretty interesting people. Despite all this, he comes to a realization. As horrible as last Christmas was (and "horrible" has now become Clint's gold standard for ridiculous understatement, thanks to Bruce), once Phil pulled him out of the white room, he was right there at Clint's side through the whole shit show.

Talking him down during a panic attack, handing him still-warm laundry to soothe himself with, reading to him, rearranging Clint's world to make the terrifying things a little less so. Offering his patience, his wry humor ("chauffeuring Justin Beiber to an arraignment" still makes him snort), his
Clint watches the rapid sunset from his vantage point in his treehouse suite, mulling all this over. Would he trade this insanely lush landscape for the white room and the long months of agonizingly slow recovery? If it meant he could have Phil back, yeah. He sure as fuck would.

* 

Though he's late coming down to dinner, Clint picks up on the tension the moment he arrives on the dining deck. President Ellis' name filters through the forest's twilight noises and Clint groans inwardly. A new guest who's a bloviating horse's ass, most likely. But the thought no sooner crosses his mind than he realizes the it's the wrong kind of tension for political gasbaggery to be the cause. The hotel manager and various staffer members are also lingering around the table, where platters are not being passed and forks are not being lifted. The soft music that usually plays during the dinner seating, he now notices, is silent.

"Shit. What's happening?"

Something called the Iron Patriot has torn Air Force One apart in mid-flight, the manager tells him. The staffers on board were saved by Iron Man, but the president is missing. The plane blew apart, but the survivors think Ellis was already off. Nobody knows for sure. They think it has something to do with some terrorist wack-job who calls himself the Mandarin, who's been blowing up random towns and intercepting broadcast stations to air his rambling manifestos.

"Fuck fuck fuck. Clint turns and dashes back to his suite, all the while berating himself for making sure no one could reach him all this time. He'd left word with his therapist and with Sitwell that he was taking time, but he'd left no contact information. Not even Bruce had that.

He sorts through his shit to find the burner phone he'd brought and calls Sitwell. "Jesus, Jasper, I just heard what's going on. Can you get me transport from Thailand?"

"For fuck sake, Barton--"

"Save it for when I'm back. You can even kick my ass if you want. Fill me in, man. Margaret Thatcher kidnapped the president? Isn't she dead?"

"What?"

"Iron Lady or whatever."

Jasper snorts. "Iron Patriot--it's War Machine, the Air Force decided he needed rebranding. Somehow the suit was compromised, and some jackhole used it to snatch Ellis."

"This Mandarin? And who the fuck is the Mandarin, and where did he come from?"

"I know, right?" Jasper says. "If the linguistics people ever figure out his fuckin' accent, maybe we'll get it figured out. We're pretty sure he's not Asian."

"Maybe he's Tangerine."

Jasper snorts again. "It'll be good to have you here. Give me your location and I'll find you a ride home."

By dawn Clint's throwing his bags into a jeep, starting the first leg of his journey back to the States.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Takes place soon after the events of "Iron Man 3."

By the time he makes it back to the mainland, the whole cluster-fuck is over, with enough pyrotechnics to rival every 4th of July around the country, all rolled into one. Despite that, the president is unharmed, except for a few bruises and singes. The Mandarin turns out to be a manufactured spectacle fronting for a homegrown megalomaniac. The fake terrorist is under arrest; the real one is presumably tango down, no body expected to be recovered. Tony and Pepper are battered but more or less okay, but Stately Stark Mansion, West is a steaming pile of rubble in the Pacific.

The junior agent accompanying him on the flight from Edwards to New York shows him some of the video from the last few days, starting with the bullshit Mandarin manifestos and Tony's counter-manifesto to a crowd of reporters.

"Tony, you suicidal motherfucker," Clint murmurs. He turns to the agent. "Who's he avenging? Are they hurt or dead?"

"Guy that used to be his driver. Happy something. He got fucked up in one of the explosions, but he's expected to make it." The agent--McAllyn--gives him a sidelong glance. "You call him Tony?"

Clint ignores McAllyn's little fanboy moment, eyes locked on the display. Tony's speech was, of course, the Best Christmas Present Ever! to the media, so naturally camera crews were perched out on Malibu Point to capture the ensuing destruction. Though he knows Tony's all right, it still sickens him to watch everything crashing down. The thought of losing someone else in his world--his family--is too much to bear. Clint wants to tell McAllyn to shut the fucking thing off, but he can't bring himself to look away. He should have been there, at least been available to be called in--fuck, he should have had Tony's six.

And where the hell was SHIELD? This is such a great question that he turns and poses it to McAllyn.

"We were monitoring the situation," he says. He seems very nervous.

"Monitoring?" Clint snarls. "Nice fucking monitoring, asshole. They got their hands on the President."

Half of his fury, he knows, is directed at himself, but he still thinks President Ellis ought to call a special investigation and hold Fury's feet to the fire. This goes beyond mere cluster-fuck into something that doesn't even have a name. Still, it's not the fault of a junior agent. Clint offers a vague wave of the arm that he hopes somehow conveys apology and moves on to the next set of clips.

By the time he's on the ground again, Clint feels as if he's been through a mission himself, not three weeks of fucking off in a Thai treehouse. Sitwell meets with him to ream him out for disappearing, but admits they couldn't have reached him if they'd wanted to. The comm systems throughout
SHIELD were FUBAR for days during the crisis, which is why they'd made no response.

"I wouldn't need a comm system," Clint shoots back. "If I'd seen that clip of him telling the Mandarin to motherfucking bring it on, I'd have been out there waiting for those miserable fucks if I had to ride a goddamn bike to get there."

"Don't hold back, Barton," Jasper says drily. "Tell me how you really feel."

"Fuck you, Jasper." He emphasizes this with a finger-poke to Jasper's sternum. "Stark has my back when we're out there. He might not be SHIELD, but he's my teammate, and nobody laughs that off, not even you."

With that, he stalks out of Sitwell's office and makes his way to the tower. After he stops in his suite to toss his bags and gather Pasha up into his arms, he heads to the kitchen to make a pile of sandwiches. As he packs everything into a knapsack cooler, Clint asks, "Jarvis, where's Tony?"

"My apologies, Agent Barton, but Sir has asked not to be disturbed."

"Right," he says, heading for the elevator. "Take me to his workshop floor, will you?"

"Sir was most emphatic that he wished to work undisturbed."

"Do you think he should be holed up on his own right now? Because he hasn't been on his own anywhere close to enough lately."

"Sub-basement level three," Jarvis intones as the elevator begins to move.

_Fuck yeah, I just won an argument with an A.I._

Tony Stark himself is a little harder. "I'm working," he shouts through the intercom.

Clint hefts the pack. "Then you could probably use some food."

"My instruments that are much too delicate to let that cat hair generator in here."

Cursing softly, Clint has to concede the point. "Yeah, all right." He sets the pack against the glass door of the workshop. _Eat._

He takes Pasha upstairs again and lets himself be overtaken by the exhaustion of his re-entry. He curls up with Pasha in the purloined comforter and lets everything go.

***

Twelve hours later, Clint has revived himself, unpacked and done his laundry, changed into non-cat-haired clothes. "Jarvis?"

"Yes, Agent Barton. How may I be of service?"

"Tony's still in his workshop?"

"He is indeed, but he wishes--"

"Know what my old man used to say about wishes? 'Wish in one hand and crap in the other--' Well, I forget the rest because I was always stopped in my tracks wondering why I'd want to crap in my hand."
"A brief internet search informs me it is, 'and see which gets filled faster,'" Jarvis says drily.

"If you ever happen to hear me say that to a kid, feel free to electrocute me. So, are we on the same page about Tony's wishes?"

"I believe we are, sir. The elevator just arrived in your foyer."

When he gets on, the button for sub-basement three is already lit.

* 

Tony looks like shit, which is hardly a surprise, but a couple of things make Clint feel a little better. The knapsack has been hauled inside from its spot by the door, so Tony at least has thought about eating in the last twelve hours. And Pepper Potts is inside the workshop, looking like she's just arrived--which means eventually she'll make him look after himself. She's also, he knows by lip-reading, bullying Tony into letting him into the workshop this time.

As he enters, Clint says, "Don't worry. Jarvis put me through the tanning/lint roller pod."

"We have one of those?"

"Hi Ms. Potts," Clint says. He's never seen her dressed as she is now: in a gray t-shirt and athletic shorts, her hair drawn up in a ponytail. Tony's begun pasting circular pads onto her body, like Clint had for the EKG before his implant surgeries, only a lot more.

"Please. It's Pepper." Now that he's closer, he notices she doesn't look that great herself. "How was your Christmas?"

"More restful than I'm used to. I get the feeling yours wasn't."

Pepper gives him a weary smile. "Oh, it was the usual. Aspiring supervillain makes the cliche move, kidnaps hero's girl."

Tony indicates Pepper with a wave of his coffee mug. "If I said that, she would club me to death." He gives her the side-eye. "False modesty does not become you, Madame CEO." Turning back to Clint, he says, "She was a badass."

Clint's grateful he's got the implants, with Tony in full hyperdrive. "I get it," he tells Pepper. "Survive a shit-show, and joke it off as just a little gas. I do it, Nat does it, pretty much every SHIELD agent I've known does." Parking himself on Tony's work table, he says, "Seriously, though, how are you? Intel I got didn't even mention you."

"I got injected with something we're trying to analyze," she tells him with a wan smile. "Either I'm joining the superhero club, or I'm going to go up in a fireball and take a city block with me."

"Hey," Tony says. "You've got two certified geniuses working on it. You are not blowing up."

"Jesus," Clint murmurs. "Wait. Is that what those bombings were?"

"Yeah. Unforeseen side-effect of meddling in things Man was never intended yadda yadda yadda. Our wannabe supervillain asshole decided exploding people were too good to let go to waste, so he created the Mandarin to take credit. Leverage whatever he could from that."

"Jesus," Clint says again, though he's thinking more of what was done to Pepper than the fake terrorist angle. "This fucker is tango down, right? That's what I heard. Did you see it?"
"I saw it. And none of the others who went nuclear survived."

Clint sees a rise in tension in Tony's eyes, the set of his mouth.

"But," Tony adds, "we don't know if there are stable Extremis users out there. We don't know much, in fact. Was this a one-time treatment, like Cap's serum, or do they need maintenance doses? Whatever happened to old-school mad geniuses who told their entire nefarious plans to their captives? All he told Pep was how she should have given him a chance back when he was hitting on her." With that, he hurls a coffee mug across the room to shatter against the wall, coffee splashing across the wall and floor.

"Tony," Pepper says, her tone half chiding, half soothing.

Clint hears a sad little squeal from another part of the room. A machine with a pincered arm, apparently strapped into a surrounding structure, clacks its claw in the general direction of the mess.

Sighing, Tony rubs his hand across his forehead. "Sorry." He looks up at Clint, his age more apparent than usual. "Pep and I have to get back on this. Thanks for the food, by the way."

"Sure." He decides he'll bring more down later, something hot, maybe. "Oh hey, how's Happy? I heard he was hurt pretty bad."

"He's mending," Pepper tells him. "He's lost some hearing, but it might come back on its own. If not, well--"

"He's got access to a damn fine expert on assistive tech," Clint says. He makes a move toward the door, but Pepper reaches out to catch his arm.

"Before you go--I hope you don't mind me asking. I keep wondering, but never at the right time."

"What is it?"

"Phil mentioned someone he was seeing. A cellist? I don't know if anyone knew about her, or where to reach her, but I think someone should try. If she hasn't been notified."

Clint blinks. This is so out of left field it's from some other ballpark. As he works to process this he gets a mental image, then he bursts out laughing. After a moment he manages to calm it down to a lopsided grin. "Sorry. He meant me." At her baffled expression, he adds, "I do play with a bow."

"You and Agent?" Tony blurts. "You and Agent were a thing? How did I not know this?"

"Nobody knew, except Fury, Tasha and a couple of other people. And that was due to circumstances beyond our control. And now Steve. Cellist, though. That's priceless. You must've tried to set him up, am I right?"

Pepper colors prettily, looking caught out.

"That's just adorable," Clint says.

"I just thought he was too good a guy to let go to waste," she says.

"I completely agree," Clint says, adding a little eyebrow action to the remark.

"Pepper, I don't even know you," Tony says. "Well, you either." He sober. "That explains a few things."
"I guess it would. Hey," Clint says abruptly. "You two need to get back on with your research. Let me know if there's any way I can help." He has no idea what he could contribute, but he wants to offer something. "Non-flammable Type-A blood, or whatever." He wishes them luck and lets himself out.

Chuckling, Clint heads for the basement to do a few laps in the pool. Cellist. Goddammit, Phil, how can you make me laugh, even now?
Chapter 13

There's plenty of tension around SHIELD in the aftermath of the Mandarin debacle as they try to track down their global communications failure. When Fury storms through the office looking like there are teeth marks on his ass, Shit is officially Real.

Clint gets called on the carpet so Fury can release some of the overflow ass-chewing. This time there's no shared laughter or almost-warm almost-comments regarding Clint's grieving process. And he deserves the reprimand, so he takes it without snark or defiance. The one concession he gets is no official punishment for taking off for parts unknown.

Jasper meets him outside Fury's office. "Debrief in my office."

"What, did you miss a word?"

Jasper smothers a smirk but says nothing, so Clint follows. Once he's closed his door, he opens a paper bag on his desk and pulls out a six-pack of a microbrew they both favor.

"Thanks."

"That was mostly due to horrendously bad timing," Jasper says.

"Yeah, I know."

"But it's also a stupid stunt to pull and if you do it again you won't get off so lightly."

Clint twists the cap off his beer. "I am aware," he says drily. "If it helps, I'm pissed off at myself for the same reason."

Clint gets plenty of work for the next couple of weeks. Helping bring in some straggling henchmen from the Mandarin clusterfuck, a hostage situation in Atlanta, standing by during high-level talks at Camp David. When he comes home from this last mission, the tension not yet drained from his shoulders and back, he checks the pile of mail on the table across from the elevator. Nat's pile has dwindled, so she's apparently come and gone again.

Clint almost misses the package addressed to him, because he rarely orders anything by mail. He frowns at the return address, an Amazon distribution center. He hasn't ordered from them--he prefers browsing in bookstores and thrift shops, though more often now it's bookstores so he can buy new books to populate his classy new shelves.

On an impulse he asks Jarvis where Tony is and heads down to the workshop with the unopened package, waiting outside the glass door for Jarvis to announce his presence. Tony's perched on a wheeled stool, gazing at a semi-circle of glowing diagrams, as a machine with a single arm and a camera lurks by his shoulder. Metal music makes the glass vibrate with the beat, but before Clint can reach up to adjust his receivers, the volume drops until it's no longer audible out here, though Clint can still feel it through his feet on the stairs. The machine whirls its camera toward Clint, nearly clipping Tony in the head. He swats at it, mouth moving at top Tony speed, and turns to gesture for Clint to enter.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Jervis said I could find you here."
"Jarvis," he says reflexively, even though by now he knows Clint only says it wrong to fuck with him. Without looking, he flicks a hand at the diagrams--looks like a before-and-after view of a crumbled cliff face--and they wink out of view. "Daddy, you're home! What did you bring me?"

Smirking, Clint gestures with the box. "I was wondering if you've got something that can scan this package. It's nothing I was expecting."

"If it's made it to the living area, it's been scanned already. You may recall I generally piss off a few dozen people on a daily basis."

"I've noticed. But since I pissed off a few hundred spies last year, I was hoping for something a little more sensitive, if you've got it."

"You don't think you would have gotten an anthrax care package by now, if anyone was so inclined?"

Clint shrugs. "Spies. We can be a 'best served cold' bunch."

"I've met some of that type. Really not a good experience." He gestures at the workbench. "Sure, I'll run a scan. Just set it down."

Okay. Not high priority. He drops it onto the space Tony indicated, and the camera machine lurches forward.

"Jesus, Dummy," Tony barks. "You're like a bull in a fucking Bernardaud shop."

Rage flashes through Clint so fast it practically whites out his vision for a moment. "What the actual fuck did you just call me."

Palming away the camera, Tony gives him perplexed. "What?" Comprehension dawns on his face, and he blurts, "No. Jesus, no. I wasn't talking to you."

Clint's breath and fists are slow to get the message, but he stands stock still, waiting for more.

"I was talking to the bot." He gestures at the camera thing, which makes a chirpy little Star Wars noise. "This is Dummy. It's his name. Fuck, Barton, I should have--" He stumbles to a halt, apparently unable to think of what would have made that go better.

Hell, Clint can't think of anything either.

"It's pretty well established that I'm an asshole, but I'm not that kind of an asshole. I'm sorry."

Clint waves it away, the way he's seen Tony do to indicate Apology unnecessary. "You named your robot Dummy."

"I was seventeen at the time. And drunk, if memory serves." He gestures at the box. "Well go on," he chides the robot. "Take it to the scanner. He's never been the brightest of my bots, but he's been a little worse for wear after being pulled out of the Pacific."

The bot--there's not a chance in hell Clint is going to start calling him Dummy--picks up the package and gracelessly spins to trundle it off to a small chamber that looks something like a microwave.

Looking around the workshop, Clint asks, "What are the others like?"

"Currently also working on their swimming skills. The salvage crew's still searching. Full scan,
Jarvis.

Lights and graphs and bars wink on and off until, after a moment, Jarvis reports, "No hazardous or unidentified substances, sir. The contents appear to be nothing more than a book. Hardcover, approximately 356 pages in length. Trim size six inches by nine inches. Text is printed in soy ink on sixty-pound weight paper with deckled edges. The book is intact, with nothing hidden inside."

"Well, now I feel silly," Clint says.

Tony opens the scanner and returns the box to Clint. "Don't be too hasty. It could be a really shitty book. No idea who it's from?"

"Not unless there's a message inside." He pulls the tab that slices the cardboard open. "Holy fucking shit." Stumbling toward Tony's workbench, he falls onto a nearby seat.

"What?"

Clint just stares, running his fingers over the book's dust jacket. *Till the Fat Lady Sings, a Mystery by Irina Danilova.* He turns to the back flap and there's a picture of Irina done up like an old souvenir card (which she herself had never made or sold, but plenty of acts did), made up like a movie star and looking sexy as fuck. The back has a starred quote from *Publishers Weekly*, calling her book an impressive debut, a hipper, gender-swapped take on Nero Wolfe.

Tony crowds in a little closer, with the bot peering around with the camera. "Oh yeah, I saw that in the *Times*. It got a good review. Looks like something that would be right in your wheelhouse."

"It's not just in my wheelhouse," Clint says, unsure even as he's doing so why he's offering this up. He points at Irene's name on the cover. "She was my friend." He wonders if Tony realizes the significance of "my friend" versus "one of my friends." Probably not. He pulls the packing slip from the box. "Doesn't say who it's from."

Tony regards him. "Is that a problem?"

"Hell, I don't know. Just...the only person in my life now who knew I knew her was Phil."

"You think maybe it was her? It's not like you haven't had your face and your skill set flashed all over the media lately. You're a world-famous kitten rescuer, after all."

"Could be. I could try to track her down, I guess."

"Jarvis can do that. Jarvis--"

"That's all right," Clint says hastily. "I'm a spy, for fuck sakes. I'll find her."

Tony is unruffled. "Well, if you change your mind. Is there anyone else from back then who might've sent it?"

"Since it wasn't laced with anthrax, no." Reconsidering, he adds, "Actually, that's a little strong. Laced with elephant shit is more likely."

That produces a soft snort of laughter from Tony. Clint barely registers it, because he's flipped to the first chapter, feeling a shiver of wonder as he reads the two first sentences. This is *writing*. "Holy shit," he says again. "This is *good*."

"So said the *Times*. Feel free to hang out and read, if you want. Sofa's over there. Just wipe any
sleep drool off the arm."

"Gee, that's the most appealing invitation I've had all day." Actually, it is, so he sprawls on the couch Tony indicated and reads the whole book in one greedy session. It's cool as hell to see the circus from the point of view of her characters. The heroine isn't Irene, though he can spot sparks of her personality, just as the young aerialist who helps her solve the murder isn't Clint, though he can see glimmers of himself here and there. They're both fully-fleshed characters in their own right, as are the rest of the circus people. The richly-described setting, however, is exactly the one he remembers--the book might as well have been laced with elephant shit. Not only does he get a sense of the dirt and mud and pervasive smell of ammonia from animal piss, but the sounds of the circus in full swing and in the dead of night are open to Clint at last.

When he finishes the last chapter, his eyes feeling gritty and his back aching, Clint looks around to find Tony still at his workbench, tinkering with the bot--Clint decides to rename it Cambot. Jasper introduced him to Mystery Science Theater 3000 some time back to get him used to listening to layered voices talking at once--and because he knew Clint would find it funny as hell. Now that he's made the connection, he can't help but think of Tony as a mix of Joel and Dr. Forester.

"Tony." His voice carries a trace of a rasp from the dry air of the workshop. "Sandwich."

"Two minutes." Tony finishes reattaching Cambot's claw, murmuring a stream of affectionate insults as he works. Finally he looks up, rubbing his hands and a fair bit of grime down his face. "Yeah. Sandwich. That's nice."

As they shamble to the elevator to head for the kitchen, Clint's not sure they'll make it to the right floor before they fall asleep. But growling stomachs keep them focused, and they make it to the kitchen still on their feet.
Chapter 14

Clint manages to drag himself from his altered state a bit sooner than Tony, so he pulls a couple of beers and ingredients for sandwiches from the fridge. "Meant to ask--how's Pepper doing?"

Tony rubs at his face with both hands. "She's good. The Extremis is stabilized, and Bruce is working on reverse engineering the thing so we can study it. I'm working on finding any existing files Killian left to hack my way to the answers, and see if there are others we can find who've been injected with this. But Pep's going to be okay. She *is* okay."

"Glad to hear that. Hell, I hate it when civilians who are total strangers get caught in the shit, much less my people."

"You actually have people who aren't in the spy business?"

Though it's a fair question, it stings a little. Clint covers by taking a drink of his beer. "Some," he says curtly. Debra may actually be on the short list of one. Maybe Irene, if he can find her. Deflecting, he asks, "How are you doing?"

"Me?"

"Well, you know, the whole fake terrorist organization raining down real terror on your head. I've watched some of those films a few dozen times. It looked to me like you were unconscious or the closest thing to it inside the armor when you got clear of the wreckage out in Malibu."

"I was a little battered," Tony admits.

"And nearly deep-fried. Right now you look like sleep is your mortal enemy."

Tony runs a hand through his hair, leaving it sticking up in a wild mess. "Yeah, well, that's been a thing."

"Before the whole Mandarin shenanigans?"

This characterization prompts a twitch of a smile. "It turns out free-falling from an alien dimension is on my list of triggery shit. Who knew?"

"Triggery shit--the gift that keeps on giving," Clint says. "That's actually why I took a hike this Christmas. Last year I was involved in an op that went spectacularly sideways. Want this grilled, pressed or as is?"

Tony regards the pair of sandwiches Clint has been concocting. "What are you doing with yours?"

"Press. Cuban sandwiches changed my life."

"Sounds good. Do that, then."

As Clint's digging out the sandwich press, Tony says, "So I asked Fury for a favor." Clint would lay serious money on the odds that these words have never passed Tony Stark's lips before. He pops up from behind the island. "Yeah?"

"And I'm going to ask you for one."

"Okay. I know you wouldn't bother asking Fury if you can adopt a few baskets of kittens, so what
Tony snorts at this. "Jesus, Barton. You have a real flair for the weird." His shoulders seem to have let go of some of the tension they held, so Clint counts it a win. "I'm scheduled for thoracic surgery next week. Considering recent events, I'm feeling a little twitchy about the time I'll need to recover. Happy won't be back to work for a month at least, and I'm gonna try to get him to take a longer vacation than that. I'd feel safer with you assigned here for the duration. Fury's given his okay, if you--"

"Sure, no problem. Thoracic surgery. Sounds pretty serious." Also like Tony is maybe avoiding something with the clinical description.

"You could say." Without looking, Tony raises his beer for a drink and nearly pokes himself in the eye with the bottle.

Nothing says I wish I were drinking the hard stuff like that maneuver.

"They're taking out the arc reactor."

Clint blinks. "Well, sure they are," he says at last. This gets no response, so he says, "Doesn't it, like, keep your heart beating?"

"Close, but not quite. It powers an electromagnet that keeps shrapnel from entering my heart and stopping it from beating."

"So I'm guessing they're taking that out at the same time," Clint says.

"Got it in one." Tony says. He raises his beer and drinks, this time much more smoothly.

"You've been carrying all that around for a long time."

"Microsurgery's tough to pull off in a cave." Tony's using the flippant tone Clint affected back when he was deaf and in some kind of shit. He wonders now if the casual tone sounded as false as Tony's. Maybe it's just that he's gotten to know Stark. "After that, I wasn't really up for people coming at my chest with sharp things. Even when the arc reactor's palladium core was poisoning me, the idea of someone rooting around in my chest--"

Clint recognizes Tony's hit the point where fake casualness isn't going to cut it. To give him a bit of a break, Clint resumes the search for the sandwich press, then busies himself with setting it up.

"In the meantime, I've been tinkering with some microsurgery tools. Gotten some teams trained here and in Afghanistan. Their success rates are pretty good. Seemed like a good time to get this shit out of my chest."

Translation: Tony made some tech to mitigate some of the damage his bombs created. Now that he's made some highly personal decision that he's ready to remove the shrapnel and reactor, he's pretending the tech and the training were for his own benefit all along.

Because he enjoys being an asshole, Clint relays this to Tony as he transfers the sandwiches to the press.

"You're an asshole and I hate you," Tony says without heat, prompting a grin from Clint.

"Since I've unlocked that achievement, I might as well ask you--"
"Oh do go ahead," Tony says, snarky tone resumed.

"Can I see it? The arc reactor?"

The request clearly surprises him, but after a moment's pause Tony yanks up his Blue Oyster Cult tee, triggering a wave of stale body odor. "Christ, that's rank." Pulling it the rest of the way off, he balls it up and launches it into a corner.

Clint snorts. "You've never been stuck in a safe house with me and Coulson for two months."

"Agent Perfectly-Pressed?"

"Given the wrong food, Phil could fart worse than two geriatric lions. And since we were both suckers for fart jokes, it could get to lethal levels for untrained civilians."

"Phil and fart jokes," Tony murmurs. "My whole life has been a lie."

"He was a man of many layers." Clint gestures at the reactor. "So let me take a look."

Coming around the kitchen island toward Clint, Tony spreads his arms wide like a ringmaster, and Clint recognizes for the first time on a conscious level that he has the instincts of a master showman and revels in using them.

Wiping his hands on a towel, Clint leans in to get a closer look. "I used to think the glowy thing was part of the suit," he says.

"That was the idea. Shareholders tend to get very nervous when word of the CEO and head R&D guy's delicate heart condition gets out."

Though he's seen it in passing since that time, he'd still never really examined it closely. There's a metal housing sunk into his chest, with the reactor nestled within. "How deep does that go? Doesn't it...crowd shit?"

"The squishy bits eventually shifted as necessary. It wasn't the least comfortable thing about that time."

"Nah, I guess not." Clint can only blame his bleary exhaustion for what pops out of his mouth next: "What's it like, having it there? You can't exactly forget it's there, right?" He's already cringing when the sandwich press beeps its signal, so at least he can turn away and let Tony forget he asked.

So when he turns back with the plated sandwiches, he's surprised to find Tony regarding him seriously. "It's kind of a love-hate thing, to be honest. On the one hand, I made it, so it's a work of genius, especially considering I made it from spare parts in a cave. And it's kept me from, y'know, dying a horrible, agonizing death. Gotta love that. On the other hand, like you said, it's a constant reminder of three months I didn't know I would survive. And a while longer when it was actively killing me. It's a vulnerability, for all it's saving my life. Anyone who knows it's there and what it does can turn on me, use that knowledge against me. Not to mention good old-fashioned body horror, which didn't used to be a thing for me, but now kind of is." He snags the closest beer on the island counter, which happens to be Clint's, and downs what's left. "Back on the plus side, it did a kickass job of cockblocking Loki when he tried to use his disco stick on me." Smirking, he taps a finger against the glass of the arc reactor. "The look on his ratty little face."

Clint would like to share Tony's glee in thwarting Loki, but all he can think of is the icy touch of the staff's tip against his flesh, the same weapon that tore through Phil's. "That fucking staff," he mutters, and turns to rummage through a cabinet until he can regain control of his expression. By
the time he tosses a bag of fancy tortilla chips onto the counter and gets fresh beers from the fridge, both he and Tony have stuffed their feelings back where they belong, like reloading the spring-filled "snakes" into the fake cans of nuts they sold in the circus.

They spend the rest of their meal arguing about the tv and movie marathons they should watch while Tony's recovering.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Warnings for post-surgical pain, disorientation, flashbacks, grief.

Clint didn't anticipate the easiest part of this assignment to be the most fun he's ever had, but the toughest parts come as a surprise. He'd been thinking the boredom of the first few days of enforced stillness would bother him the most, especially since Tony could hardly be safer than in the medical wing of a SHIELD facility.

Not that many people, even here, realize who the patient is if they aren't on his actual team. Before he was admitted, Tony had shaved off his beard and had his hair cut shorter than his favored style, to minimize the possibility any unauthorized persons spotting him would catch on to his identity.

Post-op, Tony's lying in a pool of light in an otherwise dimly-lit room, as Clint keeps watch from an interior window ledge facing the foot of the bed. The constant beep of the monitors is beyond irritating, but Clint keeps his receivers at his normal level to catch any small sounds of distress Tony might make.

The light over Tony's bed casts strange shadows over his face, sculpting new angles and highlighting the contrast of his dark hair against the pallor of his skin. Tubes and wires sprout from his torso and arms, another tube extends from the wall to feed oxygen into the cannula inserted into his nose. The only thing that seems remotely characteristic of Tony Stark is the slight intermittent twitch of his fingers, as if his body resists complete stillness, even in these circumstances. Without Tony's constant movement and near-nonstop commentary, the figure with chest swathed in bandages could be almost anyone.

Could be Phil.

He hadn't expected it to twist at his gut this way, thinking of at least having had the chance to be by Phil's bedside. That would have half killed him too, Clint is certain, but it feels like a fresh loss to realize he'd been denied the chance to sit with him, to take his hand.

Doctors, nurses and aides come and go, some nodding at Clint as they enter, some focusing solely on Tony. Clint watches them check vitals, administer meds, adjust bedding, weighing their expressions and movements for signs of alarm or concern, but he doesn't interact unless spoken to.

Sometime in the early morning, the door opens and a hulking man in a zip-up jacket slips silently into the room.

"Wrong room, ace," Clint growls. "Just back on out and go."

The guy carefully spreads his arms, palms outward. His face is lost to the dim lighting and the afterburn of the brighter hallway lighting. "Clint, it's Steve."

Clint slips his blowgun back into his pocket and rises to greet him. "Good to see you, man."

To his surprise, Steve takes his offered hand and pulls him into a hug. To his mortification, Clint feels moisture smear along his cheek as Steve releases him. He realizes he's been watching the rise
and fall of Tony's bandaged chest with tears tracking down his face. For a while, he'd guess.

Brow furrowed, Steve peers at him. "Fury told me everything went well. Is he--?" He turns to glance at Tony, who's still deep in post-surgical sleep.

"Nah, he's good," Clint says, palming away the tears. "This is all just--"

"Kicking up some shit, as they say these days?"

A circus lot full of shit, yeah. "You could say that."

Clint can see the moment it clicks for Steve, who has been gazing at Tony. "Yeah," Steve says softly. Putting a hand on Clint's shoulder, he says, "You look like you could use some rest. I'll take a watch if you want a break."

"Maybe later. I want him to see me here first. He asked for me on this detail."

"Pepper must be off getting a few hours' sleep."

"Uhh, no. He sent her off to China without telling her."

"Oh, that'll end well."

Clint snorts. "He said if she stayed 'she'll worry, and when she worries she makes this face, and then she breaks up with me.'"

"I'm glad I came, then."

Clint settles back on his window perch, gesturing to Steve to take the visitor's chair, but he seats himself beside Clint.

"I didn't find out what was going on with Tony until it was over," Steve continues. "I got invited to spend Christmas week in Massachusetts by the grandkids of one of my old squad."

Clint can't help the twinge of envy stealing over him. "That sounds nice." As he sees the pinched look that crosses Steve's face, he adds, "Or...not."

"It was kind of weird and awkward, to be truthful. They were really trying to be nice, and they went to a huge amount of trouble...."

"But what?"

"They decided what I needed was a real 1940s-style Christmas. They got a bunch of old radio shows and board games, authentic Christmas dinner including mock apple pie, the works. Once I saw how things were going to go, I got them to borrow a toboggan from their neighbors, and we went out every day. That was the best part, and it was the one thing I never did in my childhood, because of my lungs. They enforced a total media blackout, except the radio stuff and *It's a Wonderful Life*, which didn't come out until...after." He sputters a sudden laugh. "Oh shit, Clint, their kids hated it, every minute."

"Yeah, old movies aren't always--"

"No, I mean my visit. Their parents made sure they were polite, but I knew. Captain America Ruins Christmas," he pronounces in a voice that makes Clint think of old newsreels. "It was excruciating."
Clint erupts into laughter. "Oh god, that's brutal."

"Yep," Steve says, adding a little pop to the P. "It wasn't just one family's Christmas I destroyed. All four of Dugan's grandkids all came together with their spouses and kids. Nine kids, and those who were too young to be disgusted with the whole holiday were terrified by the huge stranger stuck in the middle of everything. At least the older ones I could take out on the last day of the visit. Just them. I took them to see a movie with fart jokes, then we went for pizza and arcade games at one of those kid-oriented places. I threw away a breathtaking amount of money there, but at least they didn't hate me by the end of it."

This is the best laugh Clint's had in a while. "Shit, not even Tony would trade his shitty Christmas for yours."

Steve cocks a lopsided grin. "I suspect you're right. I might have traded for his. At least cut mine short, if not for the media blackout. I heard you had kind of a walkabout over Christmas too. What d'you say next year we spend the holidays with each other? I'm game for anything, except *The Shadow* and *Lum and Abner.*"

"It's a deal," Clint says, though he suspects it's a deal that will be long forgotten by June. It's a nice idea, anyway. "So how's the gig at the Smithsonian going?"

The pinched look comes over Steve again. "Turns out it's not just a World War II exhibit. It's about me. That's what got me in touch with Dum Dum's grandkids. I've been trying to spread out the focus a little. Anyhow, they managed to collect a ton of stuff for me to sort through and put in context, and a million stories they want me to tell. Speaking of kicking up a lot of shit."

"Ah, man," Clint says. "That sucks. I see why the SHIELD med bay's an improvement."

The moment is broken by the sound of harsh breathing and whimpers from Tony. Clint is off the ledge and by the bed in three strides.

"Get it off me, get it out." Tony's hands tug ineffectually at the restraints, which triggers a full-body struggle to free himself.

"Tony." Clint takes one of his hands and lays a gentle hand on Tony's opposite shoulder. "Tony, hey."

"Yinsen," he gasps.

"Tony, it's Clint. You're safe. Open your eyes."

Tony does so, but they're wide and terrified, unseeing.

"You had surgery, Tony. You probably hurt like hell, but you're safe. Just a couple of miles from your own bed." Clint isn't sure how much gets through, but Tony's struggling subsides to some degree. "You can relax now. You're in New York and it's 2013. I'm here, like you asked me to be, and Cap's here too."

"Surgery," Tony repeats.

"Yeah. They took out the shrapnel." He's not sure he should mention the arc reactor until he's sure Tony's fully aware. "That's why your chest hurts. They went in and got every last bit."

He doesn't seem to hear. "Fuck! Yinsen! Help me sit up."
"No no no, Tony, listen to me." He increases the gentle pressure on Tony's shoulder. "You're okay. You're safe, you're in New York."

"New York," Tony echoes. "Does Obie know?"

Clint has no clue who Obie is. "We'll take care of that, but you need to lie still."

The door opens and a nurse--oh hell yeah, it's Hector--enters, with Steve on his heels.

"Oh hey, man," Clint says. "I am so glad to see you on the team." If anyone can wrangle Tony Stark, it's him.

"Good seeing you too." He flicks his gaze over the monitors, then bends over Tony. "Good morning, Mr. Stark. How's it hangin'?"

God, Clint loves this man.

Tony's panic seems to be falling away. "Precariously."

Hector grins. "Luckily I've got duct tape. My name's Hector, and I'm your first-shift nurse, at your beck and call. Do you know where you are?"

"New York?"

"Got it in one. You know where in New York?"

"Hospital."

"Close. You're in SHIELD's med facility. You had surgery, and you came through with flying colors. You know who these gentlemen are?"

Tony's gaze flickers to him and then Steve. "Barton. Cap."

"Good man. Let's check you over and then you can get some more sleep."

While he's perusing Tony's chart and asking him questions, Steve pulls Clint aside and tells him Hector says Clint's got his pick of any room on this hall to bunk down, if he doesn't want to go too far away.

"You asked?"

Steve nods.

"Thanks for that." Once Hector has finished his exam, administered Tony's meds and proclaimed that it'll be sunshine and Little Debbie cakes in short order, Clint leaves the next watch to Cap.
Chapter 16

Tony's still sleeping more than he's awake, but he's passed into lucid territory. The restraints have come off and he's halfway through his dinner tray when Clint asks, "Oh hey. When you were first coming out of it, you asked about someone named Obie. You want me to let them know--"

"No," Tony snaps, but his look of utter horror would be enough to shut down that question. "He's dead."

"Aw shit, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Really." He lets his fork clatter onto the tray.

"Fuck, I ruined your dinner."

Tony gives him a look. "It's hospital food. It's unruinable."

It's a risk, but Clint takes it: "So, you want to get this Obie thing off your chest? Seeing as how there's not all that extra structural support there anymore, I mean."

Tony eyes him for a good while before he says, "Sure. Obie--he was Obediah Stane, the man who ran my company."

"Stane, yeah. I remember. He died in a plane wreck, or did an Earhart or something, didn't he?"

"Doesn't actually matter which one, because the official story isn't true. Remember the big Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots cosplay that happened shortly before I came out as Iron Man?"

"Sure. That was one helluva mess."

"Coulson must've left that one need-to-know. So the clunkier, less elegant robot was actually Stane in a knock-off of the first Iron Man suit. That battle was him trying to kill me. He was a little pissed off, since the Ten Rings screwed up the job, and then he failed to do it when he yanked the arc reactor out of my chest. That one was close, though."

Clint blinks. There are so many levels of fucked-up in that brief synopsis that it's hard to wrap his mind around them. "But I remember all that stuff he said when you were missing. How you were like a son to him."

"Apparently not so true," Tony says. "However, he was like a father to me. If I asked for him, I probably thought I was in Afghanistan. That and I must've been high as balls."

"Fuck, I'm sorry."

Tony waves a hand, cutting the movement off with a wince. "You didn't know. Hell, I didn't either until he hit me with a paralyzing agent and pulled out the arc reactor while giving me the 'I never really liked you' speech."

Clint shakes his head. "That's harsh. It's inadequate, but he feels the need to say something."

Tony gives him a long, assessing look.

Shrugging, Clint says, "Let's skip the suspense. My brother. Haven't seen him for about half my life now. Don't really want to." He doesn't want to say more, though he would if Tony asked. He
doesn't have to, though, when Steve enters the room with Hector, who's now off-duty, though he's pushing an empty linens cart. The cart is going to provide the table for their poker game, which will last until Tony starts to flag or Hector calls it.

After a week the poker games move to the tower, as does Hector. It takes another week before Tony's feeling well enough to say, "It's not that I don't love you, Hector. Hell, I'd poach you to sign on as the Avengers' on-staff nurse, if we were doing much avenging these days. But how long do you think I'm going to need a live-in nurse?"

"Why?" asks Hector as he lays down his hand, prompting groans from the others. "You getting tired of losing your shirt?"

Clint notices that Tony's hand drifts up to his chest where he sometimes would absently touch the arc reactor. Even with Tony's mixed feelings about it, he must feel weird to be without it after--how many years has it been?

Hector rakes in his latest pile of poker chips. "I'd say at least until after Ms. Potts returns."

Tony sweeps up the discards and begins shuffling. "If you think my CEO is going to play nursemaid, I'd advise you to walk that back before she hears it."

"Nah, not for that," Hector says. "Not that I've met her, but from everything these guys have said, when she gets back and finds out you had open-heart surgery on the sly, you're gonna need some full-time nursing."

Steve snorts. "Ooohhh, sick burn."

"I'm sorry," Tony declares in a voice that doesn't sound sorry at all. "I just can't get past Captain America saying shit like 'sick burn.'"

Even if Clint didn't have it on the best authority that this is why Steve says them, he'd be clued in by the big grin.

Before the week is out Cap's called back to DC, so the poker games give way to movie nights. Hector's main function evolves into helping Clint keep Tony away from his workshop and the full-body contact with oil and solvents that usually results. Once the incision scabs fall away, even that job is unnecessary. Jarvis keeps Tony limited to a couple of hours at a time by shutting down the computers and even the lights, if Tony's working with nothing more high-tech than a screwdriver. Soon Hector goes back to SHIELD, apparently taking with him all the sunshine and Little Debbie cakes in the world. Tony's surly as fuck and Clint is going to commit murder if he doesn't get sent on an op soon.

Tony's mood improves once Pepper returns from her tour of factory conditions--hell, Clint's convinced he thoroughly enjoys the blistering scolding that follows. Even this he choreographs like the master showman he is, with Clint as audience. Tony helps her shuck off her coat, then wraps her in a hug that goes on until she realizes there's something off about the contact. When she pulls back just enough to look at him and say, "Tony?" he steps back, yanking up his shirt. "Look, Ma, no arc reactor!"

Apparently it hasn't occurred to him that the effect of the reactor's absence is offset by the opposite effect of a chest full of lurid purple scars. Pepper, not surprisingly, gasps. "What in god's name?"

"A little microsurgery, a lot of big fucking macrosurgery. All taken care of discreetly. I had Legolas here to provide protection if I needed it, and the best nurse SHIELD could lend me,
though he totally skinned my ass at poker. Everything's healing beautifully."

"You had the arc reactor removed," Pepper says, still stunned.

"And the shrapnel. Otherwise, it might have been a poor life decision."

"And you sent me off on this surprise inspection tour to keep me out of the loop."

Speaking of poor life decisions, Clint thinks.

"I didn't want to worry you. You know how you worry."

"I wonder why," she snaps, and Clint sees a white-lipped rage coming on.

He edges toward the door.

"I wonder too," Tony says breezily. "It's probably a neurological wiring thing."

Her explosion comes just as Clint makes his escape into the stairwell. Despite the fireworks, he knows the last vestige of his mission--hanging with Tony after he emerges from the grip of a nightmare--has just been rendered obsolete by Pepper's return. Clint throws himself back into hardcore training mode in the gym and the range, but the urge to be out in the field is like a deep itch that's impossible to scratch. He'd swear the forced inactivity was actually a punishment for his disappearance at Christmas, if not for the fact that Fury makes damn sure his agents know when they're under suspension.

One morning he heads down to the workshop to ask if he can borrow one of Tony's cars, halting outside the glass doors when he sees Tony gesticulating wildly and yelling at Fury himself. Making a quick U-turn back up the steps, Clint hauls ass to his apartment. He settles in with Pasha, trying once more to draft a letter to Irene, but he's interrupted by a thundering knock on his door.

Tony would just breeze right on in, and the thought of Pepper Potts rattling the knickknacks makes Clint snort. He lifts Pasha onto his shoulder and answers the door, gesturing Fury into the room.

"Barton, are you ready for a mission?"

"Oh, fuck yes. Sir."

And because this is Clint's life, it becomes a classic case of be careful what you wish for.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Thanks to my readers for your patience! This was a tough one to write for a number of reasons, including warnings below.

Warnings abound for this chapter (spoilers follow). Canon-typical violence, domestic violence in context of an undercover op, passing but vague reference to particularly loathsome category of pornography, death by gunfire, corpse mutilation and a high degree of self-loathing.

So it turns out the way you continue being an effective spy after the entire world has seen you kicking Chitauri ass is by getting sent to places so shitty they barely registered the invasion. Natasha has been on the ground for months now, working her way into the social circles of the powerful. Clint's mission takes the opposite tack, sending him to infiltrate a band of rebels who appear to be planning some hardcore mayhem. His cover is an American merc, so all he has to do is be the asshole he used to be.

Clint hates everything about this op. Hates being the asshole he used to be, and the assholes surrounding him. Hates them with extra fiery intensity because they fund what they do by trafficking in the kind of porn that puts them squarely on his personal "needs killing" list. Hates the things governments are willing to do to their people, and the things insurgents are willing to do to those same people in the name of freeing them.

He hates that he gets only the most fleeting glimpses of Tasha at a dead drop. Hates being without his bow, which might trigger someone's memory of Hawkeye in the Battle of New York. He even hates that they fucked up his hair for this job, making him dye is hair a dead shade of black to match the extensions they wove in to hide the receivers. Not to mention the douchy facial hair he's currently sporting, which he can't pull off the way Tony does.

After a few weeks of this, he signals Tasha to meet for their private passage of a message that Clint calls the half-dead drop. On the day of the weekly open air market, Clint falls into step behind her, idly examining items on offer as she goes past. He lags behind, then passes her, then comes back to follow nearly at her heels. Two stalls later, Tasha lets her wallet fall to the ground. Clint scoops it up, calling out in English, "Miss, you dropped this." Turning, she looks at him without a hint of recognition and snatches the wallet back. She palms the message he tucked inside, while making an elaborate show of counting the money to be sure it's still there, then she stalks off without a word.

"Bitch," Clint mutters as he watches her go, playing to the hilt the asshole that he hates.

Three days later he lounges on the steps of the city's sad-ass art museum, leering at women and making inappropriate comments. Tasha exits the building, letting the floor plan slip from her fingers as she passes him. Clint scoops it up, calling out in English, "Miss, you dropped this." Turning, she looks at him without a hint of recognition and snatches the wallet back. She palms the message he tucked inside, while making an elaborate show of counting the money to be sure it's still there, then she stalks off without a word.

"Bitch," Clint mutters as he watches her go, playing to the hilt the asshole that he hates.

Tasha's precise handwriting lays out a plan to meet up. She's secured the use of a summer cottage, still uninhabited in the chill of early April. She'll meet Clint there over a weekend when the official
who has taken her as his lover is away in the Crimean Riviera attending his wife's cousin's wedding. That weekend is three weeks away, leaving Clint to stew in the absolute hatred of everything about this mission.

Though the neighborhood is deserted, it's bound to be patrolled to keep the rabble from preying on the shuttered homes of the wealthy. Once the sun goes down, Clint parks in an active section of the village and sets out on foot. Cutting through several brown yards, he approaches Tasha's cottage from the rear.

She quickly answers his quiet tap at the door, admitting him to the dark kitchen and soundlessly closing the door behind him. Clint maintains silence until Tasha speaks, assuring him without explicitly saying that she's done a sweep and found no bugs.

"I have two more windows to cover, then we can get some light and heat going." She pushes the curtains to the back door aside and presses dark cling film against the panes of glass there. SHIELD tech that doesn't obstruct the view, but allows no light to leak out. As she stretches to cover the higher reaches of the last window, Clint gets a flash--not memory, because he was only told that it happened--of her altering the curtains surrounding his infirmary bed after the white room.

Unsentimental and no-nonsense as she is, Natasha has been the one who's taken care of him in so many ways, for so long. Watched his back, saved his ass, kept him grounded, kept him from running off the rails after Phil's death. An unaccustomed wave of tenderness sweeps over Clint as he watches her settle the curtains back into place and switch on a nearby light.

The first thing he notices as his eyes adapt is the radical change in her hair color, now a pale blonde. As she finds and fills a kettle, he sets his duffle beside the door and moves through the cottage, turning on lights and taking note of each room's layout. A back hallway runs from one of the two bedrooms back to the kitchen.

"New hair," he says as he reenters.

"I had it done to please my lover," she says, no trace of irony in her voice. But when she turns from the pastry boxes she's unloading onto a plate, she wears a knowing smirk. "I think I'm about to be gifted to his superior, who is notoriously fond of blondes."

"Aw, how come I never get the missions where people want to pass my booty around?"

Huffing a soft laugh, Tasha turns to rummage in the cupboard for a teapot and cups. Clint is used to the demands of the job, which is a very neutral way of saying the willingness to fuck the kind of people who'd trade you for a promotion. But he doesn't like the tightness around her mouth, the heightened tension in the way she moves. He wouldn't call it the same weary look she had before SHIELD, but there's something about the way she's carrying herself that sits wrong with Clint.

Once she has the tea things arranged, she disappears into the back hallway and returns with a small space heater, which she sets up in the living room on the hearth. He watches as she kneels to fuss with plugging it in, cursing in Russian. It takes a lot to dim his appreciation for swearing, but he's been hearing too damn much of language like this lately.

When she reenters the room, Clint says, "You're horning in on my territory."

"What," she says flatly.

"Pretending you're not hurt. That's my gig."
"Don't start." The kettle starts to rattle loudly, and she snatches it off the fire before it comes to a full boil. She pours it into the teapot she's prepared.

"This op, Nat. It feels about three degrees north of a clusterfuck. It's not just that the whole thing makes my skin crawl. There's something off."

"It's unpleasant, sure. On your end of things and mine. But we've been on worse."

She's doing what she does brilliantly--compartmentalizing so she can get the job done. Clint does it too--none of them could do what they do without that ability.

He lets it drop, but he can't let it go.

He follows the topic drift as they drink strong Russian-style tea. Listens to her stories about the months she's been away. Tells her about Tony's operation, his Christmas, Steve's Christmas.

Her reaction to his story about Steve seems off, and Clint can't tell if it's because he's fucked up the telling of it, or if it has to do with her. Either way it brings him back to everything he feels is wrong right now, and he starts another round of bitching about this whole op.

"Don't get angry," Nat says, which is the internationally-recognized disclaimer for I'm going to tell you something that will piss you off, but me saying this implies a promise from you not to get angry, despite no such promise being made.

Clint sits back and folds his arms to let her know how much weight that disclaimer's going to carry.

"What?"

"It's coming up on a year. Do you think maybe all this unease has something to do with that?"

Playing dumb is one of his strengths. It looks so natural on him. "A year since--?"

Scowling, she says, "You know. Since Coulson. I get that anniversaries are hard."

"You know what's hard?" Clint snaps. "Having my gut feelings dismissed because they might be Feelings. This isn't because oh boo hoo, I miss Phil. It's because this whole fucking op has felt all wrong from the jump. Oh wait. I do miss Phil. Because he would notice how this op is wearing on you, and if I told him what I've been trying to tell you? He would damn well listen."

The light in here isn't good, but it doesn't take much to see the spark of anger in Natasha's eyes. "Don't project your issues--" and she laces this word with a fair bit of her contempt for psychology- "onto me, Clint. You have no idea how this op is 'wearing on' me."

"No? I have eyes, Nat. My ears are for shit, but my eyes work better than anyone's. Phil would have seen it too, probably even before me. Has Warren?" He's got nothing against her handler, except of course that he's not Phil.

"When you first suggested this, I thought it would make a nice break. I didn't realize you were planning on being a one-man intervention team. Fuck this, and fuck you. I'm going to bed." Her anger leaves a trail behind her, like the powerful perfume she's taken to wearing to please the mark she's working.

When the door closes behind her, Clint scrubs his hands over his face. Why is he so fucking bad at this? Though he's tired, he doubts he'll get much--or any--sleep now. He rummages through the cabinets hoping to find some vodka, which naturally he does. For a moment he considers drinking enough to forget what a shit show he made of this conversation, but in the end he has just enough to
facilitate going to Natasha's bedroom and tapping softly. "Tasha?"

Her grumbled response is tired, but not sleep-disturbed.

"Tasha, I'm sorry. Can I--?"

"Come in," she sighs, and when he does so she's already scooting over in the bed.

"Sorry," he says again. As he settles in beside her, he murmurs, "I do miss him."

She slides her hand onto his and grips it tight. "So do I."

**

It's impossible to say whether it's the noise of an engine that wakes him, or the way the relaxation of sleep suddenly leaves Natasha's body.

Fuck. He rolls out of the bed, grabbing for his pant and shirt, just getting the pants on before there's pounding at the front door.

"Beliita!"

Snatching his pistol off the nightstand and his boots from the floor, he jerks his head toward the back of the house.

"Stay under cover," she hisses. "He has a driver."

Clint nods and runs for the back hallway, pausing only to shove the boots out of sight in the curtained pantry shelf where he'd stashed his duffel. That done, he slips soundlessly out the back door.

Natasha's voice takes on a higher register, with a side of confused sleepiness. "Anzor?"

Hoping the eaves will hold up, Clint jumps for them, then hoists himself to the roof, spreading himself flat against its slope. He slows and quiets his breath as much as possible, trying to catch something of what's happening below him. Anzor pounds on the door again as Natasha reaches it, locks clicking open under fumbling hands.

"Anzor?" she says again, her voice clearer with the door open.

The man thunders past her, and Clint can hear her stumble against the door, sending it thudding back into the wall. Boot heels storm through the cottage, Natasha's quick nervous steps following behind as she asks what's going on, why he's here and not in Crimea.

Anzor has his own question, which he repeats as he rampages through the house. *Where is he?*, liberally laced with *cunt* and *whore*.

In that high, brittle voice, Natasha protests her innocence, saying all she was after was a quiet retreat.

The back door flies open and Clint holds his breath as Anzor storms onto the stoop, ranting. Confronted by the empty yard, he curses and rails at Natasha, who tries to calm him, pleading.

*Don't look up don't look up.* It's rare that someone thinks to search above eye level, but old Anzor has already proved himself a paranoid fucker.
"Please, come inside," Natasha begs, and there's something about the voice she's using that's getting right under Clint's skin and electrifying every nerve.

The asshole goes inside at last and the back door shuts, but before Clint can release a breath Anzor erupts in a rage. Glass shatters in the sink, a sound he's intimately familiar with. A second explosion of glass, and he realizes it's the pair of glasses they'd sipped their tea from earlier.

*So fucking careless.* Though they'd had no reason to suspect her lover wouldn't be exactly where he'd claimed he'd be.

The breakage is followed the sound of flesh on flesh, and of course Clint can recognize the particular sound of fists. Natasha never breaks character, crying out and begging for mercy. They crash from kitchen to living room, then the front door shuts, muffling even more of the sound. The beating he can hear clearly enough, but their words are now more muddled, leaving Clint trying to read tone of voice.

The sobs start up then, sending panic tearing through Clint. *It's Natasha. She's doing her job.* His breathing and heartbeat aren't getting the message however, making it harder for him to hear. He clings to the roof, arms and legs spread, feeling helpless as fuck.

The sobs seem only to enrage Anzor further, unleashing a torrent of curses and blows. Then there's a high-pitched shriek, which sends Clint dropping to the ground. The film-covered windows present nothing but darkness, so he slips into the unlocked back door.

The bastard has her on the living room floor near the fireplace, his fist wound in her hair. As Anzor's other hand closes around an iron poker, Clint brings up his Glock and puts several rounds in his head with the *click click click* of subsonic ammo through a suppressor.

Anzor goes down, jerking Natasha's head back as he goes down, pulling a grunt from her that sounds more like the woman Clint knows. She twists toward Anzor, reaching for his hand to pry her hair from his fist, and her eyes go wide. "Bljad!"

Clint means to go help her free herself, but the shakes suddenly overcome him, the still-hot cylinder of the suppressor tapping Morse code against his leg.

"Jesus, Clint."

He can't respond because his breathing and heartbeat are wildly off-kilter, and his legs are giving way. Reaching for the nearest wall, he does his best to slide to his knees rather than outright crashing to the floor.

Finally disentangling her hair from Anzor's hand, Tasha reaches out to feel for his pulse, but it's beyond question that he's dead. She mutters another curse in Russian.

Clint drags in a slow breath and lets it out, willing himself to focus. "Are you all right?" It would be a ridiculous question to ask a civilian, given the swelling that will be vivid bruises within hours and the blood she's wiping away with the tail of her nightgown.

"I'm good." Glaring at him, she retorts, "Are you?"

He has absolutely no desire to tell her just how not all right he is. He'll have to, and soon, but now is not the time. "Later. What about the driver? He'll have heard all that crashing around."

Natasha scoffs. "He wouldn't come for that. If anything, he'll have his hand in his fucking pants."
Nodding, Clint says, "I'll take care of him." Exiting through the back door, he makes a wide detour through the back yards of neighboring homes to avoid creating even the slightest movement on the dash cam. He creeps up to the back passenger door of the car, tapping lightly on the front window.

The window glides down a couple of inches. "Otva li, suka, the driver snarls. Clint aims his gun through the opening and shoots him between the eyes. He opens the door and leans in to retrieve the keys from the ignition, and damned if the guy doesn't have his hand in his pants. Clint rips out the dash cam and puts a couple of bullets into it for good measure, then circles the car from behind and pulls the driver out before he oozes onto the seat. Clint drags him around to the back of the car and hoists him into the trunk, then he sinks to his knees, retching but not actually puking. When that's done, he puts in a call to Sitwell.

"We need extraction," he says without preamble. "Nat ASAP, but I've got a couple of things to take care of." He gives Jasper the name of a town 45 minutes away, tells him she'll be there in an hour. "Get her, please. Not Warren. You."

"Why, Barton?"

"Because right now I'm one paranoid motherfucker, all right? Just do it. Please. And have some medics."

Cutting off the call, Clint gets to his feet, which he realizes are still bare--battered and freezing. He picks his way carefully along the path to the back of the house and lets himself in. Tasha has packed up her bag and his and set them by the door next to his boots.

"Here's the plan," he says. He lays out her extraction plan.

"What about you?"

"I have some scene-setting to do. And some loose ends on my part."

"Clint."

He knows from the very precise pronunciation of the T that she's beyond furious. "Yeah."

"I had it under control."

"Yeah," he says again. "I had no visual. All I had to go on was what I could hear. I made a call."

"What happened in there?"

Oh, you mean the adrenaline-washed mess shivering uncontrollably on the floor?

He owes this much to her, but he can't do it here and now. "I'll tell you and Sitwell." Right now I've got a corpse to desecrate. Tossing her the keys, he adds, "See if you can find anything useful in there. Salvage something from this shit show."

Once she's gone, he kneels beside the body, appropriating his wallet and keys, which he pockets, tucking them away with the wallet, shiv and couple of guns he lifted from the driver. He uses a knife from the house to perform some very specific mutilations that will mark Anzor as someone who has betrayed Clint's own little terrorist band. He grabs a couple of towels from the bathroom and hauls ass.

Tasha has started the engine, but moved into the passenger seat.
"Not gonna sit next to the brains window?"

"It's your mess," she observes, and Clint detects some extra tartness in her voice.

"It sure is," he admits. He hands her one of the towels, folded into a careful package. "Hold this, will you?" Then he turns to use the other towel on his window. That done, he tosses the towel back behind some bushes and gets behind the wheel. "Find anything useful?" he asks as he backs the car onto the roadway.

"His briefcase. He always has work with him, so there's likely to be something SHIELD can use to our advantage. And his gun."

"Good. I need you to empty it. Take the papers with you. I need the case."

She pulls the briefcase from between her feet, snaps open the locks. "What goes inside it?"

"Dirty terrorist money, for starters."

"Sounds like you might find a use for his gun, too."

"I think I might, thanks."

She twists to stash the papers in her bag in the back seat. "The money's for starters, you said. What else goes in the case?"

"That," he says, nodding toward the towel-wrapped bundle Natasha still holds.

"What's in here?"

"Thumbs," he says.

This seems to satisfy her curiosity for the rest of the drive to her car.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Warnings for canon-compatible levels of spy vs. terrorist violence, gun battle, injury and copious use of the word asshole.

The convenient thing about being a merc in the employ of a handful of terrorist assholes is the ability to swagger into their lair bristling with guns without much reaction. They barely acknowledge his presence, in fact, once they determine it's one of their own coming through the door. They're gathered around Head Asshole's laptop, reviewing some of the latest images from their porn operation. Silently Clint climbs up to the leader's office, a corrugated metal shed perched on metal pillars, with a narrow catwalk along the front overlooking the main level. It's the perfect place for a sniper to work.

He'd be more comfortable using his own weapon, and the suppressor would let him drop more of his targets before they figure out what's going on, but that's not the effect he's going for here. He pulls the guns he took off Anzor's driver and starts shooting.

Head Asshole goes down first, setting off a scramble for weapons--and in a couple of cases, the door. Class organization, for sure. He picks off both Running Assholes, which now accounts for half of this merry little band. When the other assholes come up with their weapons things get a whole lot hotter. Bullets ping the corrugated metal front of the office as Clint dives to the catwalk. He drops another one before something jars his right side and then numbness blossoms.

Fuck! One of the assholes is shooting through the metal grating of the catwalk from below. Clint scrambles up, lunging for the lower railing along the catwalk's edge, tipping his torso over it and catching his heels on the top railing, shooting as he swings over the edge. Asshole Who Shot Him goes down, but then the Last Asshole Standing goes for that asshole's title. Clint grabs the lower rail in his left hand and lets himself flip over, swinging his body enough to land behind Penultimate Asshole's corpse and crouch behind it until he can get a bead on the last guy.

He can't hear a fucking thing but muffled shots and the ringing in his ears, but he knows Last Asshole is in the same shape. At least Clint's had years of experience. He holds his fire, hoping the sudden lack of gunshots draws his target out, thinking Clint is dead or incapacitated. Yay for mutual temporary deafness, anyway. The way Clint's breath saws in and out of his lungs, he'd never pull this off otherwise.

At last Final Asshole pops his head up from behind the battered desk where they lay out their plans for asshole terrorist attacks, and Clint takes the opportunity to plug him between the eyes. Rising from his own hiding place, Clint checks over the six assholes to make sure they're all dead. The adrenaline shakes are starting to hit him, and he's got a couple of crucial things to do. Activating his comm link, he heads for Anzor's car to haul the driver's corpse out of the trunk.

"Sitwell, I hope to hell you're there." He should be, knowing he's got agents needing extraction. "I can't hear a fucking thing." He summarizes what's happened since he left Natasha at her car. "Look, I've got some shit to take care of. I'll update you."

This is going to be ugly, but it is most definitely not going to get easier. Recoiling at the smell of
dead guy effluent as he opens the trunk, he pushes past the reaction and lifts the body. Which of course is the ideal time for the initial numbness of the gunshot to abandon him, and it's all he can do not to scream right there on the spot. The Den of Assholes is in a fairly secluded spot on the outskirts of the city, but someone might hear and investigate screams when they wouldn't go check out a gun battle.

His entire right side feels like it's filled with molten fucking metal, from his knee to his shoulder. Between that and the shakes, he drops or falls with the driver's body twice three times before he makes it inside the building. "Jesus, pal, you could stand to lose a few," he mutters as he tries to get a good handle on the stiffening body. The bright side is, he can hear his own voice, distant and obscured by tinnitus, but it's something.

The sad and sorry fact is, he's going to have to get the driver up to the catwalk to make the ballistics make sense, even to cops with so little resources that everything's pretty much open and shut. He falls six more times on top of the body, each time having a tougher time getting back up. Once he does actually scream, pressing his face into the dark wool coat of the driver to contain the sound. But he gets up again, and finally gets the corpse to the spot where Clint had been to make most of his shots.

He forces one of the handguns into the driver's hand, but rigor's pretty well set in these small muscles, so he can't fake a good grip. Doesn't matter. The other gun stays where Clint himself had dropped it when the magazine was emptied. Willing himself to ignore the burning in his own muscles, Clint topples the driver off the catwalk as if he'd fallen. The last bullet's trajectory may make no sense to investigators, but Clint will have to take that chance.

Unscrewing the suppressor from his Glock, he shoves the gun into the still lax hand of the best-placed asshole and fires a few more rounds up toward the catwalk and down into the driver's body. He has to crawl toward the stairs to pull himself up. His side is slick with blood, and there's a wound in his thigh he'd not realized was there due to the all-encompassing pain on that side. Well, if it was fatal, he'd be dead already, so he pushes back the pain and wobbliness as well as he can and staggers back to the car for the briefcase. Anzor's gun he keeps for himself, checking it over then tucking it in his waistband. Cursing every single step, he hauls himself back up to Head Asshole's office. In his current condition Clint has no hope of opening the safe, but he's well aware that Head Asshole's petty cash drawer is generally unlocked and full of banded stacks of cash suitable for bribery, hookers and blow.

He packs the briefcase with as many stacks as he can fit, then tosses it into a corner of the office as if in a rage. The thumbs he places in the center of Head Asshole's desk, displayed on the towel like gems on a jeweler's velvet.

Swaying, Clint activates his comm link and announces himself, enduring a compressed moment of ass-chewing from Sitwell. Clint's just glad he can hear there's actually someone on the other end.

"I've got to get out of here, but I can't make the extraction point."

"Doesn't matter," Sitwell says. "Just get somewhere safe. We're tracking you."

Clint's leg goes wobbly halfway down the metal stairs, and he tumbles down the rest. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" He lands on his right side and howls.

"Barton! Barton!"

"I'm good, I'm peachy," he says when he's done screaming. "Couple GSW, but nothing vital." He
doesn't inform Sitwell that his vision's going gray. He regains his feet and keeps moving.

The cold night air revives him a little, and he pauses to suck in a few lungfuls.

"ETA five minutes," Sitwell informs him.

"Awesome. There are woods all around the perimeter. I'm going to wait under cover just at the edge, in case someone finally decides to check out the scene. Don't come in from the other end, the whole area's full of booby traps."

He settles himself at the base of a tree, shivering uncontrollably. Once he hears the sound of a helo, he lets himself slip away.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Warning for discussion of domestic violence, recent and long-past.

Naturally he's not lucky enough to remain in his swoon until he comes to in the infirmary under the influence of the really good drugs. Even if he drooled and babbled, it would be a fuckload more dignified than his extraction is. Clint comes to with a flak-jacketed agent kneeling beside him, rummaging in her kit. Her name's Jackson. Aliiyah, if Clint remembers right. She peels the wrapper from a tampon and inserts it into the bullet wound in his thigh, withdrawing the applicator once it's situated. She pulls out another one to deal with the wound in his side.

"How're you doing there, Barton?"

"Well, I'm PMSing pretty hardcore." He carries a supply of tampons himself for just this purpose, but he hadn't expected to need them on his weekend getaway. That'll teach him.

She snorts. "I bet you are. Well, hang onto your Midol, because you're in for a rough ride." She fastens another harness around him, then attaches it to her own. "I'll take as much of your weight as I can, but it's still gonna be bad."

He expected no better, because his luck sucks. Jackson helps him to his feet and wraps herself around him. His vision threatens to gray out again, but gets a bracing wake-up call when the tether grows taut and his weight shifts from his feet to the harness around his side and groin. Clint screams the entire way up. There's a fair bit of cursing too. Assholes get damned to the hell. Shit is a thing. Lots of mothers get fucked.

When they reach the helo and hands reach for him, Clint's brain decides it's past time to check out again before they start jostling him. The next time he wakes, he's still being transported, but at least he's on the good stuff. He fuzzes out again, and the next time he has a coherent thought, he's in a medical facility of some kind, in a state of blissful vagueness. He lets himself drift for a while before he finally looks toward his injured right side.

There's a swirled mass of blonde hair on the sheet by his side, and he blurts, "Who the hell are you?" He watches, fascinated, as it rises, flowing across the sheets (like blood in water), and then he is looking at Natasha, who had been sleeping with her head resting on the bed. "Wow. You're blonde," he says. He is officially, he thinks, high as balls.

Taking his hand in a fierce grip, she says, "Barton" and nothing more. Bruises have blossomed on her face, dark against her creamy skin and her too-light hair.

"Hey," he mumbles.

"You asshole," she says in a low, rough voice. "You nearly got yourself killed."

"That wasn't the plan," he tells her.

"You don't do that to me. God damn it." Abruptly she gets to her feet and then she's gone.
The door doesn't even finish its slow drift closed when it reopens and Sitwell peers in at him.

"She seemed upset," Clint says. He's trying for that dry thing Phil did that Clint always thought was funny as hell (at least once he started to get Phil), but his attempt falls flat.

Jasper enters the room. "She's not happy you did that for her."

"I FUBARed her op," Clint says. "Least I could do was try to unfuck it." There's more he wants to say, about the months she'd put in on that mission, the price she was clearly paying, and to ask if what he had done even worked, but the pain meds are pulling at him, and he lets them take him down.

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Not long after this, there's a fairly long bit of travel and not nearly enough drugs, and then he's back in the SHIELD infirmary.

"Welcome back to your home away from home," Hector says.

"Hardy har," Clint retorts, but he feels something within him unclench for the first time since the whole fucking op started.

Once Clint has had another night's rest, Jasper comes in for the debriefing, bearing a Starbucks coffee cup in each hand. "Thought maybe you might be tired of the shit they brew here."

Unthinkingly, Clint reaches for a cup with his right hand, wincing as he pulls at stitches. "I could kiss your shiny dome right now."

"Please. I'm saving myself. SHIELD gave me an exploding promise ring." Once Jasper settles into a chair, however, it's all serious business. He listens to Clint's account of the op, asking for details and clarification now and then, but mostly letting the narrative flow.

When Clint winds up at his extraction, Jasper says, "Natasha said you had a bad feeling throughout the whole op. You feel like telling me why I'm hearing this second hand after it's over?"

"There wasn't anything I could really pin it on. I mean, the whole hanging out with pornographer-terrorists aspect made me want to puke pretty much 24/7, but something felt wrong. I had nothing to back it up with, just the feeling."

"So you didn't fucking tell me."

"I told Natasha and she totally blew me off." 

Jasper scowls. "Yeah, I heard about that. Still, you tell me that shit. Let me decide if it's something."

"Have you got any intel on how her mark knew where to find us, or why he should follow her?"

"Nothing yet. We're working on it."

Clint nods. "So did I get perforated and risk the wrath of Natasha for nothing, or did something come out of all that corpse manhandling?"

"You did good. Smeared Anzor Kazbekov pretty good and our cyber people built on what you did, pumping up his bank account and his superior's, nicely backdated. We leaked some of the story to a friendly journo, and we'll be feeding him more, which he'll think he's digging up. I think there's a
damn good chance of bringing down the government. We'll be pushing that when and where we can."

The opposition leader--not affiliated with the rebel faction consisting of Clint's assholes--is a decent, reform-minded guy, according to all intel. Getting him in place would be as good an outcome as you could ever hope for in this business. Clint just hopes his undermining of Natasha's plan doesn't push the timeline too far too fast for the opposition to have the support it needs to succeed.

"Agent Romanov said we should discuss what led up to the op going off plan."

Clint knows what's coming the second Natasha is "Agent Romanov."

Jasper continues, "She seems to think something was going on with you. That maybe you were emotionally compromised at the time of the shooting."

"Yeah, I'll talk about it, but I want Tasha in here too. She deserves to know, and I'm not telling it twice."

Nodding, Jasper says, "I'll find her. She said something about sparring, so give us about twenty minutes to get back. Why don't you catnap or something--you still look like shit."

Clint makes an attempt, since he's not up to much else, but there are too many thoughts and memories threaded through with anxiety to let him sink into a doze.

They make their way back via the Starbucks stand, Jasper bestowing another large coffee on Clint before they settle themselves at his bedside.

Clint hates being the center of attention in this particular fashion. Not just the "Explain yourself, Agent Barton" aspect--it has always been a source of tension or outright fear from childhood on. Fear of saying the wrong thing, of not sounding normal, of not hearing a crucial question or response and reacting wrong, of being bullied, beaten, exposed, killed. It's the kind of fear he'd usually mask with a joke. But he fucked up Natasha's op, and he's not going to pass that off with a smartass remark.

In lieu of that, however, he has no idea what to say.

Jasper regards him for a moment. "This isn't a tribunal, man. Shit went bad for you before they went bad for the op, and we want to understand that."

Clint raises the head of his bed and becomes immediately aware that it was a terrible idea. He sucks in a breath as pain shoots through his side and fans the embers of the pain in his thigh. Automatically his eyes flick to the clock to check when his next meds are due. Fuck! 0'clock is when. He doesn't lower the bed--he won't discuss his tender feelings with Amelia lying on the couch in her office, and he won't do it here.

Sucking in another breath and then releasing it, Clint says, "I went on the roof." Jasper and Tasha know this. "Kazbekov was already in a jealous rage when he got to the cottage. Pounding on the door and yelling. The windows were filmed, so I had no way of seeing what was going on. I had to go by sound. I could hear him hitting her. Nat. Punching her."

As Clint takes a sip of his coffee, there's no hiding that his hand is shaking. Nat places her own warm hand on his shoulder, and Clint continues, staring at his cup.

"I could hear Natasha crying and begging him to stop, but it wasn't her voice, it was the one that
went along with her legend. So I knew she was okay." Okay is an idiotic word for it. "She was playing her part. The fight went on, shouting and crashing and crying. That voice--"

"Which voice, Clint?" Natasha asks.

"Hers. Your legend, I mean. I couldn't-- And then a scream, but I couldn't tell if it was you or her."

"That's when you went into the house?" Jasper asks.

"Yeah. Jesus, I can't-- Fuck. When I was a kid, still little, when I could still hear. That's what I remember. That's what I heard."

Nat's hands are surrounding his, gently tugging the coffee cup away, which prompts his realization that he's spilled some of the coffee onto his bedding.

"Her voice and your voice."

Once his coffee is safely rescued, Nat's hands are back around his, her grip fierce this time. Her Don't you even think about dying on me hold. "That's enough, Clint," she murmurs. "That's all we need." Her gaze cuts over to Jasper, then back.

Clint focuses on their hands. "Hiding, and hearing those sounds, and not knowing--I couldn't be that kid again."

"Shhhh, Clint. It's all right."

"So after, when I fell apart, that was the I just Oedipus-by-proxyed that dude in the face six times shakes."

"Man, I hate when that happens," Jasper says.

Clint laughs, but it hurts like a rattling cough.

Giving Clint's shoulder a squeeze, Jasper gets to his feet. "That's enough reporting for the day. You get some rest."

"I'll stay," Natasha tells him.

When Hector comes with Clint's next dose of pain meds, he finds her curled by Clint's side, her fingers lightly raking through his choppy black hair.
Chapter 20

Being injured and bored is a damn sight better at the Avengers Tower than Clint's old sixth-floor walkup. There's Pasha, for starters, who pours on the affection full-force for three days before pissing on Clint's favorite ratty running shoes. Then he's back to his old self. There's a metric assload of video games on his massive TV--or even better, the one in the common area. There's a pile of books awaiting him, short-listed Hugo contenders, because for the first time ever he's bought a membership and gets to vote for the awards. And of course, there's pretty much always good company somewhere in the tower.

Still, he'd trade it for burning and shivering under a pile of blankets in a safe house, if it meant Phil was there with him, his voice anchoring Clint through delirium.

Clint's hanging out with Tony in his workshop--well, reading on the sofa while Tony tinkers and mutters over something he's working on. Well, attempting to read through restless boredom. He's been on the same page for an interminable length of time and still hasn't absorbed a thing. It's a relief when Tony stands over him, tugging the book from his hands.

"What do you people do when you're bored?"

"Which us people?"

He offers a little frown that indicates that should be obvious. "People who are not me. When I get bored I build a robot. Or think about ways to convert the sighs of the bored into a source of renewable energy."

"Well, usually I hit the range. But my doc hasn't given me the green light yet." Which normally wouldn't stop him, especially now that he has his own range, but fucking Jervis has locked him out. "And you know, for a guy who's so fond of ignoring doctors' orders, you sure are happy enough to enforce everyone else's compliance."

"Let's just say I was hectored into it."

Clint can't suppress a laugh. "Oh, good one. I'll be stealing that."

"In the spirit of our good friend Hector, it's time to get off your ass. Grab a bag with your overnight gear, and a couple of days worth of clothes. Bring something nice, a jacket and tie, or even a suit. Nothing more formal than that. By the time you're finished with that, my barber should be here."

"Barber?"

"You don't think I'm going to be seen with you in that two-tone bullshit, do you? Personally, I think that dye job accounts for at least half the moping you've been doing."

He's not that far wrong. The violence done to his hair is a constant reminder of the general horribleness of that op. But... "I don't want a buzz cut. I'll have to wait it out."

"Nonsense. I burned off half my hair in an unfortunate workshop incident and did a Vanity Fair photo shoot two days later. Seriously. Marco is that good. But the one thing you don't do is keep him waiting. So go get packed, chop-chop."

Resisting the urge to give Tony chop-chop across his throat, Clint rises and heads to his rooms.
Clint's got to hand it to Tony; he knows what he's talking about. Marco manages to rid him of the extensions and cut off the offending black-dyed bits without making him look like the victim of a weed-whacker accident. He even manages to leave a few of the black ends on the top to give him some length yet make the whole thing look intentional. Clint has no idea how much Tony pays this guy, which he insists on doing, but it's totally worth it. Clint tips him fifty dollars, hoping it's not an insultingly low amount.

Regarding himself in the mirror, he says, "Shit, man, I have to repack. My clothes are completely outclassed by my hair."

"Five minutes, Katniss. We've got a schedule to keep."

When he reaches for the cane he's been using (and despising), he finds his infirmary-issued model has been quietly replaced by one of beautifully figured wood, finished with a purple stain. It's getting kind of ridiculous--or maybe it would be if it wasn't Tony Stark. With anyone else, Clint would be wondering what's the catch--was he expecting to buy Clint or fuck him (or both). But to Tony this is pocket change, and he genuinely believes the point of being stupid rich is to be ridiculously lavish with himself and his friends. Now that Clint gets it, there's nothing to do but sit back and enjoy it.

Tony won't say where they're going, even once his private jet is in the air, so Clint just kicks back and enjoys this, too. It's going to ruin him for military transport flights, or flying in coach.

"Welcome to Kansas City, Mr. Stark," says the gate agent as they walk into the terminal. He nods at Clint. "Sir."

"Kansas City?" Clint blurts. "You brought me to Kansas City? What the hell is in Kansas City?"

Tony smirks. "They've got some crazy little women here and I'm gonna get me one."

"That means you're not going to tell me, doesn't it?"

"Got it in one, Green Arrow." He seems extremely pleased with himself. Clint isn't sure if he should be very afraid. Probably.

Once they settle into the limo waiting for them, it takes off with no instruction from Tony.

"K.C. barbecue?" Clint guesses. "Ribs?" He isn't enthusiastic about the notion. Tony had him change into his jacket and tie before they landed, so Clint's wearing the purple silk tie Phil gave him. He gives zero fucks what any maitre d's says, Clint is not risking it on barbecue sauce.

"If you're set on it, you can get some later."

Later. So whatever it is is not about food. What the hell else is in Kansas City?

Apparently bookstores. The limo slows to a stop outside a storefront that's not one of the big name booksellers--an indie. "They do have these in New York, you--" The sentence goes unfinished as Clint spots the placard in the store's window, positioned over a display of Irene's book, "Irina Danilova Reading and Signing." Reflexively Clint looks at his watch--the start time is 15 minutes away.

He turns to stare at Tony. "How did you know about this?"
"Jarvis has been keeping track of her tour. You know how he is." He gestures toward the limo door. "C'mon. Out. We want to get seats." As they walk in, Tony says, "You sit wherever you like. I'll stay toward the back."

Clint notices then that Tony has totally changed his body language, walking past tables and bookshelves without his customary swagger or expansive gestures. It's fascinating how he attracts so little notice--his designer suit is no less elegant than usual, and the trademark facial hair has grown back and been freshly Marco'd, yet several patrons walk past them without doing the usual OMGit'sTonyStark double-take. Clint realizes what it is: a courtesy extended to Irene, taking care not to upstage her. A gift (another gift) to Clint. His second realization is, if he can pull this off, Tony really could have been one hell of a spy.

They find the section of the store set up for her reading. There's a chair already placed at the front, facing rows of folding chairs. Clint knows at once that it belongs to Irene. Like the one where she displayed herself in the ten-in-one tent, it's wider than a standard upholstered chair, with an extra pair of legs midway along the width. It's ornate, almost throne-like, and Clint can tell, though it's similar to the one she used in Carson's, the materials are higher quality, the fabric richer, the carvings more ornate. The colors are the same, the peacock hues she's always favored.

Though there's a fair number of people in attendance, seats are still available in most of the rows. Clint, however, settles next to Tony in the back corner he's chosen. When Tony eyes him, Clint says, "I don't want to distract her. She's got a performance."

"You are going to let her know you came though," in that tone of voice that indicates a wrong answer will not be tolerated.

"Yeah, of course," Clint says. "As soon as she's done with the signing thing."

After another few minutes someone from the bookstore stands beside the chair to make an introduction. The hand that rests on Clint's knee clenches convulsively, which prompts an inquisitive look from Tony. "Her voice," Clint whispers. "I've never heard it."

Tony's Whoa is more a soft puff of breath than a word. There's no time for more of a response, because the staff room door opens and Irene makes her way to her chair. She looks amazing in a long dress that picks up the colors of the chair but switches the predominant color and the accent hues. She uses a swanky brass cane, but seems to lean on it less heavily than Clint remembers. On her upswept dark hair is perched a tiny nothing of a feathery hat.

She settles onto her seat and greets the crowd, which has filled out even more since Clint and Tony's arrival. As Irene sets up the scene she's about to read, Clint closes his eyes, taking in the sound of her voice. It's more like Natasha's than Maria Hill's in timbre, warm and rich. To his vast surprise, there's also a hint of an accent, from somewhere southern. He doesn't remember them talking about where she was from, or her life before the circus. It was pretty much always the created worlds they shared in books, and topics that sprang from those launch points.

Clint leans forward to listen, elbows on knees, chin on his fisted hands, trying to keep his emotions under control. It gets easier once she moves into the reading, one of Clint's favorite scenes. It's a great choice, with humor and character moments, with a thread of dramatic tension running throughout. After that, she answers a few questions from the audience (Yes, there will be more; her publisher has the second and she's finishing the third. The book tour isn't much different from her days traveling with the circus, living out of a customized trailer. Just less redolent of lion pee.)

Tony waits with him through the autograph session until the line thins out and Clint goes to take a place at the end. He drifts off into the DIY section as Clint steps up to the table they set up for her
signing.

"Hey, Irene," Clint says softly.
Chapter 21

Irene looks up at him, eyes widening, a hand flying to her mouth. Quickly she lowers it to give him a clear view. "Clint. Oh my word." Rising to her feet, she uses one hand to steady herself with her chair, reaching the other toward Clint. "Get around here."

Clint moves around the table and gathers her into a hug. Or maybe she gathers him--it's hard to tell. "Oh my god, you look great." By great he means beautiful and well and happy, which he doubts he can get past the knot in his throat.

Releasing her, he takes a half step back, but leaves his hands at her shoulders. "That feather thing on your head is tickling the shit out of my nose."

"Feather thing," she scoffs, reaching to unpin it from her hair. Clint recalls her using this same fierce hatpin on a rube or two who thought she couldn't defend herself. "It's a fascinator." She sets it on the table.

"That's a fascinator? I always thought that meant some kind of sex toy."

Irene bursts into laughter, the sound dipping and soaring like the flight of a bird. Even as she laughs her eyes well with tears, and she delicately dabs at the corners with a fingertip. "Oh, there goes my mascara."

"That's why I waited until you were done," Clint says.

"You were here for the reading? Clint, you should have come up front."

"Honey, I heard you fine." He turns his head slightly. "I've got implants."

"Oh wow! When did that happen?"

"It's been a few years now. Holy shit, you have an accent!"

Irene laughs again, and the sound sends a thrill through him. "Sweetheart, I have a million things to ask you."

"Same here," Clint says. "Can I take you to dinner, or do you need to hit the road? Could you use a hand with the load-out?"

Her gaze flicks down toward the cane. "Looks like one free hand is all you've got."

"Shit. I forgot."

She gives him a look he remembers from when she was tending to a stake bite wound, which makes Clint think she and Hector would have a lot to talk about. "My road crew has it under control. Including making dinner."

"You have a road crew."

She smiles. "You have to meet them. You should join us for dinner. There's more than enough."

He's wondering how to bring up Tony's presence when the store manager begs their pardon for an interruption, and Clint notices that Tony's not the only one who's been watching their reunion. A small handful of staffers and a couple of stragglers carrying Irene's book are beaming at him from a
respectful distance. Tony, of course, doesn't know the first thing about respectful distances--he's close enough to clap Clint on the shoulder, which he does. "I'd say this is going well."

"Yeah. Thanks for this, Tony." He doesn't think he can say more without becoming a blubering mess, which is bound to happen with Irene anyway, but he'd prefer it in private.

He slings his arm around Clint's neck and thumps him on the chest. "Hey, well, I was kind of bored too."

Finished with her conversation, Irene turns back toward Clint. "Oh hi," she says to Tony. "You're a friend of Clint's?"

"Yes, ma'am." He releases Clint and takes the hand she offers. "Tony." Instead of shaking it, he turns and raises it to his lips. "Delighted. I enjoyed your reading." He hasn't yet turned on the full-force Tony Stark, and it strikes Clint as weirdly sincere and kind of sweet.

"When did you start liking to perform, anyway?" Clint asks. He tells Tony, "Seriously, the whole Russian thing was because she didn't want to talk to people."

"When it started being about being a writer," she says.

"The things you make rather than who or what you are," Tony suggests, and Irene nods emphatically.

Sometimes he gets the feeling Tony's never going to stop surprising him. A moment after the shock of this insight, though, he remembers that Tony's dad was a genius inventor too. Clint wonders how much of his early life was spent in that shadow.

A young black guy who'd been seated in front of Tony during the reading wheels a hand truck toward them.

Irene turns toward him. "Coltrane, where's your mom? There's someone I want you both to meet."

Coltrane looks over toward them, expression open and curious, then his eyes widen as he sees one of the people waiting for an introduction is Tony Stark. He hurries off, presumably to follow Irene's instructions. When he returns, he's accompanied by a woman with short natural hair who looks to be about Clint's age.

"Clint, I'd like you to meet my daughter Odessa and my grandson Coltrane."

His brain stutters for a moment. He knew as little about a daughter as he had about Irene's accent. Blinking stupidly at the three of them, Clint sees a similar expression overtake Odessa.

"Clint? You mean your Clint?"

Abruptly he finds himself grabbed up into a hug. Her son looks as startled by the development as Clint is.

Laughing--and maybe on the verge of tears--Irene says, "You're getting ahead of me. Yes, this is Clint Barton. He traveled with Carson's for several years when he was young. And this is Tony, who came with him."

"It's Tony Stark," Coltrane blurts, awe in his tone, mingled with a trace of that Mom, I can't believe you didn't recognize that pop star tone especially beloved by teens.
"I know, sweetie," Irene says indulgently. "But he's here as Clint's friend." Smiling at Tony, she says, "You may have trouble getting away. He's majoring in engineering and plans to apply to MIT for grad school."

Tony lights up at this. "You'll have to tell me about it over dinner. You are all going to let me take you out to dinner--?"

"That's incredibly generous, Mr. Stark," Odessa says, "but--"

"Mom," Coltrane says, and there's a dense paragraph in that tight syllable.

Irene says, "I was telling Clint that we have dinner already made in the bus. You're both welcome to join us."

"Nana Rene, Tony Stark doesn't want to eat Crock Pot lasagna."

This is where Tony flips the Tony Fuckin' Stark switch, gestures and rapid-fire speech instantly online. "That," he says, holding up an index finger, "is where you're wrong. Crock Pot lasagna happens to be my absolute favorite. Yet somehow I never get anyone to make it for me. And I've been wanting to see your bus." She had mentioned the bus in her Q & A, purchased from a country singer and refurbished for Irene. "I've always wanted to see the inside of one of these things. Well, I did once, but I was a little bit tipsy at the time, and I had other things on my mind. All I really noticed was the bed." Jerking a thumb toward Coltrane, Tony turns to Odessa. "Is he old enough to hear this?"

Odessa laughs. "He's twenty. But if it goes any further, I'm too young to hear it."

Once they've left the bookstore, Coltrane leads them to the tour bus, with Clint, Irene and their canes bringing up the rear. Clint stops and draws in a breath when he sees the painted banner tethered to the side of the bus, a full-size recreation of the one on the cover of her book. The title and Irene's pen name are emblazoned across the top and bottom in red lettering in the exact same style used by Carson's.

"That's so fucking cool," he blurs.

"That was Odessa's idea. We keep it in the bus when we're moving, but we hang it at bookstores. Sometimes at campgrounds or rest stops. I've had a few flash autograph parties that way."

He has a million questions, but Odessa's name brings up an urgent one. "How did I not know back then that you had a family?"

"I didn't have one then. I was forced to give Odessa up for adoption. She found me eight years ago. Boom. Instant daughter and grandson."

"Looks like you hit it lucky."

"Honey, you don't know the half of it."

By then they've joined the others, so once they've settled in with food, the conversation shifts to include the entire group. Tony chats with Irene about the novel, which it turns out he's read without ever telling Clint. He asks if any of the stories in the book are things that happened to her and Clint, which starts them on a whole series of tornado stories. A circus is hands-down one of the shittiest places to be when a tornado hits--Irene's trailer was one of the sturdier structures on the lot, which wasn't saying much. They never took a direct hit in Clint's time, but they did get their tents and vehicles torn all to hell, not to mention whatever damage a terrified animal could do.
Clint became as handy at stitching up a canvas as he is now at suturing flesh.

That topic leads into the book itself, Clint talking about it the way he used to comment on whatever he was reading decades ago in Irene's trailer. Tony, Odessa and Coltrane join in.

"I totally ship Mehitabel and Kip," Odessa says.

Clint's about to ask what ship means when Irene says, laughing, "Oh no! So, so wrong!" It has the sound of an exchange they've had before, maybe reaching running joke status.

"Oh come on, he's of age. It's not like they have any kind of parent-child vibe. It could easily go the friendship-to-love route."

"And think of the gymnastic se--" Coltrane says, the wicked gleam in his eye totally reminding Clint of Irene.

"Whoa whoa whoa," Odessa cries. "Moving on now. How 'bout those Cubsie?"

Tony, who has been eating with gusto, points his fork at Coltrane. "Actually, I want to know more about you. What's your field of interest?"

"I'm into entertainment logistics, finding better ways of moving acts from one place to another, and my engineering degree dovetails into that."

"Most kids finding out their grandmother traveled with a circus would be all about the lions and elephants," Odessa says. "Coltrane kept asking about how things got moved from one place to another, and how the whole thing was put together."

Irene says, "You should pump Clint for more of those details, if he's got time. He was actually involved in setting up and tearing down." To Clint and Tony she says, "This book tour is actually part of his senior project next year. He built some of the modifications on the bus."

"And again," Tony says, "I want the full tour."

When they've all finished eating, Coltrane leads Tony and Clint to the outside of the bus to show them some of his modifications, Odessa coming along to bask. Tony and Coltrane go into geek tangents that Clint only sometimes follows. Just as they're reboarding for the inside tour, Tony suggests Coltrane and his mom might like to come out for drinks afterward so they can ask him anything they'd like about MIT and engineering, and Irene and Clint can do some catching up.

Once the tour is over and the others have gone, Clint settles on the love seat facing Irene's chair.

Beaming at him, Irene says, "I still can't believe it. Would you like some tea?"

"Sure." He starts to rise to put on the kettle, but she waves him off as she gets to her feet. "You sit."

"You're moving easier than you used to," Clint observes.

"That's thanks to Odessa. She got me doing strength training. That child is a drill sergeant."

"Oh jeez, I wonder where that came from."

"Well, it has to be genetic, then." As she settles back onto her chair, she asks, "So what's happened? Why the cane?"

No way he's telling her he got shot. "Sports injury. It's coming along, but slower than I'd like."
She eyes him, making a non-committal sound. "Mm. I love the cane, but it doesn't exactly say 'short-term sports injury.'"

"That's all Tony," Clint says, relieved he can say something that's true. "He wanted to spiff me up for the trip out here."

"Trip? You weren't already in KC?" She sets the kettle on the burner and settles back onto her chair.

"Nope. I was in New York at lunchtime. I didn't even know about the reading until we hit the sidewalk outside. It was a surprise."

"He flew you out here?"

Clint shrugs. "He has a plane. Maybe a bunch of planes, I'm not sure."

"Wow," Irene says. "Tony Stark is really nothing like I'd have expected from the press he gets."

"I've known the guy for a little over a year, and he still surprises the hell out of me on a regular basis. I think he hides himself from everyone but a few trusted people."

She fixes him with a significant look. "I wouldn't know anyone who fits that description."

Clint tries not to squirm. "Yeah, well."

"Catch me up, Clint. What's happened since the last time I saw you?"

"Jesus, that's not a big request."

"Whatever part you want to tell, then."

He does want to tell it all, that's the thing. "Well, after I bailed from Carson's I spent a few years doing shit I'm not very proud of, so we'll leave it at that. Then I got a chance to change course, and I took it. That's when I got the implants. I'm prouder of what I do now, but I can't talk about most of that."

Irene grins. "The world saving, or the kitten saving?"

Spluttering a surprised laugh, Clint says, "Oh shit! Stark said you'd have seen that."

"You all were rather hard to miss."

"I guess we were." He soberes, examining the calluses on his hands. "I've had a couple of rough years. A couple of really bad ops, and in between those, the guy I was in love with was killed. He died in the battle of New York." Close enough, anyway.

Her breath gusts out on a sigh. "Oh, Clint. I'm so sorry."

"He was the first person since you who really saw who I was beyond the deaf kid." (Or the punk-ass merc, but he decides to leave that unsaid.)

"It looks like maybe he wasn't the last."

"Yeah, I think you're right. But I wouldn't have any of those people without Phil."

"I'm sorry I missed my chance to meet him." The kettle whistles and Irene moves to tend to it. As
she sets Clint's steeping tea beside him and then reseats herself with her own, she says, "Tell me about him?"

Clint tells as much as he can. About the guy who arranged for the implants and got weepy when Clint heard voices for the first time in years. Who shared his glee over the hilarity of farts. Who geeked out over Captain America and cartoon dogs by Booth and Thurber. There's much more he wishes he could tell her about Phil but he can't, so he tells her that. "I can say he died a big damn hero."

"How are things with Barney these days?"

"They aren't. I haven't seen him since I left Carson's." The admission makes him ache in a way he hasn't in years. Stupid to care, though, just as it had been stupid to cry when his old man died.

Irene must read the complex mix of emotions on his face, because she says, "It's perfectly natural to miss people who've been important in your life. Even if they're shitty people." She was never much of a fan of Barney's.

Like a lot of her wise pronouncements, it's expressed in a way that makes him laugh. "I think I'm content to keep missing him, though."

She joins in his laughter. That's perfectly natural too."

As the night wears on, he gets Irene to fill him in on her life as well: finding her family, leaving Carson's, deciding to see if she had any writing talent of her own.

"You do," Clint blurts. "I hope you know that. I read the first damn paragraph in Tony's workshop, and I parked myself in there until I'd read the whole thing. Your writing is fucking amazing, and watching you work the crowd of people who came to hear you--it was beautiful."

"Okay now, quit," she said, her gaze on her brightly colored fingernails. Clint could see, though, the flicker of a smile at the corner of her mouth.

Just then the bus door opens and the other three tumble in, tired and jazzed and happy, including Tony. They all make a plan to meet up for breakfast--Tony's treat this time, he insists--and after hugs all around, they say goodnight.

Apart from Phil, Clint thinks this qualifies as the most amazing night of his entire life.
As spring quickly shifts into a ferocious New York summer, Clint progresses physically, working hard on PT until he can go back to spending time at the range. Emails fly back and forth between Clint and Irene, swapping little bits of news and commentary on books they're reading. He bought her a Worldcon membership so she can vote on the Hugos, so much of their book-related correspondence has been SF oriented. Clint also has less frequent email exchanges with Odessa and with Coltrane, who also seems to be in contact with Tony.

When the book tour arrives in New York after the summer's stifling heat has passed, Clint invites them to the tower for a weeklong visit. Clint's suite becomes the social hub of the residential floors, as his found families come together. Natasha and Irene become instant besties; Odessa and Clint spend more time getting to know each other and swapping stories about Irene. Thor is on-world, and he likes to sit in on the storytelling if it's not too private.

When he's not spending time with Tony in his workshop, Coltrane starts game nights, launching an epic battle of Cards Against Humanity. Coltrane takes to declaiming his answers like Thor, which Thor thinks is hilarious, so soon all of them are reading their cards aloud with Asgardian gusto. Odessa's husband David comes for the weekend, but before Clint gets to know him well, he and Nat are called away on a mission. He tells everyone to continue hanging out as he assembles the gear he'll need. As Clint crosses in and out of the living room, he can see Odessa and Irene taking in his movements and manner as if they're observing a totally different person.

When he's suited up and has his gear waiting by the door, Clint says, "Stay as long as you like. It's a blast having you all here. I expect to be back within a couple of days, though you never know for sure." He hugs Irene and Odessa, shakes hands with David. "Sorry I didn't get to spend more time with you. We'll do this again."

Given Coltrane's age, Clint isn't sure whether a handshake or a hug is in order, but Coltrane clasps him in a back-slapping hug and booms, "We shall drink much mead and play many hands of cards while you fight for glory and honor!"

"Well said, young friend!" Clint bellows back, and it's as good a sendoff as he can remember having.

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A string of ops follows, all fairly uncomplicated, which is a profound relief. He's on a mission providing eyes-up-high and protection for Alexander Pierce's movements in Paris when he's abruptly pulled off his post and sent to Greenwich, where all manner of shit is breaking loose.

He gets a quick briefing on the fly. Thor is in Greenwich, along with Jane Foster and the funny little motormouth intern. And there's a big fucking spaceship! Of course there is.

SHIELD gets him on the scene at top speed, but it's impossible to take a shot. Thor and the freakish elf dude he's fighting--who looks like a refugee from a Tim Burton remake of *Lord of the Rings*--keep winking in and out of existence, along with random cars and other shit pulled in their wake. Clint stays in his perch, bow drawn, but it's all too hectic to be certain of anything, other than the high possibility of killing someone he doesn't intend to.

Meanwhile, the sky is doing things that sky shouldn't do. There's a hole widening, like the portal that brought the Chitauri. And then another and another, and then all the light is somehow sucked
out of the daytime sky. Clint catches a glimpse of red cape.

"This is seriously fucked up," Clint says to Jasper over the comm.

"Yeah, tell me about it."

When the light comes back and the dust is beginning to settle, Thor sprawls motionless on the ground. Clint's already on the move as he says, "Thor's down. I'm going to him. Get med support here, ASAP."

Jane Foster runs out and drops to her knees beside him.

Over the comm, Jasper breaks off his orders to the med team for a bitten-off curse. "Barton."

"I see it." The spaceship, wedged in the pavement it had torn through, is slowly tilting forward. It's coming down.

"Get yourself out of there."

Clint doesn't change course or bother to respond. "Jane!" he shouts. She looks up and spots the ship heading straight for them, then folds herself over Thor as if that's going to protect him. "Ahh, fuck me," he mutters, still running for them. He hadn't known how--or if--he'd manage to get Thor up and moving, and this just complicated things tenfold.

"Barton! Stay back. That's an order."

He's huffing now. "Teammate. Civilian."

Jasper uncorks a rich assortment of curses, and Clint can't say he disagrees. He scoops up Jane as the spaceship starts to pitch forward, staggering as she kicks and flails to return to Thor, one fist nailing Clint's ear hard enough that tears spring to his eyes. He yowls, one of the deaf-kid noises he's worked hard to erase from his repertoire. The part of his brain that can provide sour commentary on even the most fleeting moment of peril gives a sneering thanks to the universe for making one of his last seconds a replay of years of childhood shit.

Before he can even wonder why he hasn't been flattened like Wile E. Coyote, he hears Jasper mutter, "Whoa, what the fuck?" and an answering burst of similar exclamations over the comm. Jane elbows him in the head, catching his other ear and wrenching herself free to run back to Thor. The force of her movement spins him partway around, enough to see that the freaky spaceship is just--gone.

*That doesn't mean it won't just reappear fifty yards away,* his brain helpfully supplies.

But seconds pass and it doesn't. Thor manages to sit up, looking worse for wear than Clint has ever seen him. Selvig and the motormouth intern run toward them. Clint sways on his feet for a moment before deciding he should join them. By that time Jasper has gotten on the ground and intercepts him before he reaches them.

"Barton, status." The words are crisply delivered but the softened tone makes Clint suspect Jasper knows he's rattled.

"I'm fine," he responds, more because he's expected to hold out than anything else.

"Yeah, right. You look a little queasy."
"Dr. Foster boxed my ears for me. Jesus, she could go a few rounds with my old man."

"You hurt? Your tech damaged?"

"Rattled some, that's all. Since the clusterfuck in Chechnya, he's been more forthcoming with Jasper about past and present shit, and they've forged a good working relationship. It doesn't quite approach what he'd had with Phil, but Jasper has gained Clint's trust.

"Ready to unass the A.O.?" Jasper asks.

"They need me back in Paris?"

"No, Pierce finished his speech and headed straight for the airport. He's on a flight back to the States."

"I'd like to hang around a while."

"Sure," Jasper says. "I've got to debrief Thor about this whole thing, but you can have him when I'm done. In the meantime, how about helping keep the lookie-lous from stealing the rubble."

"Oh yay! Does that mean a field promotion to Level 8?"

"Oh, bite me," Jasper says, but he's smirking.

"Actually, I wanted a chance to talk to Selvig." He hadn't actually realized this until it came out of his mouth. "I haven't seen him since the whole Loki shit show. I'd like to see how he's doing."

"Well, two days ago he was running around Stonehenge with his bare ass hanging out, if that tells you anything. I've gotta debrief him, too."

"Sounds like he beat you to it."

That gets an actual laugh from Jasper, who gives him a half-assed wave and walks off.

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Later Clint and Selvig find a pub that has missed the devastation, and by unspoken agreement they head toward an open spot in the back.

A woman peers at Selvig as they approach. "Oooh, didn't I see you on the telly?"

"I don't know, did you?" he says tartly, continuing without pause toward their destination.

Once they've settled in and ordered a pint apiece, Clint asks, "Television?"

"Christ, idiots and their cell phones. And the news crews got there quickly enough. At least they pixilated my privates."

"So what was that about?"

"The convergence."

Clint has no idea what he means by that, but he catches the light that's kindling in Selvig's eyes, which worries him. If he calls whatever it is "she," Clint's going to be asking for a meeting with Fury, ASAP. "Convergence?"
"The nine realms in perfect alignment. That was what was happening out there."

"With the dark and all that?"

"No, that was the elves."

Clint snorts. "I know, right? They were totally Cybermen/Lord of the Rings mashup cosplaying aliens!"

Selvig regards him. "Of that sentence, I understood 'aliens.'"

"Oh."

"According to Jane, who heard this directly from Odin--Jesus, who'd have believed I'd one day be hearing tales of Odin directly from someone who walked the streets of Asgard?"

"Uh, the elves?"

"They're called the Dark Elves. Apparently they were hoping to use the convergence to extinguish the sunlight of our world and colonize it."

"That always turns out well. Okay, back to the convergence."

"It's like the bifrost times nine. When I realized it was about to occur and that it was imminent, something took hold of me. Maybe the influence of the Tesseract."

"Are you sure it's not the influence of Loki?"

Selvig gives him a sour look. "You're telling me you wouldn't know if Loki were meddling in your brain again?"

"We both know if he meddles in your brain he can also force you to deny he's doing it."

"Look, I've had my SHIELD debrief. I came out for a pint, not to be grilled on my mental state."

Wincing, Clint holds up a hand. "Sorry, sorry." He takes a deep drink of his pint, which had arrived along with a saucy wink at Selvig. "I actually have been wondering how you're doing. Not for any SHIELD-related purposes, but because we were in that shit together, and we're the only two who survived. We're the only people who know exactly what the other went through."

"The others all--"

"Oh. Yeah, I guess you'd have to be SHIELD to know. The others he took over died in the fight for the helicarrier."

"Christ. The mercenaries?"

"Some dead, some captured and awaiting trial." Some (recommended by Clint) being considered for recruitment, but he feels no need to divulge that.

"They weren't even under his control, were they?"

"No. Just liked money and didn't care whose it was." He quirks a half-smile. "Though some of them came around to thinking enabling an alien invasion wasn't the greatest move. How about you?"
Selvig gives him the side-eye. "It would sound a lot less like you were still trying to interrogate me if you went first."

Clint laughs. "I see your point." He signals the barmaid for another round. He's going to need it. "Having Loki in my head didn't do me any favors. I've had some training in resisting brainwashing techniques, but it didn't prepare me for Loki. The worst part for me was the colleagues and civilians who died--that I killed or had a hand in killing. One of those was my partner."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Were you close?"

For a moment Clint considers leaving Selvig with the wrong impression. Just saying "Yeah, we were" and moving on. But it would dishonor Phil, and Selvig too, Clint supposes. "Not Mel Gibson, Danny Glover partners. We were lovers. We lived together. Loki killed him on the helicarrier, I got Loki on the helicarrier, so there's the guilt. But it's worse that he's just gone."

"He was SHIELD, then. Did I know him?"

Clint twitches something that isn't quite a smile. "The head of the 'jack-booted thugs.' That kind of hurt his feelings, you know." He says it with the same straight face Phil would have maintained.

Selvig draws in a breath. "Thor's 'Son of Coul.'" He mutters something that, from the sound of it, is a few very bad words in Swedish.

"Yeah." Clint is done for a while. He addresses himself to his pint, which at least hasn't gotten warm--this is Britain, after all, so it was already warm.

"Well, then," Selvig says, and his voice has less of a hard edge than usual. "I should stop complaining about what I've been through."

"No, don't. I asked."

"Can't say it's been easy. When I was Loki's--" he makes a sour little moue at that, but goes on without taking it back-- "I had access to so much. The secrets of the Tesseract were mine. It sounds crazy now, but it really did feel like sh-- like it was speaking to me. I had such intimacy with the secrets of the universe--the very things I've studied my whole life. Then when Loki lost his grip on me, it was all torn from me. I could sense it close by on occasion over the past year. It was like-- Have you ever had your face numbed by the dentist, and as it just begins to wear off, it itches, but when you try to scratch, you can't begin to reach the itch? Your skin's still too numb to register the feel of your fingernails. That's what much of this past year has been like. I didn't cope well."

"Given what you've been through, I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"No, I get it. I had something like that too. When I had that fucker in my brain--" No way is he ever saying he belonged to Loki-- "I heard his voice with such crystal clarity. Other sounds too. I did miss that, but it got swept away by missing Phil, and coming to terms with what Loki made me do." Wasn't it just like Loki, he thinks, to fuck your brain over but leave a little something behind to make you miss that.

Frowning, Selvig says, "I'm not sure I understand."

"Oh. Maybe you didn't know. I'm deaf. I have been, to some degree or another, most of my life. I've had implants the last few years. They're amazing, but still imperfect."

"I had no clue."
"That's the idea. But we were talking about you. So what happened when you felt the convergence starting? Doom, despair, the end of the world?"

"Not at all. I ran to greet it as a lover." Selvig makes a face. "A bit too literally. I was hauled off by the police, but Darcy and the other intern sprung me in time for the grand finale." Laughing, he adds, "I stuffed all my meds in the nearest bin"

"You what? Psychoactive meds? Jesus, Erik, you can't quit that shit cold turkey. That will seriously fuck you up." Sliding across the booth, he gets to his feet. "C'mon, show me where you dumped it."

"It wasn't here, it was in London."

"Oh, fuck me dead." As little as Clint had wanted to go rooting around in a trash bin in Greenwich, it beat getting SHIELD involved in rummaging through every refuse station in greater London. Or maybe they could just get the list of his meds from the cops who had logged them in with his belongings and get them replaced. Pulling out his phone, Clint speed dials Sitwell and explains the situation.

Once he and Sitwell get Selvig to London via quinjet and hand him over to the SHIELD liaison there, they settle in for the flight back to the US. After the debriefing and other formalities are taken care of, Jasper and Clint watch the Stonehenge news reports on YouTube, and let autoplay show them several of the unpixilated clips from cell phones. Selvig wasn't exaggerating about meeting the convergence as a lover. Either that or his unit is a highly accurate dowsing rod for interdimensional portals.

Clint doesn't make a habit of remarking on other men's dicks, but when Sitwell murmurs, "Damn, that's impressive," Clint has to agree.
Snowflakes settle on Clint's hair and shoulders, land and melt on his face and the backs of his hands. It's cold for DC, and the damp--not unusual at all--seeps into his bones. He's not sure how long he's been standing here at Phil's grave, only that it's been a while.

"The thing about Arlington," he says to Steve, who's been standing behind him at a respectful distance for a few minutes now, "is that you can't stand here thinking that you're the only one who's suffering this way, that your story is that different from anyone else's. I mean, yeah, you lost Bucky seventy years ago and practically yesterday, and Phil got stabbed through the heart by a Norse god, but when you look at these rows and rows of white stones, it's got to hit you that this has been going on for a long, long time." He turns to face Steve. "Well, I guess that hit you a lot sooner than it did me."

Steve offers a wry smile. "Yeah, I guess so." After a pause, he asks, "Did it help, coming here?"

"I think it does. I know he'd be proud and honored to be here, included in this company. He lived and died doing what he felt he was meant to, keeping people safe, making it possible for them to live their lives not having to know the shit that he knew." He smirks. "Listen to me, I'm finally giving Phil his eulogy. What about you, Steve? Does it help you to come here?" Briefly placing his palm on Phil's headstone in farewell, he turns and they start walking back the way they had come.

"Sometimes, I guess. But sometimes it feels like poking at a wound, stirring up a lot of 'what ifs'. And it's a big disappointment to see seventy more years of gravestones. I really hoped we'd learn how to do things differently. I would have been good with waking up and being a completely forgotten part of a long-past era because humanity had moved on."

"Well, moving on is a bitch, isn't it? Whether it's one person or seven billion."

"Seven billion--you are just pulling that number out of the air, aren't you?"

"Nope. That's the latest stat. Which I guess is why we don't do something about all the war and killing. Plenty of spare-- Hey, it's Christmas Day. Tell me to knock off the gloom."

"It's fair. There are men and women who've put their lives on the line on Christmas Day. I wish there were something I could do for them."

"How about doing a video message wishing them a merry Christmas?"

Steve's mouth quirks unhappily. "It's a little late for that. Anyone who could arrange that has the day off, and by the time it would be finished--"

"Who needs to arrange anything? My phone's camera has a video setting, and the quality's good. We could do it right here and have it uploaded to YouTube in no time."

"Not here," Steve says.

"Well, no. It's a little...downbeat. Lincoln Memorial? The Jefferson?"

"The Lincoln. That's a great idea."

"Want to go back to your place and get your uniform?"
Steve shakes his head. "Let's go before we lose the light." It's not that late in the day, but the cloud cover has given the entire day a twilight feel.

As Steve's measured pace picks up, Clint can see it's not just hurry that quickens his steps but pleasure in the idea of spreading some kindness. To be honest, it has the same effect on Clint, with the additional enjoyment of making Cap a little happier.

It's barely a twenty minute walk to the memorial, but during that time the snow picks up its pace as well, and it's coming down with a fury when they reach the steps. There are a few people up around the gigantic figure of Lincoln, so Steve chooses a spot farther down the steps that gives a good distance view of the statue.

Clint gets the angle he wants and says, "Okay, go."

Looking directly at the camera, Steve says, "Hi, this is Steve Rogers."

"Captain America!" Clint throws in, loud enough to sound like an exclamation on the video, but too soft to carry to the people above.

Cap's sheepish grin at this is just too fucking adorable. "Yeah. I've been on active duty far from home on Christmas day, and I just wanted to send my greetings to the men and women serving our country. We're having a white Christmas here in DC. I'd sing that song for you, but I know when I heard it when I was a continent away from home during my war, I cried. And anyway, if I sang it, everyone in hearing range would cry, so not singing will be my gift to you. Merry Christmas to those who celebrate. And to those who observe some other tradition, I wish you peace and joy and light. Thanks for serving our nation. Be safe."

Steve abruptly bends down and scoops up a handful of snow, packing it as he rises and fires the snowball at Clint. The missile hits Clint in the shoulder, aimed perfectly to show up in the video on its way but not slam into his phone.

Clint cuts off the video in the midst of their laughter. "That is going to kick ass."

"Are you sure? I think I came off as kind of a dope."

"No more than usual," Clint says, offering a wicked grin. "Watch." He plays it for Steve, who curves his hand around's Clint's to angle the phone better. The warmth of his hand is almost a shock to Clint's nearly numb ones, and there seems to be some kind of current running beneath.

"Well, I do look doopey," Steve says ruefully. "But go ahead and put it up."

"When we get to your place. I can't do it directly with this phone."

"It's past time, I think. Your hands are frozen." Gently he pulls the phone away and slides it into his pocket without letting go of Clint. Then he briskly rubs Clint's hands between his. "There's this crazy new invention, Barton, called gloves. And Jesus, I sounded exactly like Bucky just now."

That seems to prompt a wry smile rather than a fresh round of grief. "I hated bundling up, which meant every winter was nonstop nagging from him and my ma."

Steve releases Clint's hands, which actually are warmer, and hands back his phone. "Now put your hands in your pockets."

"Sir yes sir," Clint says with a smirk in his voice. On the Metro back to Steve's neighborhood, he finds that, however he tries to direct them, his thoughts bouncing back to the heat and friction of Steve's hands on his. He thinks of the time the two of them goofed around like street fighters, warming up to spar. He scowls. What kind of person dwells on shit like this immediately after a visit to his lover's grave?
Back at the apartment, Steve puts on a pot of coffee while Clint putzes around with uploading the video greeting to YouTube. After this, he texts a message to Tony to wish him a good Christmas, suggesting he tweet the link to Cap's message to his 6.7 billion Twitter followers. As he takes the coffee Steve offers, he sits back to let the internet do its thing.

"Thanks for inviting me here for Christmas. I've needed a good break. Man, the behind-the-scenes Smithsonian tour was kickass." He'd taken the train to DC the afternoon before and gotten the tour after hours. This time Clint's actually requested the time off, and plans to stay through New Years, barring some international crisis.

"It was fun showing off what I've been up to all this time. Thanks for lending the items from Phil's collection."

"He'd have been so stoked to have them there. Especially his notes with his contribution to the design for your new uniform, and having them blown up so huge." Steve offers a lopsided grin. "Well, how else were people going to read handwriting so small?"

Clint has to laugh. "I guess there is that." It was possibly the neatest cursive he's ever seen, but so tiny he's heard Fury bitch that his "arms are too damn short to read this shit."

"How has everything been going lately?"

He tells Steve about spending Thanksgiving with Irene and her family, which is probably the first real Thanksgiving he's ever had. "I hope you weren't stuck with a 1940s holiday again."

Laughing, Steve says, "No, I had an invitation from my team at the museum that I accepted before I heard from the Dugans. The host and guests were all single people who moved here from elsewhere. Since the museum doesn't close on Thanksgiving, not that many people travel home."

After the first cup of coffee, they move the conversation into Steve's kitchen, where he unpacks a huge quantity of containers from Dean & Deluca and puts some in the oven to heat.

Clint asks, "You like the people you're working with here?"

"I do. They aren't afraid to get excited about things. Though it was a little uncomfortable at first when it was me they were getting excited about. Things are already winding down on my end, though, so I've been splitting my time more between the Smithsonian and SHIELD. It'll be hard to leave when it's time."

"Anyone you're interested in?" He's not sure why he asked; this isn't the sort of question he normally drops into a conversation.

"Oh god, you sound like Natasha."

"Seriously?"

"Anytime she's in town she takes the opportunity to try to get my love life sorted out. She's always suggesting people I should ask out. Always women. So you and Natasha don't tell each other everything."

Clint shrugs. "It wasn't my news to share. You want me to tell her to knock it off?"

"And spoil her fun? Nah. I can take it. Besides, driving her crazy is kind of fun too."
"Good. Nat needs another person who isn't too scared of her to fuck with her."

"Sweet potatoes, or regular mashed?" Steve asks.

"I don't think I've had sweet potatoes."

"I'll make 'em both. I can make room." He spends a while shuffling things around in the oven, then emerges to ask, "What about you?"

Clint, who's been idly watching (staring at his ass? No--definitely idly watching) tries to follow the thread of the conversation back. "Nope. Nobody on the horizon."

Laughing, Steve says. "Sorry. I was going back to the work conversation. How's it been going?"

"Some good, some bad." He sips his coffee, which Steve had refilled. "I saw Thor last month when all that crazy shit was going on in England. He seems happy with Dr. Foster, but Asgard was attacked first, and his mother was killed and the city's been destroyed."

"That's a damn shame."

"Yeah. I got to talk with him for a little while. Loki died too. Apparently redeemed himself--he died fighting those freaky elves on their planet."

"Loki too. He's bound to be going through a lot."

"You can send the sympathy card for that one. If it weren't for Thor's feelings, I would've done a happy dance at the news." Selvig had told him his own reaction was to blurt *Oh, thank God!* in Thor's face. At least Clint had reined that in.

Steve eyes him, smiling wryly. "Is that the good or the bad?"

"Well, it was good seeing Thor, and it seems like he's planning to stick around awhile."

"And the rest?"

Clint drags his hand through his hair. "Since Greenwich things have been...weird."

Steve waits for a moment, but when Clint doesn't expand on that, he asks, "Weird how?"

"It's Sitwell. I don't think you know him that well."

Steve shakes his head.

"I've known him since I joined SHIELD. He helped me relearn how to navigate a world with sound. He's been taken to pieces by torture. He knew about me and Phil, and when Phil had to quit being my handler because we were together, he took over the job."

Steve frowned. "Something's happened to him?"

"No. Something's up with him. Since Greenwich, or a few days after. He's been...off. The last mission I had, he was unavailable. I got stuck with another handler. The last time I worked with Warren, the op went completely sideways, though part of that was me. But I don't trust him the way I trust Jasper--or anything remotely like the way I trusted Phil."

Steve mulls it over for a moment. "So Greenwich--was there any interpersonal tension between you and Sitwell? Tactical disagreement or anything?"
"No. As it turned out, there was fuck-all I could do without risking good guys and civilians. Well, wait. I did risk my ass to pull someone out of harm's way even though he said not to, but he would have done the same, and it all turned out okay, though not due to anything I did. I made a joke after that, and he laughed. It was all pretty normal, except Norse gods and interdimensional portals and fucking elves."

"Have you talked to him?"

"Not yet. I'd almost swear he's avoiding me. When I get back, though, I'll hunt him down and find out what's going on."

The caring and sharing drifts into more general talk through dinner, then they sprawl all over the living room furniture to watch *A Christmas Story*, which makes Steve laugh himself sick.

The next morning Clint's awakened by a text alert.

It's from Tony. *Might want to turn on Fox News. Apparently Cap's a traitor in the war on Christmas.*
If Tony thinks there's steam coming out of Bill O'Reilly's ears, he should see Steve. Once he sees O'Reilly's rant on his Christmas message, he's ready to start a war of his own.

Though he sympathizes--even agrees--Clint tries to talk him down. "They don't care what's true, Steve. They manufacture outrage because it makes people watch. Ratings equal money, and that's all that matters to these assholes."

Steve's on his feet, as he has been since a few sentences into O'Reilly's diatribe. "The least they can do is have me on to explain my point of view."

"No, that's the worst they can do. Because they wouldn't run what you said the way you said it. They'd chop it up into something that could be misconstrued by anyone who heard it, and the outrage machine would run on and on until it came across some other source of fuel. It's not worth your time."

"So I'm supposed to let these bullies have the last word."

Clint didn't live with the nation's foremost Captain America expert and fanboy to miss the fact that the word "bully" is a danger signal. "Nope. But you don't go to them to deliver your counter-message. Because when they get done with it, it won't be your message anymore."

"How do I--" Steve gently smacks himself in the forehead with his palm. "I'm an idiot. So I make another video. Think anyone will watch it?"

In answer, Clint gets out his phone and pulls up the YouTube page for yesterday's video, then tilts the screen toward Steve. "Check out how many views you got in fourteen hours." Again he finds his hand cradled in Steve's, and the heat he feels flashing between them isn't just the effect of his hand being half frozen.

"Eight hundred sixty--that's three-quarters of a million. There has to be something wrong with their counter."

"Nope. It's gone viral. And now that Fox is all over it, it's gonna explode."

Steve releases Clint's hand as if he just realized he was holding it. "Viral. Explode. These are good things?" A crooked grin accompanies this, and Clint is suddenly intensely aware of how much he likes it on Steve.

"Give it a day or two and you'll be up there with Beyoncé. So do you want to do the follow-up video?"
"Damn right I do."

"I liked the stuff you said about the grave markers. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Arlington?"

"Yep."

"This time wear gloves."

***

This video requires some editing, so Clint sends the clips to Tony, and they put together a meal from the Christmas leftovers. Clint introduces Steve to Mystery Science Theater 3000, but it doesn't take. It's not the references that trip him up--though Clint finds himself intensely aware of how fast and of-the-moment they were. With his own weird childhood on the road and limited hearing, there are a lot of references Clint misses, too, but he's a smartass, so he often finds them funny anyway.

It's the idea of people blabbing through an entire movie that really sets Steve's teeth on edge, and though he tries to relax into it and enjoy the jokes, he can't let go of his annoyance at Joel and the bots obscuring the dialog. "I used to get into fights with guys who yapped through movies."

Clint can tell when he's beat, so they turn the TV to a football game. Not long after, the finished video comes back from Tony. The finished vid is much more of a production than Steve's initial message, but it's still a thing of beauty.

It's almost like an ad for goodness and decency and purity of spirit. There's music--not overpowering or schmaltzy, just a quiet acoustic guitar that underscores the tone of Steve's words. (Clint would have sworn Tony wasn't even aware of the existence of acoustic guitar music.) The vid opens with Clint's establishing shot of the rows and rows of graves and then Steve walking into the frame. He says, in voice over: "So it seems Fox News has a problem with my Christmas day message to the troops. Apparently I'm supposed to extend good wishes to our service men and women who worship in one way only. But I'm here to say, as hard as Fox tries to put their exclusive stamp on what being an American is all about, they don't get a say in how I express my appreciation to those who put their lives on the line for this nation." The shot switches to Steve talking to the camera. "I'd like to show you something." He walks out of the shot, which cuts to a gravestone with a cross symbol at the top. "Here in Arlington, there are symbols on the markers to show the religious affiliation of the person it commemorates." The shot cuts to a montage of shots, starting with a Star of David and moving on to a series of other symbols.

Steve's voice continues: "Many of the symbols are ones I recognized, but some were new to me. So I looked them up on the internet. And I found the men and women buried here were followers of different branches of Christianity, of Judaism, Islam, Shinto, Sufism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Native American traditions, Wicca and atheism, among many others."

Now the video switches back to Steve. "Each and every one of those men and women agreed to accept the same risks and sacrifices. I will honor them--and those who are fighting now--I will honor them all, on Christmas day and any day, and if Bill O'Reilly or--" Steve breaks off, rummaging in his coat pocket until he finds a slip of paper, which he consults-- "Sean Hannity have anything to say about it, they're welcome to come say it to my face." In his tone and expression it's easy to find the pugnacious little bastard Steve Rogers was as a scrawny kid.

"Thanks for listening," Steve says to the camera. Clint half expects to see a "Paid for by Friends of
Steve Rogers for Senate card, but the video just goes to black.

"Damn," Clint says. "That was brilliant."

Steve's wearing a slight frown. "We did a retake of the part about Sean Hannity. Why didn't Tony use that?"

"Because this is a sick burn. The fact that Captain America doesn't know his name will eat at his shriveled little soul."

Clint's phone rings. It's Tony. "Does Cap like it?"

"Judging by the grin on his face, I'd say he likes it. Speaking for myself, the Hannity moment is a nice touch. I'm about to upload it to YouTube."

"You can do that too," Tony says.

"Uh, thanks?"

"That'll be good for people without cable. Good plan."

Clint shoots Steve a look. Tony. Who knows what the fuck. "Cable?"

"Oh. Maybe I forgot to say. I'm about to pull the trigger on a multi-million dollar ad buy. It should be airing within the hour."

"Cool. Where should we look for it?"

"Fox News. Don't worry about missing it. It'll be pretty much on constant rotation. Gotta go. Iron-clad contracts to sign."

When Clint hangs up he's laughing so hard it takes him several minutes to report what Tony just said.

***
Steve goes back to work the next morning, so Clint goes out to spend the day like a tourist. There are a kajillion museums in this city, and most of them are free, so his most pressing problem is choosing where to start. Steve lends him his battered tourist guide and his bike, which Clint uses to drop Steve off at work. If Clint thought the casual touch of Steve's hand on his was a recipe for sexual confusion, Steve leaning into his back with his arms around Clint's waist is off the charts.

Since Steve has the weekend off, Clint gets to experience the reverse effect, too. He discovers he finds it scorchingly hot to be riding behind Steve, arms wrapped around him, snuggled against his broad back. Like a girl, he can't help thinking. Having his body pressed against another that makes Clint feel dainty in comparison causes his head to swim.

By the time they get to Air and Space museum, Clint is vibrating half out of his skin. Steve, it turns out, likes to read every placard in any given exhibit. Clint tends to wander until something catches his eye, or he falls down some rabbit hole of related facts he's suddenly incredibly into. (There was the time, for example, that he dragged Phil all over the Natural History's dinosaur exhibits to discover the advent of kneecaps becoming a thing.)

Clint feels like he's running circles around Steve, and is ready for the next room. He heads back to the halfway point of this room to tell Steve where he's going.

"Are you bored?" He's got those frown lines happening that Clint suddenly realizes he finds stupidly endearing.

He is so very fucked. "No, I just do museums differently. Phil once told me if you see one good thing in a museum, you got your money's worth. It was a life changer. I don't have to read every single sign anymore."

"It depends on the museum for me," Steve responds. "I spent a lot of time here to catch up on what I missed, but when I go to art museums I do it Phil's way."

Clint and Phil used to go to art museums. To look at them, no one would guess they were together. Phil might be in his suit, if it happened to be the Met's free evening hours. Clint would be wearing whatever. They'd come together and pull apart, sometimes exchanging a thought about what they were viewing, sometimes acting as if they were strangers, except for a brief touch of hands.

Thinking of Phil in this context, while simmering with lust after riding with Steve, makes Clint feel sick and sad. He drifts through the museum well ahead of Steve, reading the occasional placard and forgetting what it says the moment he turns away.

He starts a text to Natasha. I am so fucked. He deletes it, unsent.

A short while later his phone buzzes and for a moment he thinks Nat has read his mind--it wouldn't be the first time. It's Steve, though.

Cafe break?

Sure. He searches for a diagram to show him where he is and how to get to the cafeteria.

Once they've settled in with food and coffee, Steve aims those frown lines toward him again. "You okay?"
Clint tries to summon up a *Why, whatever do you mean?* face, but he can feel the pitiful failure of the attempt. "Guess it's Phil," he mutters.

"I was wondering." He offers a soft smile. "I occasionally get slammed upside the head too. When I smell cigarette smoke sometimes. Buck didn't smoke once we became friends because smoke set off my asthma, but he picked it up again in the Army."

"Again? I thought you guys knew each other when you were kids."

"He'd started when he was eight. Quit when he was ten."

"Jesus."

Steve huffs a laugh. "Yeah, it's a different world now. Two things that were really strange to me after I woke up were the lack of cigarette smoke everywhere--and I do mean everywhere. Restaurants, movie theaters, the street--and all the men going around bare-headed." Steve flicks his hand. "But I changed the subject on you. Sorry. Go on."

Clint didn't really have a desire to go on. But his recent honesty binge has turned out to have surprising benefits, so he says, "It's not just missing him. I'm feeling this weird guilt."

"Not over what Loki forced you to do."

Clint shakes his head. "It's not that. And it's not survivor's guilt, either. I've worked through all that shit. Mostly." As far as Clint can tell, "mostly" as as worked-through as any shit ever gets. There's always room for a surprise visit from some nasty psychological ex. "This is new."

"What's going on?" Steve sounds so much like Amelia that Clint has to stifle a laugh.

"The last year and a half, I've been feeling like I died along with Phil. But lately--well, it seems like I might be coming back to life."

"Well, that's good."

"I guess. But it feels disloyal to Phil. I feel like I'm cheating."

"Ah." Steve's eyes widen. "Oh. Well," he continues, seeming to choose his words with care. "I understand how that feels. It's pretty recent for me, too."

Clint wonders if Steve's saying what Clint's saying. *Get real. What would attract a guy like Steve to a guy like Clint?*

"Buck would've liked you," Steve says, which sounds like a complete non sequitur, but Clint really really thinks it isn't.

"Why do you say that?"

"He appreciated a fellow smartass. Buck and Morita--he was one of the Commandos--were funny as hell. When they got going they could keep it up all night. Awful stuff, most of it. The kind of jokes you make when you've been in the shit too long, you know?"

Clint nods.

"We'd still be wiping the tears off our faces from laughing, and Buck would say, 'Ah, Stevie, we're going straight to hell.' I'd tell him, 'Don't worry, I'm betting we get off with time served.'"
There's a lot to this story, so much that Clint feels totally unqualified to address. Instead he says, "Stevie?"

Steve's fond smile turns a little wry. "He never could see me as anything but that matchstick of a kid I used to be." Carefully folding the paper wrapper of his sandwich, he asks, "So, more museum, or have you had enough?"

*

Even after receiving Bucky Barnes' imaginary posthumous blessing, Clint doesn't scrape up the nerve to make a move until New Year's Eve at Steve's place. Neither of them is up for a crowd, either in DC or at Tony's shindig at the Tower. They spend the evening watching movies, now and again checking the live broadcasts.

"I did that mob scene once," Steve says when the feed switches to Times Square. "Never felt so lonely in my life."

"When was this, after Bucky joined up?"

"No, he was there. Him and his date. And my date, who acted like her Christmas stocking was filled with coal and reindeer shit."

Clint can't stifle a laugh.

"I saw that look a lot. I swear, Bucky was even worse than Natasha for trying to set me up."

Though Steve is smiling, this fact makes a knot rise into Clint's throat, sadness that Steve's still mourning for a guy who did everything he could to palm him off, pair him up.

Apparently Clint does a crap job of hiding this reaction, because Steve smiles sadly. "No, it's not like that. In those days, a fella got married, that's just how it was. Buck and I used to talk about how we'd each find a nice girl and live next door to each other and have a pack of kids who'd run around together. But honestly, I think he was just worried about who'd take care of me after he shipped out."

"So what happened?"

Steve gives him a confused look. "Well, obviously I didn't marry a nice girl."

"No, I mean that New Year's Eve."

"Oh. Well, I ditched." His expression turns sheepish, which Clint finds cute as hell. "In that crowd, all I had to do was stop fighting to stay with them. It happened often enough that I had plausible deniability. It took me quite a while to elbow my way through the mob, but I got free and wandered into Hell's Kitchen. He adds an extra measure of embarrassment. "I got into a helluva fight." A grin abruptly sweeps away the sheepishness. "Actually improved my night."

Clint laughs. "Yeah, I've had that kind of night."

"Oh hey, I think they're starting the countdown." Grabbing the remote, Steve un-mutes the TV, just in time for thousands of people to scream a string of numbers and then scream some more, as well as blowing car horns and vuvuzelas and blasting air horns. At Clint's wince, Steve hastily mutes the set again. "Sorry."

"It's okay, I--" Without finishing the sentence, Clint leans in and kisses Steve. It's brief and
undemanding, and he builds in an escape hatch by drawing back and saying, "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year," Steve says in return. Clint is frozen in his searching gaze for a moment, then Steve leans in and kisses him. They keep it up for a while, beginning slow but letting the heat build.

As Clint shifts to ease the growing tightness of his jeans, he mutters, "I'm such a chickenshit. Why the fuck did I wait till my last night here?"

"You needed to be sure you were ready," Steve says. "Same for me. We don't want to start anything for the wrong reasons."

"You think that's what we're doing?"

"No. But we were right to give it time. Maybe we should keep it light this time. I'll come to New York for a long weekend over Martin Luther King Day weekend. If we've kindled a fire, let's give it room to catch and grow."

It's only two weeks. It makes sense. Clint hates that in a plan.

The upshot is, they both (Clint is sure) go to bed horny as hell. He takes care of his raging hard-on in the dark of the guest room, like a furtive teenager.

And he feels more alive than he has in well over a year.
Chapter 26

It should come as no surprise that his whole world goes immediately tits-up shortly after this, but it does, since Clint has managed to forget the Roller Coaster Principle. He'd been spending so much time trying to figure out if the thing with Steve should go any further--all the way on the train back to New York and now intermittently, between impatient head butts from Pasha, curled beside him as he tries to read the book Irene sent him--that he's forgotten to feel his usual sense of impending shitstorm. The house phone from the lobby rings, a rare enough event, and the staffer on the other end announces Agent Sitwell.

While he waits for Jasper to arrive on his floor, Clint wonders what the hell is up. He's always called in for mission briefings--unless it's some kind of deep-cover shit. He fervently hopes that's not the reason Sitwell's here--he needs time to think, but not six months out on his own surrounded by porn- or krokodil-mongering assholes. Though Jasper's appearance might mean he wouldn't be saddled with Warren again, which would be one small saving grace.

That theory's blown out of the water when the elevator doors glide open to reveal Jasper in jeans and bomber jacket, carrying a pizza and a six-pack.

"Hey," Clint says, unable to keep the surprise from his voice.

"Hey," Jasper returns."Thought I'd drop by. We haven't done this in a while." He waggles the pizza box, in case Clint is confused about what "this" he's talking about.

"Well, hey. Come on in." Clint follows him into the living room, wondering if he's about to be treated to Jasper's love troubles, because he looks kind of shitty. "Pasha, look who's here," he calls to the cat, who's still a bit peeved at being dislodged from Clint's side.. "It's your pal Jasper." He takes the pizza and beers so Jasper can give proper obeisance to Pasha.

When Clint returns from the kitchen with paper plates and napkins, Jasper straightens up and shucks out of his jacket.

"Wow, you look like shit," Clint says. "One of the probies trank your ass again?"

That was supposed to be top secret, since it happened on the Hub, but it was too good a story not to leak among the level 7s.

Jasper doesn't even rise to the shit-talking, so his visit is clearly not a casual pizza-and-beer night. He settles himself on the floor next to Pasha, shaking his head when Clint opens a beer and offers it. "I think you should sit," he tells Clint. "I have to tell you something."

"SD-6 isn't CIA?" That's a long-running joke, since they marathoned the first two seasons of Alias and laughed their asses off at the "spycraft." It usually gets at least a snort from Jasper. This time it doesn't crack his stone face in the slightest. Clint takes a long slug of the beer he'd opened for Jasper. "Well, hit me."

"You've got to understand something. I could lose my career. I'm gambling I won't, because I actually told Hill I was coming here, and she didn't shoot me outright."

Jasper, Clint knows, has one hell of a poker face when working an elaborate joke, but he can tell this is not what he's seeing. He puts down the slice of pizza he'd started on. "Go on."

"Back in November, I was at the Hub--don't give me the 'this is news' face, Clint, I don't have the
"Okay. What happened?"
"There is no good way to say this. I saw Phil."

This makes no sense. Why would they be keeping his body at the Hub?

"He's alive, Clint."

His brain turns to white noise and static. He stares at Jasper, who looks about as miserable as a human can look.


"There's a lot of secrecy around this, so the details I have are sketchy. The story when he came back was he was recovering in Tahiti. He got back on active status in September."

"September? Where's he been? He was supposed to be working with the Avengers, is what I heard."

"Fury put him on some secret assignment. He has a team. The probie who shot me on the Hub, that was one of his."

There are a million questions this prompts, but the TooMuch of it all overwhelms Clint just as much as the New York streets had after the white room. He curls in on himself, shutting down.

Pasha leaves Jasper and jumps onto the couch, flopping against Clint's thigh. He scoops up the cat and breathes into his fur. After a few moments, Clint looks up and says in a cracked voice, "Just when was I supposed to get the memo?"

"I don't know," Jasper says sourly. "It's fucked up, which is why I'm telling you. Fury wanted this to be top secret."

"Fury. Fuck his shriveled walnut husk of a soul." The outburst provokes a cranky yowl from Pasha, so Clint lowers his voice. He goddamn knew how I was taking Phil's death. He knew we were together. The fact that I didn't have a hand in killing the guy that I loved and lived with is strictly Need to Know?"

"Yeah. It's fucked up."

"Is that all you're gonna say?" Before Jasper can come to his own defense, Clint holds up a hand. "Sorry. That's all any sane person can say. When did you find out?" He knows Jasper said, but this all is so huge he can't keep it all in his head.

"Shortly after the, uh, elves."

"That was--" Fuck. His brain is utterly fogged.

"November," Jasper supplies, looking so unhappy that Clint's attention sharpens.

"Two months."

"A little less." Jasper looks like a probie trying to justify some act of dumb-fuckery, which provides a clue that maybe Clint should be pissed off.

"What changed between now and then? You got a conscience upgrade?"
"I was called in on a rescue mission. Phil was captured--by what group, I don't know. Beyond my pay grade, or else nobody knows. I wasn't one of the ones who freed him, but I ran into the probie--the one who tranked me--when she was too rattled to keep her mouth shut. She said they had him in some kind of machine, and he was screaming, 'Let me die, let me die' over and over again. I got a brief look at him before I got sent on another op. He was ambulatory, but he looked like hell."

"What's his status now?"

"I don't know. Above my clearance level."

"Fuck that shit." Nudging Pasha off his lap, Clint stands. "I'm going to find out where he is and how he is, or I'm going to shoot--correction, and then I'm going to shoot Fury in his fucking face."

As Jasper gets to his feet, Clint says, "Don't think you're gonna stop me."

"Don't think I'm gonna try. I'm comin' with."
"You fucking said he died!"

If Clint weren't consumed with grief and rage and betrayal, he would count this as one of the strangest experiences of his life. Fury had allowed him an unimpeded path to his office and now sits calmly, letting Clint vent it all as Hill and Sitwell look on. His hands rest on the desktop, not making the slightest move toward a panic button—of course, the joke in SHIELD is that Fury doesn't push the panic button; the panic button pushes him.

But now Fury speaks up. "He did die. On the helicarrier, in surgery, in post-op. Twice after that, due to raging infection."

Clint sways on his feet. That can't be true, not literally. Phil had almost died. But he sees the truth in Fury's dark, unwavering gaze.

"I should have been there," he says, each word distinct, weighted.

"You should have been right where you were, dealing with the damage Loki did to you. Coulson wouldn't even have known you were there."

There are so many responses to this in his head. That he's been dealing, for the last year and a half. That Phil would have known, on some level, that Clint was there, that he wasn't alone in fighting to live. But none of that gets him to what's really important. "Well, what about now? What's Phil's status?"

"Coulson's fine. He's on a mission."

"Really? Because I heard otherwise. I heard he was captured. I heard he was tortured. That he was screaming when the team got to him."

"He had some minor physical injuries, all treated when his release was secured." Despite Fury's shift into report-speak, Clint can see there's tension or emotion just below the surface. Fury's hands still rest on the desk, but the flesh under his fingernails is white and dark pink from the pressure of his hands against the wood.

"You forget who you're talking to, sir. I was tortured for days, and I didn't have a mark on me. I wouldn't have made it if not for Phil."

"Phil is handling it just fine," Fury says, and Clint doesn't miss the note of warning in his tone. He doesn't give a flying fuck. "And I'm supposed to believe that. Just like I believed all this time that he was dead."

"The ops he's on demand that level of secrecy. In case you haven't noticed, you're in the spy business."

"With all due respect, sir, fuck you. Where is he?"

With a fierce and fluid grace, Fury gets to his feet and leans in, fingertips still on the desk's surface. It's impressive how the man can loom, even with three feet of mahogany between himself and his loomee. But then, Fury runs a master class in Looming 401 for high-level agents. "If you interfere with or jeopardize Coulson's mission with any act of dumb fuckery, I will have your balls bronzed
for a paperweight, and the rest of you will be looking for a job at Circus World. Am I clear?"

"Clear as a thirty-year Scientologist, sir."

"Then we are done here."

"Coulson is your friend. If this is how you treat the people you like--"

"Clint," Sitwell says in a warning tone.

Without another word, Clint turns on his heel, brushing past Jasper as he strides out of Fury's office.

Ducking into the nearest men's room, Clint unleashes his rage on the fixtures, kicking in the stall doors, pulling down the paper towel holders and soap dispensers, beating his fists against the mirror. As shouts and the sound of running reach him, Clint pops the vent cover and tries to hoist himself up, but his hand slips on a smear of his own blood. He falls heavily onto the floor, landing on his elbow in a way that whites out his vision.

He's still gasping on the floor when Jasper enters the bathroom.

"Well," Sitwell says mildly. "That could've gone worse."

*

After shoving a wad of paper towels none-too-gently at Clint, Sitwell strong-arms him down to medical. Wrestling him into a corner of the elevator, he murmurs into Clint's ear, "Don't be a dumbass" before letting go. Aware of the surveillance cameras, Clint just wedges himself further into the corner and crosses his arms until they reach their floor.

The treatment rooms are another matter; even SHIELD has to obey HIPPA privacy laws. When Hector arrives to check him over, Clint blurts, "Did you know?"

"Know what?"

"About Phil. Did you know he's alive? Were you down there in the--"

"What?" Hector looks from Clint to Jasper, who's followed, as if wondering if Clint has lost all connection to reality.

"It's true. I saw him."

"Shit, no, I never heard a thing about it."

Clint doesn't need to weigh his statement to see its truth--Hector looks shaken by the news.

"Fuck it," he says, rising from the treatment table. "I'm going down there."

Jasper manhandles him away from the door. "Sit. You're here to get patched up from the last stupid thing you did. And while you do that, I'll clue you in on a couple of things that went right over your head."

"Trust me, I didn't miss shit." He hisses sharply as Hector gently probes the elbow he landed on. "Phil being alive is need-to-know, and I, the guy he was living with, wasn't on the list. And where he is now, well, that's need-to-know too."
"Yeah, and he also reminded you that you're in the spy business."

"I heard that," Clint snaps.

Jasper goes on as if Clint never interrupted. "So you're in the business of gathering intel, often finding people who are trying to fly under the radar."

Clint goes completely still for the span of a few heartbeats. "That's not what Fury meant."

"It's not what Fury's going to say. He's in the business of plausible deniability. He didn't say not to go find Coulson. He just said don't fuck up his op."

So many thoughts slam through Clint's head that he's immobilized by them. At last one finds its way to the top and he blurts, "Why didn't he tell me he's been alive all this time?"

Nobody has to ask who he is.

"We're also in the business of getting important information to the people who need it, even when secrecy is key. So why--" Clint suddenly finds his throat is too tight to say more.

"Hell, I don't know," Jasper says. "Phil's always been a company man, though. There must have been compelling reasons."

*Compelling my ass,* Clint wants to snarl, but he doesn't trust his voice. *Phil will defy Fury when he thinks it's worth it--Tasha is literally living proof.* He has to clamp down with all the strength he has to keep the obvious conclusion from showing in his face.

Slumping, he grows still, allowing Hector to attend to the cuts he opened during his rampage. He lets Hector's cautions and instructions wash over him without any smartass comments. When pressed to repeat what he's just been told, Clint lets Jasper say, "Don't worry, I got it."

When he finally slides down from the exam table, Hector takes him by the shoulders. Clint hadn't realized he looked that unsteady. It turns out, though, that it's not his balance Hector's worried about.

"I'm sorry." And Hector, who has manhandled him gently in the course of his nursing duties only, pulls Clint into a bear hug. "Hang in, bro. You've got my number."

"Call you, maybe?" It's self-defense smart-assery, joking so he doesn't break down.

Hector releases him, lightly thumping his head. "Go fuck yourself, maybe."

In the elevator on their way out, Clint punches the lobby button.

Jasper, who'd pushed the parking level, says, "Oh hey, I'll give you a ride back."

"Thanks, but I think I'll walk." Clint's sure he can hold his don't-fuck-with-me face out on the street, but in the darkened car, with the pity vibe filling every inch of space between him and Jasper, he won't last two minutes.

The air is cold and damp, the kind of weather that makes a twenty-degree day in Manhattan harder to take than sub-zero in Iowa. By the time he gets back to the Tower, Clint isn't sure whether he wants a bottle of Tony's most pricy booze, the phone or an armload of cat.

After a moment's thought, he goes for all three.
Chapter 28

Clint's not even sure what he's planning to say when he calls Steve, but it doesn't matter, because all he gets is several rings and an answering machine. He hangs up and starts on the top-shelf bourbon he boosted from the bar in the common area. By the time Steve calls him back, he's pretty well toasted.

"Sorry I missed you earlier. I had a long day at work."

Somehow Clint hadn't expected Steve to fathom the complexities of caller ID, but apparently he's mastered it. "SHIELD work, or being an icon of truth, justice and the American way?"

"That's Superman. He's from my time, you know. Working at the museum." He sounds a bit off to Clint, but he's too far gone to pick up on nuances. "It's good to hear from you."

"Is it? Because I'm starting to wonder where the fuck I fit in people's lives." His tongue gets tangled as he speaks, and he's not sure any of it translates for Steve, but whatever. "I sure as hell seem easy to walk away from."

"Clint? Are you soused?"

"Drunk or sober, it's true. I'm the world's easiest guy to forget."

"What's going on?"

"Oh, it's Top Secret, Cap. If I told you it might be the end of the free world. If, y'know, there's actually any such thing as the free world."

"Cut the crap," Steve says, his tone not unkind. "Tell me what's happened."

Closing his eyes tightly, Clint tries to put words together as intelligibly as he can. "Got some news today. Phil--" Just one syllable, but it cuts like swallowing a piece of glass. "I found out he's alive. He's one of Fury's top-secret projects, like those weapons you found on the helicarrier." Clint had been somewhere else--someone else, in effect--at the time, but he'd heard about it.

"They faked his death?"

"Fury says not. They brought him back somehow. Science, voodoo, nobody's saying. And that's the main fucking point. Nobody said anything all along, even though Fury knew damn well Phil and I were together. Nobody said anything, until Jasper, who found out a couple of months ago. Nobody, Steve. Not even Phil." He grabs the bottle and whips it across the room to shatter against the door frame and rain glass and bourbon on the floor. A sob tears through him then, and he quickly breaks the connection.

A moment later the phone buzzes with a text. "I'm coming. There in about 3.5 hours."

Clint doesn't respond. He's not going anywhere.

***

When Clint wakes, he discovers to his surprise that he's in his own bed. The night stand has a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin next to the lamp, and a small waste can sits by the edge of the bed. Groaning, he reaches for the aspirins and water.
"Jervis?"

"Captain Rogers arrived sometime after you...fell asleep," the A.I. tells him. "He is sleeping in the sitting room."

Rubbing his face, he makes a detour to the head, then pads out to the living room. The smell of bourbon hits him and threatens to jerk his stomach out through his nose, but he sees that Steve has cleaned up the glass and wiped up the booze.

Steve, sprawled on the sofa with a throw dragged halfway over him, is still sleeping, so Clint silently heads for the kitchen to make coffee. It's already been set up, so all Clint has to do is switch on the machine. As he waits the cat comes ambling in from wherever he spent the night—Pasha's the perfect service animal when Clint's fucked up twelve ways from Sunday, but he hates the way Clint smells when he's drunk.

Pasha uncorks a loud meow, so Clint sets out Pasha's food as he keeps up the litany of impatient yowls. "What do we want?" Clint chants, timed to accompany Pasha's outbursts. "Chowwwwww. When do we want it? Nowwwwwwww." Pasha dives into his dish so far that half the kibble comes spilling out, and Clint hears a chuckle from the doorway. "I think you two were made for each other."

"Hey, you didn't need to sleep on my couch. You've got a whole floor just two levels up."

Steve shrugs. "I wanted to be around in case you woke up and wanted to talk. It's why I came."

Clint takes down a pair of mugs and pours coffee.

"It's a nice sofa," Steve adds. "I slept great."

"Yeah, I let Tony pick it. He puts in more rack time on his workshop sofa than his own bed, I think." He can't believe he's blathering about stupid bullshit like this when his whole fucking world--

Swaying, he hits his hip against the counter. The mug tilts precariously in his hand, but before it slips out of his grip entirely, Steve is there, gently taking it and setting it aside.

He puts a hand on Clint's shoulder. "It's a lot to take in."

This, coming from the undisputed champion of A Lot To Take In, breaks him again. He lets his legs fold and dump him on the floor. It's an unfortunate reminder of his collapse in the hallway in Phil's building, and that the man who settles in beside him is not Phil, and that's all it takes for him to completely unravel in Steve's arms. Before long, Pasha wedges his way between them, and Steve adjusts his embrace to accommodate him.

Once the storm has blown over, he leans back against the cabinets, stretching his legs out. "Fuck. I'm sorry."

"No need," Steve says.

"I have no idea what I should do next."

"Take a few minutes while I make us breakfast," Steve suggests.

"You don't have to--"
"I know. Let me."

"Sure. I never turn down someone else's cooking."

Steve's knees crack softly as he rises to his feet, and he starts rummaging around in the fridge. "You would," he says. "If you ever tasted Bucky's cooking. He could screw up boiling water."

"What would you do?" Clint blurts. He's still on the floor, his hand in Pasha's fur, scritching softly. "If it were Bucky. Shit. Sorry, sorry. I shouldn't ask."

"It's not like I didn't think about that the entire way from D.C.," Steve says. "But Clint, our situations aren't the same. I have regrets, you know? Things I should have said, and didn't."

"You'd go."

Steve puts a carton of eggs and some cheese onto the counter. He quirks a smile at Clint. "I fought my way behind enemy lines last time, and kicked a lot of Nazi ass. So yeah, probably."

"What if--" His throat closes tight against the words, as if letting them out into the air might make them come true. He pushes past the knot. "What if he didn't want you?"

"I honestly don't know. It would hurt, that's for sure."

Clint feels like an idiot sitting on the floor, so he gets up. Snagging his mug from the counter, he settles in at the table. "Those eggs are too old."

"I'll check them."

"The date's stamped on the carton."

"That doesn't matter." He runs some water into a container and gently lowers the eggs in. "If they float, they're no good. Otherwise, they're fine. The water should be lukewarm, by the way."

"So what did you do with old eggs in your day?"

Steve laughs. "Eggs didn't have a chance to get old in our house. If we were lucky enough to have them, they were gone in no time." His smile taking on a wicked cast, he adds, "If one was bad when we got it--well, it didn't go to waste. If we got it from a grocery who tended to palm off bad food, we'd take it back. We might get unfortunately clumsy and drop it right inside their door. If that wasn't the case, we'd save it and drop it on the anti-union goons at the docks."

Miserable as he feels, this revelation still teases a grin from Clint. "You and Bucky."

"Yeah." Sobering, Steve says, "You don't know that he doesn't want you. If it were me, I would have to hear it directly from him, not go on assumption."

Apparently satisfied with the eggs, he fishes them out of the water, cracks them into a bowl and starts beating them with a fork. Clint watches him work, a reminder of their week together in DC. He enjoys this, the graceful, certain movements of Steve's hands. Chopping onions and peppers he'd scrounged from the fridge. Clint finds himself thinking of the sketches in the book he'd taken from Phil's condo (Shit, I have to give those things back now.) and wishes he could watch Steve draw.

"I wanted this," Clint blurts. "Us, I mean."

"I know," Steve says softly.
"But I want--" The knot rises in his throat again.

"You want Phil to be alive. Of course you do."

By now Clint's run out of words. He picks up Pasha and croons the usual nonsense into his fur until Steve sets plates of eggs and toast on the table. Their silence through breakfast isn't a companionable, as it has been before, but due to the fact that words are too small and frail for the enormity of what's happening right now.

But Steve, of course, is used to pitting the small and frail against the insurmountably large. Scooping up the last of his eggs onto a piece of toast, he says, "Whatever way I can help, I will."

Clint stares in disbelief. "But we were-- You-- Jesus, Steve." He is obviously not as adept with overcoming his--or language's--weaknesses.

Steve makes a gesture, part shrug, hands up and spread, that shows his dominance over the limitations of non-verbal language as well, because it's crystal clear to Clint. What else could I do? I care about you.

Once in a while Phil would say that something in particular made him feel humbled--Clint's first session with the audiologist comes immediately to mind. For the first time Clint really gets what that means, how it feels. This feeling in his chest, tight and warm and strange, must be what that's like. He nods, and when he can find the words, he says, "First we have to figure out a way to find him."

"I'd think Tony could help."

Clint considers it. "If you want explosions bigger than last Christmas, by all means tell Tony Stark that Nick Fury lied to him about Phil. I can live without the Post-Dramatic Stress Syndrome." The notion gives him another thought. "Jarvis?"

"Yes, Agent Barton."

Clint could swear there's a different, more serious tone to Jarvis' voice in response to the use of his correct name. "Can you snoop into some SHIELD servers without alerting Tony right away?"

"If the information uncovered does not pose a threat to Mr. Stark or is not counter to his interests, I believe a certain amount of secrecy can be justified."

Clint goes about the task of explaining what they're looking for without knowing what they're looking for. He gives Jarvis the few details they know--the date of Coulson's appearance at the Hub, the date of the rescue mission that brought Jasper back into contact--however briefly--with him.

"What about Tahiti?" Steve asks. "Didn't you say he spent some of his recuperation there?"

"That was the rumor Jasper said was going around," Clint says. "Sure, look into that, too."

That seems such a pitifully small start, but it's all that he has.

"I shall focus my best efforts on your query, Agent Barton."

"Thanks, Jarvis." Clint takes an unsteady breath, suspecting he's unleashed a force beyond his understanding, with consequences he may not be able to control.
Jarvis has a lot of ground to cover, looking for patterns, locations, the kind of activities no one wants disclosed--activities too secret even for most SHIELD agents to know about. Steve hangs out during the wait, and they wind up sprawled on Clint's sofa, trying to find a movie that works for them both.

"Are you sure you can stay?" Clint asked as they settled in. "Didn't you say something last night about your work day?" Thanks, drunk brain, for sitting on that memory until now.

"Don't worry about it. Your timing couldn't have been more perfect."

Clint stops flicking through the TV menu interface, leaving the images hanging in the air. "Why, what's going on?"

"Nothing dramatic." Steve rubs his hand through his hair. "I just--we were making our final selections for the video rooms. I honestly could have gone the rest of my life without seeing myself prancing around in those terrible movies."

"Better than watching the other guys who've pranced around being you, trust me." And Clint would know--Phil had treated him to a double feature one rainy afternoon. They were dire.

"For you, maybe." His rueful smile fading, he adds, "The newsreels were tough. Seeing Bucky at my side in almost every one. And I knew the ones people should see most are the ones I find hardest to look at. How he came back from that prison camp."

Clint can hear the effort Steve's making to keep his breathing steady, and without thinking he pulls Steve against him, leaving an arm across his shoulders. Steve doesn't break down, just leans into him, and after a moment they shift into a more comfortable tangle of limbs. Clint has missed this kind of contact so fucking much, and he's sure it's worse for Steve.

"He was out of his head when I found him. Muttering his name, rank and serial number. I don't know what all they did to him. Science experiments, the others told me. He was so weak, but he rallied. Made it back to our camp on his own two feet." Steve's mouth twists into a pained smile. "That was Bucky. So goddamn proud." He draws in a breath and then huffs it out. "I'm sorry, this isn't doing either one of us any good."

"Hey, don't be--"

"Let's watch something. Not Star Wars, though." They'd talked about doing a full watch during their planned weekend over the Martin Luther King holiday weekend. "I don't think I'm up for stormtroopers just now."

"Same here," Clint responds, but he's drawing a blank on any alternate viewing. Almost anything he can think of just now involves blowing up shit. He flicks through the movie interface again, muttering

Jarvis speaks up then, startling the men despite his soft, carefully modulated tone. "Sirs, if I might offer a suggestion..."

"Uh, sure," Clint says.

"Perhaps something completely unlike your usual fare would suit. Might I suggest A Hard Day's
"Night?" He cues it up for them and they both find themselves delighted by the wit and energy, and Steve really likes the music. Pasha wanders into the room and joins the cuddle pile, and when their hands meet in the attempt to stroke the cat, they slot their fingers together, holding hands unselfconsciously. The movie, the cat and the contact seem to clear the heaviness in the air.

* 

It turns out that a common element related to Jasper's two sightings of Phil is radio chatter making reference to "the bus." It takes a while for Jarvis to beat the algorithm that drives SHIELD's ever-changing encryption, but after a few days he has come up with a number of other references plotted to a map and timeline.

Peru. Stockholm. Hong Kong. Austin, Texas. Greenwich. *Fuck, Phil was in Greenwich, just after Clint had left.* This discovery nearly sends Clint into another tailspin, except he calls Steve, who is back in D.C., before he reaches for a bottle. "He was right there, following up on the whole shit show, after Jasper and I left. It's like the universe hates me, I swear."

"Well, if Jarvis has tracked him this far, I have to think he'll be able to get you in the right place eventually."

"I don't know. There's no pattern to where they go, they just head where events take them. Well, that might not be accurate. There may be a pattern the events follow, but that's not something Jarvis has cracked yet."

"Do you have a way to get to him that you can arrange on a minute's notice?"

"Well, shit. I generally rely on SHIELD. Since they're the ones who want me wherever."

"I doubt that'll be the case this time. But we do happen to know a fella with a jet. More than one, for all we know."

Clint smothers a groan. "If I ask Tony, he'll make me tell him what's going on. Then he'll want to come."

"Well, there is that." Clint can hear the smile in Steve's voice. After a moment Steve goes on, sobering. "I don't know if he'll be madder for himself or for Pepper."

"Shiiiiitttt," Clint says, the word riding on a laugh. "I hadn't even thought of that."

"If he's insisting on going, send me a quick text. I'll talk to him."

"Sic him on Fury when you do."

He doesn't expect the laughter that crackles across the phone connection, but he has to admit, it makes him feel a bit better.

* 

When Clint reaches the workshop, Tony's adjusting something on Cambot, who tweets a forlorn little greeting—or maybe distress call.

"Don't look at me, little guy. There's only one genius in the room."

Tony rewards him with an abrupt "Hold this" as he thrusts a tool at him. "I haven't seen much of you since you got back from DC. Good visit with Cap?"
The question throws him, since this visit is the one that's on his mind. "Yeah, it was good. Thanks for making the video. We both got a kick out of that."

"It was a helluva lot more fun than I had last Christmas." He reaches out a hand. "Gimme that back. Any other holidays you two want to declare war on, just let me know."

The casual way Tony says "you two" gives Clint a pang. Maybe he should just pretend he came to the workshop to invite Tony to watch a movie or go for beers or something, and let it be over, if that's what Phil wants.

But Phil is not a chickenshit, not the kind who would ghost--literally fucking ghost on someone he cared about. So Clint is not going to be chickenshit either. He'll get some answers about what's going on with Phil.

"So, Tony." He scratches at his shoulder blade with the tool, which Tony has handed back. "If I were to need immediate transport to distant places as yet unknown--" What the fuck is coming out of his mouth? He sounds like a character from one of those novels he used to stick with only out of sheer desperation for something to read. "--is that a thing that could happen?"

Tony looks up at last from his attentions to Cambot. "Why, what's up? Has something gone south with Natasha? Where the fuck is she, anyway? Jesus, you look terrible."

"Taking that in reverse order: uh, thanks, Belarus, no, and that's why I'm here."

Tony's eyes narrow. "Would this have anything to do with the enormous amount of my A.I.'s processing power that seems to be directed elsewhere?"

"Um...yes?"

"So you asked Jarvis to look into something but not me." Wait. Is he letting on that he's hurt? Tony Fuck You Stark?"

"Yeah, well, I was somewhat reluctant to damage your calm."

"That sounds super promising." Tony snaps his fingers at Clint, gesturing for the tool again, which he's been figeting with. "Something stopping SHIELD from providing the processing power and transport you need?"

"You could say that," Clint responds. "I'm looking into them, trying to dig up some secrets."

"About--"

Clint heaves a sigh. "Keep a grip on your blood pressure. I found out something a few days ago."

Tony just keeps his gaze on Clint's face, his eyes dark and serious.

"It's Phil. Fury lied to us all along. He's alive and recovered and leading a super-secret special ops team. Jarvis has been helping me try to track him down."

The tool slips from Tony's hand, clanging on the cement floor. "Fuck. Me."

The bot extends its arm to retrieve the dropped tool, offering it to Tony with a disconsolate whistle. Tony is oblivious.

"Jasper--Sitwell--saw him a couple of times. He told me."
Tony scrubs a hand over his face. "Recovered, you said. So the whole thing wasn't a lie. The blood on those cards, that wasn't from Fury's own personal drinking supply?"

Despite the situation, Clint can't contain a snort of laughter. "Well, it may have been. Phil didn't carry his Captain America cards around on him. They were precious to him."

He can see the anger start to leech into Tony's expression, overtaking the shock. "That sonofabitch. But Phil--why would he--"

Clint cuts him off. "That's been the burning fucking question over the last few days. You got me."

Tony regards him for a long moment. "Jesus. Are you..." He gestures feebly, then finishes, "okay?"

Quirking a bitter smile, Clint says, "Not remotely. There's the big fat sense of betrayal, but it's buried under a giant rock slide of other emotional shit." It occurs to him that he hasn't even talked to his therapist yet.

"Fuck. You should have said something before this."

"Steve was here the first couple of days. He did the heavy lifting. So you're just on the hook for the ride. If you're willing."

"Whatever you need." His expression changes as a thought occurs to him. "Natasha--does she know?"

Clint shakes his head. "Well, not that I've told her. Her last deep cover mission went tits up because of me. So I'm planning to tell her after I've actually seen Phil." Just saying those words, acknowledging that seeing Phil might, in fact, be a thing that happens, makes Clint start to shake.

"You need to sit," Tony declares, steering him toward the same sofa where he'd spent a day reading Irene's novel. "You mind if I take a look at what Jarvis has so far?"

"No, go ahead." He sinks into the cushions while Tony waves his hands, calling up screen after screen of data shimmering in the air, flicking through it swiftly as he absorbs the information. As disorienting as he'd found this when he first encountered it, Clint now enjoys watching Tony create this dance of shimmering pixels. It's like getting a look inside his brain, at the light-speed travel of his thoughts. It's kind of comforting, seeing this energy directed at an apparently insurmountable problem.

Finally Tony ceases his movements, apart from running his hands through his hair while blowing out his breath. "There's no way to discern a pattern in all this without knowing what they're looking for."

"That was pretty much my conclusion, too."

"Jarvis is running into significant resistance trying to find out just what sort of events Coulson's team is investigating. You people are paranoid assholes."

"It is what we do."

"He's going to stay on it. In the meantime, keep a bag packed."

Clint levels a look in his direction.

Tony smirks. "Right. Paranoid assholes."
Two nights later, Clint's asleep on his sofa with Pasha a solid weight on his chest when Jarvis calls his name. "I'm sorry to wake you, Agent, but I've intercepted a transmission from 'the bus.' It's an urgent request to bring a patient with a critical gunshot wound to SHIELD's trauma center in Zurich."

Pasha yowls his annoyance as Clint pushes himself up. "Is it Coulson?"

"Unknown, sir. Mr. Stark's helicopter will be on the roof in ten minutes to take you to the jet."

"Thanks, man," he says, already racing for the shower. "Hey, make sure someone feeds my cat, will you?"

There's an uncharacteristic warmth to Jarvis' voice when he responds, "I certainly will, Mr. Barton. Best of luck in your search for Agent Coulson."

It's not until he's on the helipad with two minutes to spare that he learns why.

Tony, smeared with grime from the workshop, has come to see him off. "You're now officially Jarvis' favorite Avenger."

"Why's that?"

The helo's approaching the LZ, so Tony has to shout his answer. "You called my A.I. 'man.'" He thumps Clint on the back. "Now go get Agent and bring his ass back home."
Tony Stark's private plane beats the hell out of troop carriers and other transports Clint has taken via SHIELD. He suspects it's even more posh than Air Force One. There's actually a chef on board, who undoubtedly finds Clint a huge disappointment. Clint finally accepts a sandwich, just to make the guy happy. When it arrives, "sandwich" is almost an insult for the stack of artisan bread, grass-fed beef, goat cheese, leafy garnish and, undoubtedly, some kind of aioli. Chefs who make sandwiches into miniature artworks definitely have a thing for aioli, Clint has noticed. Whatever the fuck that is. After his initial inspection, however, it might as well be lunch meat between two curling slices of stale white bread. Clint mechanically chews, his thoughts on Phil--on how things were with them, and what he's potentially going to find when he gets to Zurich.

Once the flight attendant has taken away the plate, Clint jacks his StarkTech mp3 player into his implant and curls his body toward the window. It seems to send the message he intends, since no one approaches him until the plane's about to start its descent.

There's a helo waiting for him at the airport. Of course there is. Anything Tony Stark asks for, he gets. Which is precisely the reason Clint will never be able to think of a way to thank him, but it won't stop him from trying.

Clint hasn’t spent all these years as Coulson and Fury’s asset without learning how to bluster his way into places he isn’t authorized to go, and that includes SHIELD trauma centers. He issues orders like the second coming of Patton, and rips one poor bastard a new one for not having his name on an approved list. Two more steps up the chain of command he invokes the name of Fury, and has the pleasure of watching his antagonist go pale.

As he’s guided through the corridors by the lowest agent on the totem pole, he finds it harder to hang onto his veneer of impatient self-importance. He still doesn’t know if he’s heading toward a waiting room or to Phil’s bedside, and the hours of not knowing have not been great for his mental health. He doesn’t realize his hands are balled into tight fists until a stab of pain tells him his nails have cut the skin of his left palm. At last his guide gestures him into a waiting room, where everyone looks up as they enter, tension, hope and fear all mingled on their faces.

Including Phil’s.

Relief crashes over Clint like a storm wave swamping a small boat, and he clutches at the doorway.

“Thank you,” he says to his guide by way of dismissal. The kid, glad to get free of his Fury Lite, is gone before the second syllable passes Clint’s lips. He’s forgotten just as quickly as Clint sees the occupants of the waiting room realize he’s not medical staff. They each deflate a little, turning away.

Including Phil.

“Sorry,” Clint says. “Wrong room.” He backs into the hallway and stumbles against the wall. He’d taken it all in during that brief, horribly awkward moment. Phil’s face, the expression he’s seen before—usually as a brief flash before Phil smoothed it over for Clint’s benefit. The same downturned mouth that freaked Clint out after the white room, the expression that signals impotent worry, smoldering anger at whoever the fuck fucked up his fucking agent, and self-blame for letting it happen.

He’d taken in the rest of the room as well, with his sniper’s habit of instantly assessing a situation.
The three others in the room—are they Phil's new team? Clint knows Ward, but the last he knew, Garrett was his S.O. The two baby agents—what the hell are kids like this doing on a team involved in such high-level shit that almost no one at SHIELD knows about it? The girl—he presumes she's the one who accidentally shot Jasper with an icer—what the actual hell is she doing on this team? This whole situation is about half fuckery and half what-the-fuck?

“Clint.”

He whirls to see Phil has stepped into the hallway. “What’s going on? Why are you here? Is Natasha—?”

“Natasha’s fine.”

“The other Avengers?”

“Everyone’s okay. I came because—”

“Coulson,” says an urgent voice behind him. They turn to see Melinda May coming up behind a woman in scrubs.

“I have to go,” Phil says, following them into the waiting room.

Clint slumps back against the wall, stunned. Melinda May, he thinks stupidly. That explains why Phil can run a strike team with baby agents. On some level he knows he's thinking about this because it’s so much safer than replaying his interaction with Phil, which was—not impersonal, exactly. It was Coulson the handler. Coulson the distracted handler. He gets it—it’s not the time and place for the big dramatic reunion, but fuck—

May comes out of the waiting room like she was shot from a rocket launcher, hands balled into fists, her expression a terrible mix of rage and grief. Some impulse makes him follow her, his own confusion and resurgence of grief needing the release of movement.

He follows as silently as he can, but she is Melinda May. “Fuck off, Ward,” she snarls without looking back.

He doesn’t. May only pours on more speed, head down and fists balled, ignoring her pursuer. By the time she breaks into a run, the strike team’s plane is in sight, a C-17 troop transport. Code named, as Jarvis told him, the Bus.

Once they reach the plane, Clint hangs back to keep May from realizing who’s actually on her tail. And, well, he might be taking a moment to deal with the candy-apple red vintage Corvette parked next to the standard black SUV in the cargo bay. The convertible, waxed to a high polish, is ridiculously out of place. “What’s the opposite of a turd in a punchbowl?” he mutters under his breath. Once May’s footsteps stop ringing on metal, he abandons the puzzle and moves forward.

The Vette may be the most ridiculous luxury in this transport, but it’s not the only one. As Clint stealthily moves beyond the cargo area, he sees a lab, workshop, med bay and sleeping compartments. There’s a goddamn bar with mood lighting and wood paneling—not the kind Clint’s family’s house had (which he remembers vividly from having been knocked into it so often), but the kind he sees now in pricey hotels and the occasional palace. It would not surprise him in the least if the Bus had a personal chef too.

Muffled sounds of violence reach him, which probably means he’s caught up to May. Before he gets very far considering whether he should interfere, he hears the sound of hurrying footsteps coming up behind. Clint retreats into a recess just before Ward and Phil arrive. Phil presses a
control Clint hadn’t spotted, revealing a door hidden in the bulkhead. He gets nothing more than a glimpse of a table like the one Clint had met Phil across before the view is blocked by their entrance into the space.

A moment later, May steps out and the door closes behind her. She’s disheveled, still breathing hard, her hands a mess. On impulse, Clint steps into view. “Where’s your first aid kit?”

She does a double-take and growls, “What the fuck are you going here, Barton?”

“Pleasure to see you too, May,” he says easily. “Last I knew you were on another assignment.” Piloting a desk, in fact, and refusing to go back to field work.

“So were you, I thought. Why are you butting into my turf?”

“Fury. Now c’mon. First aid kit.”

She regards him stonily. “Fury.”

Clint figures “That’s my story and I’m sticking to it” is less than credible. “Need to know,” he says instead. From the look she gives him, he doesn’t think that worked either, but he is, in fact, sticking to it. “So does this thing have a sink, or maybe a solid gold fountain or something? Because you need to wash those cuts and scrapes out ASAP.”

“I need to get ready for takeoff the moment Skye is aboard.”

“You need a couple of good hands to maneuver this beast, I’d guess. Last thing you want is an infection and enough antibiotics to wreck your intestines to hell and gone. You know what they do for that now? A shit transplant, no lie. A patient with a fucked system comes in, and they shoot some stranger’s shit right up his ass so he’ll get the good bacteria.”

May thrusts the first aid kit into his hands. “Oh my god, Barton, I'll wash and bleach my hands if you'll just shut the fuck up.”

He follows her to the bar, where she lathers her hands in the small sink. “Where are the clean towels?”

“By my knee,” she says.

As Clint bends to get one from the drawer, he hears hurried footsteps and Coulson’s voice. “May, Skye’s prepped to go. Get the Bus ready to roll as soon as we get her on board. We’re taking her to Bethesda.”

The sound of footfalls is fading by the time May snaps out her “Yes, boss.” She’s stepping back from the sink when Clint rises. He manhandles her back in front of the faucet.

“Keep going. God knows what kind of scum you were kicking around in there.”

“Billionaire scum.” She shakes him off but resumes washing up, at least.

“Ugh. They're the scummiest.” He nods toward her hands. “That should be good. You can rinse now.” When she’s finished, Clint carefully dries her hands.

“Oh my god, you’re Coulson’s Mini-Me.”

Clint, who had been on the verge of making a smartass remark, abruptly closes his mouth and turns to the sink to wash his own hands. He keeps up the quiet in the cockpit while he efficiently tends to
May’s abused knuckles, then while he assists with the pre-flight checks. She eyes him as they wait for orders to take off, but she doesn’t tell him to get lost, so he stays.

Clint’s hand twitches when Phil’s voice comes over the cockpit comm. *The med pod is being loaded. Stand by.*

“He looks good,” Clint says, looking straight ahead. “Lost some weight, though. How is he?”

“He’s good,” May says, and then Phil orders them into the air and that’s the last of the conversation for a while.

Clint wonders if her response is the truth or if it’s just team loyalty speaking. He’s an outsider now, and god knows he and Nat covered for each other and for Phil plenty of times to outsiders. The thought makes him wish Nat were nearby so she could go get stinking drunk with him. Hell, he’d take Tony. Or just sit with Steve and be miserable.

“This agent we’re transporting,” Clint says. “He’s close to her?”

May nods. “She’s kind of a special project of his. The hacktivist type. She’s reckless, but shows a lot of promise.”

“Yeah,” Clint says, his throat tight. “Coulson likes his reclamation projects.”

May doesn’t miss the bitterness of his tone, again narrowing her gaze on him.

Clint can feel his face heating from the scrutiny. This was a stupid idea. Stupid stupid stupid. To come all this way and then sit her under her laser focus instead of having the balls to approach Phil for some answers.

*It’s bad timing. Phil won’t have space in his head for anything but saving his agent. It’s who he is.*

That’s a crock. Clint’s being a chickenshit. He unbuckles his seatbelt and unfolds himself into the cramped space of the cockpit. “I’m going to stretch my legs.”

Phil is right where Clint knew he’d be, at the window of the medical pod where the agent—Skye—is being treated. “What happened to her?”

Startled, Phil turns toward him. “Barton, what are you doing here?”

“I could ask the same, considering last time I visited you was in Arlington.” As soon as it’s out of his mouth, Clint’s head is screaming, *Fuck! No! You idiot!*

And yeah, Phil’s expression agrees with him, but all he says (all he needs to say) is, “Now is not the time, Barton” as he turns back toward the window.

“You’re right. Sorry.” *I’ve just spend the last year and a half grieving, so I kind of lost my head.* At least he has the sense to keep that one confined to his head.

“Gut shot,” Phil says tightly.

“By that festering sack of shit in your holding cell.”

“Got it in one,” Phil says.

“What, billionaires are doing their own murders now?” He regrets it the second it’s out of his mouth. The look that crosses Phil’s face is gut-punched. Clint stumbles on through. “You think
they can help her at Bethesda.”

“If anyone can, they will. I’m living proof of that.” His mild frown wrinkles his brow. It’s so Phil that Clint finds himself overwhelmed. “You never did say why you were in Zurich.”

“I heard you weren’t dead, that’s why. Christ, do I really have to explain why I needed to see you? And for future reference, that’s the kind of intel that would go down better coming directly from you. And maybe a year earlier.”

“I was under orders.”

“Fuck orders, Phil. And fuck you.” Clint wishes this beast had an archery or firing range where he could bleed off some of the anger. Pounding the shit out of billionaire scum probably isn’t an option. He needs to be gone, though, so he turns on his heel and heads back to the cockpit. If he has to shove his heartache and rage into a locked box, he might as well sit next to the master.

“It looks good,” he says after a long while. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it was an exact match.”

May shoots him a sidelong look.

“It even had me fooled for a while. But there’s one thing I really don’t get. Why even bother making an LMD if Coulson’s supposed survival is supposed to be a big secret?”
May’s habitual impassive mask shatters. “What? Where the hell did you get an idea like that?”

“Come off it, May,” Clint says, but he’s shaken. He’s seen faked shock and surprise, and that’s not what May’s giving off.

“Barton, that’s no LMD. It’s Coulson. I’ve been working with him this time around for months. Maybe the other members of the team are new to him, but we go back years. You know that.”

“Convenient that he’s got a team full of baby agents and a brand new level 7 who never worked with him. And you. Special assignment from Fury?”

She scowls. “Do you realize how insane that sounds?”

“Insane enough to be in the realm of possibility. Fury’s a master of secrets that hide other secrets. He’s a fucking matryoshka doll of secrets.”

This prompts a huff of a laugh from May. “Well, I can’t argue with that. But Coulson is Coulson. The medical protocols that kept him alive are so top secret that his existence can’t be common knowledge. But he’s Coulson. I’ve seen him injured. Seen him bleed.”

“Other witnesses to that?”

“Skye, for one. But she’s not exactly up for questioning just now.”

All at once Clint recalls the story Jasper had told him when he gave him the news that Phil is alive. “Skye. She was the one who saw Coulson being tortured, right? She heard him screaming.”

May turns her sharp gaze on him. “How do you know that?”

Clint doesn’t answer that, caught up in the details of Jasper’s story. When Skye had seen Phil, he’d been begging to die. Phil. Begging to die. That was no Life Model Decoy.

“What did they do to him?”

Before May can answer, a message from SHIELD comes over the radio. Prepare to be boarded and to relinquish command.


“Coulson,” May says, her voice tight. “They wanted us to take the prisoner to the Hub. Coulson said not until we learn whether Skye makes it or not.”

Once again he unbuckles the restraint. “I’ll go give him the word.” And some backup, if need be. Clint trusts his reasons when he says fuck orders—though not necessarily when he follows them. That one’s going to hurt for a while.

Phil and Ward stand outside the med pod, watching one of the baby agents tending to Skye. Young as she is, she’s clearly got medical training and talent, if not the ability to keep her grief off her face.

“Sir,” says Clint, the word tasting bitter and strange on his tongue. “SHIELD radioed in. They want their billionaire scum. They’ve sent a plane to intercept and board us.”
“They’ll have him when when we know whether Skye’s going to make it.”

The three of them are forced to make quick adjustments in their stances as the SHIELD plane sets down on the hull of the Bus. And if this whole shit show wasn’t bad enough, the agent who makes his appearance is John Fucking Garrett. He annoys Clint plenty on his own, but what he really hates about the guy is how Coulson acts around him. Clint sees the change in Phil’s expression and knows the metaphorical rulers are about to come out, and he’s seen enough.

He drops gracelessly back into the seat next to May. “It’s Garrett,” he says flatly. “If you enjoy a good dick-measuring contest, better go now for a front row seat.”

She emits a quiet snort, which he’d normally consider a major accomplishment, but it just pisses him off more. “What are you laughing at?”

“You,” she says without the slightest hesitation. “You suffer from the tragic condition of being funny even when you’re pissed off. What’s got you so wound up?”

“It’s just hard to figure out Coulson’s criteria for when he gives Fury the Sir, Yes Sir! and when he tells him to go fuck himself.”

She scowls at him. He’d forgotten how terrifying she could be. “It shouldn’t be that difficult. This is a young agent’s life.”

“I get that. But he couldn’t get word to me, even in secret? To Natasha? His death gutted me. How long has he been — awake, whatever you call it, with no word at all?”

“That’s some level of entitlement you’ve got there. To hear you talk, someone would think—“

May’s impassive-face is so good that the slight parting of her lips is the only hint that she’s figured it out. It’s the Melinda May version of a jaw drop.

“Yeah,” he says, clipping the word. “Someone would think. So you can see why the ‘Agent Barton, what are you doing here?’ schtick isn’t going over too well. Let’s just skip right over the awkward non-conversation about this, and you can show off whatever nifty upgrades you’ve got for flying this thing before we get to Bethesda, which is where I’m getting off.”

*They’ve fallen back into silence by the time Coulson calls May out to talk to him. “You comfortable flying this?”

“I think I’ve got it. Don’t fly too low, and don’t fly too slow.”

Smirking, she unasses her seat and heads for the cabin. A few moments later, she’s back. “Prepare yourself. You’re stuck with the traveling dick-measuring show for a while. We’re not going to Bethesda.”

“Why not?”

“Turns out that’s not where Coulson was treated. FitzSimmons found out it was in a place called the Guest House. Ever heard of it?”

“None?”

“ Heard of Bumfuck, Nowhere? This is its sister city. It’s not SHIELD, so we don’t know what we’ll encounter. There’s a contingency plan forming out there.”
“Sounds like something I should get in on.”

May nods. “Sounds like.”

Once again Clint heads back into the cabin, where Coulson, Garrett, Ward, Antoine Tripplett and the baby agent—FitzSimmons?—were formulating their plan. “I want in,” Clint says, and Coulson nods, so they rewind to the beginning.

“You need to understand, I’m not saying this to be a dick,” Clint says partway through the briefing. “I’m saying it because lives may be at stake if things go south. I can’t understand a word FitzSimmons says.”

“Fitz,” Ward and Coulson chorus. Fitz himself just stands there with a fierce blush developing on his face.

“Sorry,” Clint says. “Fitz. This is all me, not you. I’m hearing-impaired. I have really great tech, but it takes me a while to adapt to different accents and rhythms. The middle of a mission isn’t the best time. Are we good?”

“Definitely!” He turns even redder, if possible. “I mean, yes.”

Oh Christ. Now the poor kid will never speak an unselfconscious sentence for the rest of his life.

They sort out the communications protocols, run over potential scenarios.

“Anything at all you can remember about this place?” Garrett asks Phil.

“It seemed a lot like Tahiti,” Phil says drily, then adds, “No, nothing.”

“Too bad,” Garrett says.

They run through Plans B–P, plan A being asking nicely. Then there’s nothing much to do but wait to reach their destination. Garrett and Coulson go back into the holding cell, Ward heads off somewhere, and Fitz takes over the moping post outside the med pod.

As soon as he has that thought, Clint curses himself for being an asshole and makes his way back to the cockpit, but Ward has taken his seat. So Clint does what he always does when he’s at loose ends, finding a high vantage point. He settles on the top step of the stairs to the upper deck.

*

Later, they are standing on a bleak mountaintop staring at a speaker grille as it repeats, “How was the drive from Istanbul?”

Phil tries to reason with the gatekeeper, appeal to his sense of humanity.

“How was the drive from Istanbul?”

Right, then. Violent shit show it is. Reassuring to see that some things in Clint’s life never change.
This is completely fucked up.

They kill two guys to save one life. Sure, they wait until the guys open fire, but still—they’re just doing their job. The SHIELD team has no intel that the Guest House people are enemies—hell, they’d apparently put Phil back together in this place, so they’ve cooperated with SHIELD within the last couple of years. Coulson’s team didn’t have the countersign, and the guards did what guards are supposed to do, turning them away.

It leaves a real bad taste in Clint’s mouth.

As Fitz and Phil run down a corridor, Clint’s left standing by one of the guards, who’s already unconscious, bleeding out. Triplett, Ward and Garrett frantically search for a kill switch for the explosives wired to blow this place to hell and gone. Clint stands momentarily frozen, watching the pool of blood spreading out around the man.

He’s the first to see Fitz come barreling down the corridor, prize in his hand. “I’ve got it!”

“Where’s Coulson?” Clint shouts.

“Coming behind me.”

Yeah, Clint’s not trusting that. He takes off down the hallway, ignoring shouts of his name. He rounds a corner and finds Phil, one hand planted against a concrete wall, bent over a puddle of vomit. Has he stumbled across some toxin, or has it hit him what they’ve done?

“Phil, we’ve gotta haul ass.”

Phil looks up, eyes unfocused, face pasty white.

Right. Fireman’s carry it is. Won’t be the first time he’s been covered in puke and other gross fluids. Won’t be the last, unless he’s too slow getting them out.

The knee he fucked up in Crimea starts showing the strain, staggering him by the time he’s crossing the last few yards to the Bus’s cargo ramp. Ward and Garrett lift Phil off him as the Bus leaves the ground, causing Clint a momentary surge of vertigo. The plane makes an abrupt ascent, rocked by the explosions below.

“He injured?” Ward asks.

“Not that I—”

“Skye,” Phil says.

“Fitz got the vial to Simmons. She’ll be—“

“Jesus, no,” Phil says, suddenly sharp, focused. “Skye.” Scrambling to his feet, he takes off toward the main cabin.

“What happened in there?” Garrett asks Clint.

“Beats me.” They all head after Phil, toward the med pod, as fast as they can.
Skye is seizing when they get there, and Phil, standing on the threshold of the pod, is as pale as death. As they watch, her muscles unlock and she relaxes onto the mattress, her vital signs stabilizing, getting stronger by the second.

Clint finds himself releasing a breath that had been lodged in his chest. He’s not the only one. He steadies Phil, who’s now staggering under the weight of relief.

“Thanks, Barton,” Phil says weakly. “For getting us out of there.”

“Thanks for not puking down my back,” Clint responds, deflecting as always. But he lets his hand tighten briefly around Phil’s biceps.

The drama over, at least for now, Garrett and Triplett depart with their billionaire scum, Phil heads to his quarters to catch some sleep, and Clint returns to his perch to try to do the same.

* * *

Clint sits at a table outside the galley, nursing a cup of coffee as he flips through a magazine and wonders when the fuck this living hell will be over. They’ve been diverted to Death Valley to deal with something brewing there, and he feels like he’s never going to get off Fury’s Flying Model Home of Guilt.

Without looking up from the magazine, he says, “Fitz. Stop avoiding me and get the fuck over here.”

Fitz, who was slinking out of the galley with a cup of coffee in hopes of going unnoticed, freezes.

“Sit down,” Clint says. “Talk to me.”

“But I thought—“

“How I learn to process new speech rhythms and accents is by hearing them. Plus I’m bored shitless.”

Without even a twitch of a smile, Fitz joins him at the table. He’s so damn earnest it’s kind of adorable.

“So is it Fitz, or FitzSimmons?”

“It’s Fitz. Leo.”

“FitzLeo, then.”

Color rises in Fitz’ cheeks. “No. Sorry. Leo’s my first name. Leo Fitz.”

Fitz is so serious that Clint decides it would be meaner to admit that he was just fucking with him. Instead he nods and says, “I’m Clint Barton.” They shake hands over the table, their palms warm from cradling mugs of coffee. “So where’d the FitzSimmons thing come from? I thought I heard someone say something about a FitzSimmons, but maybe…” He gestures toward his ear.

“Gemma is Simmons,” Fitz says, but he catches on by Clint’s non-reaction that this means nothing to him. “Oh. You haven’t met her. She’s taking care of Skye.”

“Sure, yeah. I know who you mean.” The other baby agent, who hasn’t learned to keep her emotions and her expression compartmentalized. “So, you two are a thing?”
“No!” His stammer and the way his face goes space-heater bright are pretty clear indications that he wishes that they were. “No. We were at academy together, that’s all. That’s where it started. We, em, tend to finish each other’s sentences. I guess that’s why.”

Clint takes a not-that-wild guess. “And you hung out a lot, because no one else was as smart and quick as you two.”

He looks surprised, gratified and embarrassed all at once. “I don’t know that I’d say that.”

“Most wouldn’t, I guess. Tony Stark would. I’ve seen him with Dr. Banner, so I know how it goes.”

“I’d give a lot to see that once,” Fitz says earnestly.

“Most people would give a lot if they only had to see it once.”

Fitz’s internal heater switches back to high. “I didn’t mean—“

Waving a hand, Clint says, “I know. I’m just fucking with you. They’d probably get a kick out of having someone around who knew what the hell they were talking about. You could even translate for the rest of us.”

Now he’s doing pleased/embarrassed again. Before he can stammer a self-effacing response, Clint says, “So how’s it going, working with Coulson?”

“It’s good,” he says emphatically. “Exciting. I mean, he’s a legend, isn’t he? Gemma and I can’t quite believe we’re here. We thought we’d be stuck in a lab for years. Oh. I mean, we like being in a lab. Stuck probably was a bad choice of word. But we never expected to be in the field, much less on a team that sees this kind of action.”

This speech is so fast that it’s more Clint’s lip-reading skills than improving comprehension of Fitz’s accent the lets him follow what the kid is saying.

Clint nods. “What kind of shit have you been seeing out there?”

Fitz happily launches into a story and is just beginning another when Ward ambles out of the galley with a cup of coffee. He lays a hand on Fitz’s shoulder and says, “You do realize the war stories you’re telling are classified.”

So Ward did learn Condescending Prick from his mentor.

Stammering, Fitz protests, “But I thought— He’s an Avenger.”

“He doesn’t have the clearance to be on the Bus, much less getting briefed on Level 7 missions.” Ward turns his prick smile on Clint. “I’m sure you understand.”

“Sure,” Clint says easily, because fuck if he’s going to give this douchelord the satisfaction. “Just passing the time.”

His face still flaming, Fitz comes up with an urgent task that needs his attention, hurrying away from the galley. Ward takes his chair, assuming a casual sprawl, a cocky smirk aimed in Clint’s direction.

Sliding magazine he’d abandoned back toward him, Clint picks it up and turns to an article he’d already read, giving Grant Ward exactly as much attention as he deserves.
He expected to find Phil in the command center putting together whatever intel’s coming in on the shit happening in Death Valley, but Ward is in there on his own. Clint finds Phil in the med bay, sitting by Skye’s bed. She’s asleep, but looking a lot better than she had in the pod. Clint clears his throat quietly, prompting Phil to look up from the book he’s been reading.

“How is she?”

“How is she?” Phil closes his book without marking the page—he always remembers where he left off, can find any passage instantly. It’s his weird superpower. As he sets it aside Clint catches sight of the cover and loses the rest of the update on Skye. He barely waits for Phil to stop speaking before he blurts, “You sent me that book?”

“I thought you’d enjoy it. I’ve been reading it to Skye when she’s awake. It’s a great comfort read.” Phil’s delivery of this is so bland Clint doesn’t even know where to start. He seems to pick up on Clint’s agitation. “You didn’t enjoy it?”

“I thought you’d enjoy it. I’ve been reading it to Skye when she’s awake. It’s a great comfort read.” Phil’s delivery of this is so bland Clint doesn’t even know where to start. He seems to pick up on Clint’s agitation. “You didn’t enjoy it?”

“Of course I fucking enjoyed it.” He manages to put a lid on his volume after the first two words. “It’s Irene. You know what else I might have enjoyed? A note, maybe ‘From your not-dead pal Phil.’ That would have been a fucking great comfort read.”

Something flickers across Phil’s face at the way Clint spits out the word pal, there and gone in a microsecond. Hurt, maybe? Well, tough shit. Clint has nearly two years of pain welling up, and he doesn’t much care at the moment if it splashes around.

Yes, goddammit, he does. He scrubs his hands over his face and heaves a sigh. “I have some things of yours. Jasper told me it would be okay before he knew, and he’s your executor. I have a couple of books. A comforter.” Fuck fuck fuck, don’t lose it now, Clint. “One of your Thurber dogs. I’ll take them back to your place, and leave the keys with Jasper. But you can’t have Pasha.” Clint may not be around enough to suit Pasha, but at least he isn’t living on a goddamn troop transport—no matter how fancy—traveling from global crisis to global crisis.

“Tasha?”

“Pasha. Our cat.”

There’s only confusion in Phil’s expression, his head shaking slightly.

“Right. I was still calling him No-Balls when you…died. He’s mine. You got him for me, and he stays with me.” That’s as much as he can handle, and the girl is starting to shift in her bed, normal waking-up signs. “I’ll be out of your hair as soon as we deal with whatever this is.”

As he turns to go Phil calls out, “Clint, wait.”
“She’s waking up. Keep her company.”

“Clint.”

As he rounds the doorway, he hears a scratchy female voice say, “That’s Clint?”

* 

Fuckfuckfuck. The very last thing Clint needs is another evil fucking Asgardian. She’s made herself a small army of mind-controlled bikers, and Nope to the tenth fucking power. His gut tells him to get as far away from this cluster fuck as possible and aim a lot of arrows, but these guys— they’re him, and he can’t kill the poor bastards. They might be the outlaw gang from hell or the sort of bikers who run toys to orphanages at Christmas. He doesn’t actually care which. What they’re doing now is not their free will, and he won’t—he can’t just shoot them down.

He finds himself warning the others off any sort of lethal engagement—and why is it up to him and not Coulson’s call? Whatever. He wades into the throng as far from the lady-Loki as he can possibly get, fists, elbows and feet flying. Even when he releases them from their thrall, they don’t seem too appreciative of being thwacked upside the head. Clint becomes the center of a milling, punching mass of sweaty, stinking humanity, and it’s the best time he’s had in a very long time that didn’t involve necking with Steve.

And then fuck yeah, Sif comes wading into this shit show, and kicks the lady-Loki’s ass. Her fierce expression breaks into a huge smile when she spots Clint, as she leaves the sorcerer bitch with Coulson as she bounds up to Clint and crushes him in an Asgardian hug, lifting him right off the ground. “Archer!” she booms, every bit as loud as Thor. “It is an unexpected joy to see you again!”

“You too, Sif. You’re looking well.” And that is an understatement—if Clint didn’t bat for the other team, he’d consider making a play for her. As it is, her swooping him up like that has made him half hard.

“Tis a pity my mission is so urgent,” she says. “It would be a pleasure to get shit upon our faces once more.”

Clint’s unable to suppress a laugh. “I agree.” It had been worth the massive hangover to get stinking drunk with her. He suspects her affection for him stems 97% from his declaration at closing time: “You know what’s complete bullshit? ‘Lady Sif and the Warriors Three.’ Why the fuck isn’t it the ‘Warriors Four’? Shit, pardon my language.” Now he tells her, “Anytime you’re on Midgard with nothing urgent going on, look me up and we’ll do that again.”

“Rest assured that I shall.” She swats him on the shoulder, nearly knocking him to the ground. Lowering her voice, she adds, “Forgive me if I overstep, but I no longer sense a close bond between you and the Son of Coul. Have you and your shield brother had a falling out?”

“No,” he blurs, wondering if it sounds as false to her as it does to him. “We’ve just been assigned to different teams. It’s been a couple of years since I worked with him, and I have to head back to my team after this.”

“Your commanders cannot be so wise, if they would separate such a formidable duo as you.”

“I did make that same opinion known.”

“I hope that you shall be reunited soon. And now, my friend, I must take my leave as well.” She collects Endora then and moves away from the team, calling out to Heimdahl, and Clint is awestruck at the coruscating rainbow that envelopes the two women, bearing them away.
As soon as the last of the unearthly light fades, a depression descends on him that makes him want to curl up right there on the strange patterns made by the Bifrost. Instead he begs a ride to the nearest town from a biker who’s prepared to forgive him in exchange for a fifty. He texts Jarvis that he’s ready for Tony’s jet to pick him up, and while he waits he heads for the seediest bar the biker knows and gets shit upon his face all on his own.
Thanks to my lovely readers for your patience. I had major orthopedic surgery last month, and it's hard to believe how much energy the little daily tasks take. When even binge watching Netflix takes too much out of you, it's bad!

At some point before they poured him onto Tony’s jet, he had called Steve. “I’m coming home,” he said. “It’s done.” He was just sober enough to realize how trashed he sounded, so he hung up. A moment later, his phone vibrated with a text: I’ll be there.

True to his word, Steve is standing behind glass doors as the helo touches down, raising his hand in a wave as he waits for the blades to stop moving. Just the sight of him makes Clint feel like he can breathe again. Once the engine whines down and the rotors have stilled, Steve emerges with Pasha on his leash and Clint’s breathing goes cockeyed again. Heedless of the pilot, Clint hurries to them, scooping up Pasha and letting Steve wrap the both of them in his arms.

“How are you doing?” Steve asks.

Clint’s only response is a noise deep in his throat that he immediately realizes sounds like the growl Pasha makes when Clint skritches him in the wrong spot.

“Let’s head inside,” Steve says. As they wait for the elevator, he asks, “Your place or mine?”

“Mine.” In the confines of the elevator, Pasha catches the smell of booze on Clint and vacates his shoulder with a swish of his tail. Clint tilts his head back against the elevator wall.

“Tell me what you need,” Steve says, guiding him out into the foyer.

“Sammich,” he slurs. “Fuck.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Fridge. There’s nothin.”

Steve’s still gently steering him forward, trying to lend a hand with his jacket, but Clint’s unable to do more than hamper the process. “How about some sleep instead.”

“Can’t sleep.”

Steve keeps guiding him to his bedroom. “It’s worth a try.”

“No, I don’t think so,” he says, but he allows Steve to sit him down on the bed. He flops backward as Steve bends to help remove his shoes, then bounces back up to sitting upright. “Hey, I saw an old friend. Sif.”

“Who?”

“Lady Sif. You know, ‘and the Warriors Three,’ but it really should be Four.”
“I don’t know who you mean, Clint.”

“Sif. One of Thor’s friends. Warrior chick. Like Xena. She puts the breast in breastplate.” He leans toward Steve as if to impart a top secret piece of intel. “I’m gay, but I’d totally do her. If she was into mortals. Wouldn’t you? Jesus, the babies you two would make.”

“I still don’t know who you mean, buddy, but I think you should try lying down.”

Finally the penny drops. “Aw shit, you never met her. That was New Mexico.” Without warning, Clint feels bereft at the thought. “Jesus, I’m sorry. That’s fucking heartbreaking. And me going on and on. I’m an insensitive piece of shit.”

“No you’re not,” Steve says reassuringly. He’s so reassuring. It’s like his superpower. Clint is about to tell him this when Steve gently pushes at his shoulders to get him to lie down. “Rest now. Just humor me and close your eyes for ten minutes.”

Clint closes his eyes, still sad at how much it sucks that Sif and Steve have never met, and the amazing babies they’d never have. (Not amazing babies like the 10-in-1 babies that were pickled in a jar or just black and white photographs. Real Asgardian/Supersoldier Amazing Babies.) He decides that life is monstrously unfair, and the next moment he drifts into sleep.

Clint wakes to a pounding headache and the certainty some sorry animal has crawled into his mouth overnight, where it shit and then died.

And to the feeling of a warm hand resting on his hip. He has no sooner had the thought that Tasha has crept in to curl up with him than he rejects it. Her hands, like the rest of her, are tiny. This one is about the size of a catcher’s mitt. His mind still fuzzy, Clint rolls onto his back to find Steve lying next to him, fully clothed, on top of the covers.

His first coherent thought is, *Holy fuck, look at those eyelashes.* They’re ridiculously long and thick. How has he never noticed them before? He’s noticed Steve’s ass, his hands, arms and chest. (Did he mention Steve’s ass?) But these lashes fanned out just north of his cheekbones, they’re glorious enough to send Tasha into a fit of jealousy. Even better, that’s Steve inside there.

The lashes flutter, and Clint holds his breath as Steve blinks himself awake. As his gaze settles on Clint, he says “Hey” in a cracked morning voice. His sleepy smile, however, is absolute perfection.

“Hey. Hold that thought.” Clint shambles to the bathroom, where he takes a long and exuberant piss. Before he leaves, he makes a quick pass with the toothbrush. By the time he returns to the bedside, Steve is looking more awake, leaning against the headboard with his legs crossed.

“Hey,” Clint says again. “You know, it should be criminal to look that good in the morning.”

“Bullshitter.” Steve waves off the compliment, color rising in his cheeks.

Clint decides he should make this occur whenever possible. He catches the hand Steve had just waved and sits on the edge of the bed, leaning in for a kiss. “Let’s see if you taste as good as you look.”

Steve responds eagerly, his hand coming up to the side of Clint’s face. Heat flashes through Clint, and he grabs a fistful of Steve’s shirt just as Steve pulls back. “Hold up a second.”

“Good thinking.” Clint retreats just enough to start pulling off his own t-shirt, but Steve stills his
“Hang on, hang on. You just came back from seeing Phil, after thinking he was dead all this time.”

“Like I said, that’s over.”

“I know.” A wry smile flickers for an instant. “I can’t believe it’s me saying this, but do you think maybe you’re rushing into something that needs a little more time?”

Clint scowls. “What, like you’re my rebound thing? In case you hadn’t noticed, we were right at this point at New Year’s.”

“At New Year’s you were a year and a half into mourning.” Oh god, he’s gone all Steve Rogers Earnest. “It’s different now.”

Finally Clint launches himself off the bed. “What’s different? What is the actual difference between Phil being dead and it being above my pay grade to know he’s not? From where I stand, there’s not much of a distance between the two.”

“You haven’t even talked about what happened.”

“No, I haven’t. Because fuck talking.” He turns for the door. “I need coffee.”

Steve doesn’t call after him, or follow him to the kitchen, but Clint still takes his anger out on the appliances and the coffee container, resulting in a fine silt of grounds on the counter and floor. Ignoring the mess he’s made, he switches on the brew cycle and attends to Pasha’s food dish. It’s already been filled by the timed feeder, and Pasha’s clearly had at least one go at it, so he wanders into his living room to find the cat lying in a rhombus of sunlight. Clint stretches himself out on the carpet next to him, humming tunelessly to jumpstart Pasha’s purring. The cat curls gracelessly toward him, writhing like an inchworm evading the poke of a pencil.

It never fails to make Clint grin, though this time it’s a pale shadow of the usual. “Hey, Your Glory. How’s it hangin’?”

Hanging pretty well, Clint assumes, since Pasha turns the purring up to eleven. He lumbers to his paws, head butting Clint until he rolls onto his back to let the cat climb aboard. Pasha’s contented rumble drowns out the chuffing of the coffeemaker, but after a while the scent comes wafting from the kitchen.

“Suddenly I see the fatal flaw in my plan,” Clint mutters, still making no effort to dislodge the cat.

“What’s that?” Steve bends to place a mug beside him.

“Scratch that,” Clint says. “My plan was perfect.”

”Do you need a bendy straw?”

Clint huffs a soft laugh. “I think I’ll manage.”

Steve settles on the floor nearby, cradling his own mug in his hands. Silence stretches out between them as Clint strokes Pasha’s fur, letting his gaze drift idly along the upper reaches of the bookshelf/cat ramp.

“It was so goddamn weird,” Clint says at last, his voice barely above a whisper. ”At first I was convinced he was an LMD.”
“LMD,” Steve repeats, his brow furrowing. “I know what a WMD is. Is that—“


The furrow deepens. “He acted robotic? How?”

“No, no. Not—“ Clint rubs his forehead. “Twice he asked me, ‘What are you doing here?’ One of his people got shot, and it was looking bad. He was distracted. I get that.” For a moment he digs his fingertips into Pasha’s fur, giving him a gentle backrub. The cat makes a soft little old-man groan, melting into Clint’s chest. “Jesus, I sound like the world’s whiniest asshole. But it felt like he was a handler I’d worked with once or twice, not the guy I’d been living with. Which is weird, considering the first time I met him I felt totally exposed, laid bare.” He huffs a bitter laugh. “Of course, that could’ve been the drugs.”

“Drugs? How did you two meet?”

“Phil recruited me. Brought me in from the street, more or less.”

Clint can practically feel Steve’s focus on him sharpen. “He kidnapped you?”

“Less hands-on.” He thinks of Berit, who’d reminded him at the time of Kali. “Well. The agent who drugged me was handsy as fuck, but Phil didn’t come into it until later. Anyway, my point is, that first time we met he understood me so well it was scary. He figured out that I’m deaf, which I’d worked really hard to conceal, and I thought I’d succeeded. That’s why this was so goddamn hard. Even Sif noticed how distant we were, and when she last saw us we’d only just started necking.”

“What happened with the agent who got shot?”

“She looked like she was going to be okay when I left.” Clint shifts to his side, propping himself on his elbow to regard Steve. “That’s also part of what was so weird about all this.” He resettles Pasha on his hip and reaches for his coffee. “I caught up with him at SHIELD’s trauma center in Zurich. They told him she wasn’t gonna make it, but nobody tells Phil that when it’s one of his people.” A hard knot rises in his throat as he thinks of the fierce advocacy Phil had shown on his behalf from the start, getting Stark-designed cochlear implants for a yet-untested asset.

When Clint regains his voice, he tells Steve about the aborted trip to Bethesda, then the Guest House shit show. “That whole thing was surreal. We don’t know that they’re allies, but they’re not enemies. Still, we go in with guns blazing because they’ve got the magic cure that saved Phil. But after he turns up a vial of the stuff, I'd swear he changed his mind. I think he would’ve stopped them from injecting her with it, if he hadn’t been too late. So what was all that for?” He sits up, Pasha squawking in protest, and leans back against the sofa. Pasha trundles off toward the kitchen and his food bowl, tail swishing in indignation.

“That’s a lot of mixed signals,” Steve says.

“Not so mixed where I’m concerned.” He rakes his hand through his hair. “I have some stuff of his that I took from his place when I was told I was inheriting the whole thing. I told Phil I’m going to take it all back there.” He sighs. “Today’s as good a time as any, I guess.”
“You don’t have to,” Steve says. “I could do it.”

Clint’s breath catches at the generosity of it. “Thanks, Steve. But I think I need to go myself.”

Steve holds his gaze. “I could go with you. If you want.”

Surprised by the depth of his relief and gratitude, Clint nods. “I’d like that.”

Getting up from the floor, Steve says, “Why don’t you get the stuff together while I make breakfast?”

“Sounds like a good deal to me.” Clint takes the hand Steve offers to pull him to his feet. “Wait, I think the fridge is empty.”

“That was an easy fix. Remember where you live.”

“Thanks for that. Give me fifteen.”

It doesn’t take that long to find the few things of Phil’s that he has. The comforter and robe take up the entirety of the bottom drawer of his dresser. Clint drops to one knee to open it, habit prompting him to lift the robe almost to his face before he stops himself. This used to be his ritual; breathing in as much of Phil’s scent as he could find lingering on the fabric. Instead he reaches into one of the pockets to retrieve the rectangle of notepaper that has been there for more than two years. It’s just a reminder in Phil’s small, neat handwriting to schedule his requalification at the range, but Clint’s fingers have worn the paper to the point where it feels almost like fabric itself.

He crumples the note and drops it in the bathroom waste can, then gathers the comforter up with the robe and takes them down the hall to the laundry nook. The hollow clang of the washer lid seems to echo Clint’s own empty feeling. He sets the dial and walks away as the hiss of pressured water begins.

Phil’s framed Thurber dog is hanging above the table by the apartment’s front door. The goofy thing almost always makes him grin, but this time Clint doesn’t have it in him. He lays it on the coffee table, followed by the Captain America sketchbook replica from his bookcase.

The smell of bacon and maple greets Clint when he enters the kitchen, where Steve’s tending a pan of eggs. “Good timing. This is almost ready.”

“Good, because now I’m starving.” Clint starts rummaging through the dish cabinet.

“I brought your mug in with mine.”

“Nah, I’m looking for one that was Phil’s. Is Phil’s.” Now, it seems, he’s having as much trouble with the present tense as he’d had before with the past tense. Toward the back of the cabinet he finds Phil’s green and gold Manitowoc Fighting Outlaws mug. Unconsciously, his thumb traces the tiny chip in the rim of the mug, which has been there for at least four years. “This is the last of it.” Abruptly he realizes what he’s doing and sets the mug on the counter. “I’ll have to find a box.” He finds the mug he’d been drinking from before, that says, “CROP CIRCLES—BECAUSE SOMETIMES CORN NEEDS TO LIE THE FUCK DOWN” and pours himself another coffee.

“Eat first.” Steve forks a Belgian waffle out of the waffle maker, then scoops up some eggs, portioning them onto two plates with bacon that have been warming in the oven. “Get started. I’ll be there in a second.”

Clint does as he’s told as Steve pours more batter into the waffle maker. “Man, I love it when
someone cooks for me.” It’s a dawning realization, out of his mouth almost the moment it arrives in his head.

Steve joins him at the table, smiling. “Yeah, it’s like home.”

“Yeah, not so much.” He offers his own smile, but it’s a darker sort. “What I mean is one person, cooking for just me. It’s sexy, but it’s more than that, too.” He shovels in a mouthful of waffle piled with berries, mostly to shut himself up.

Before Clint can backtrack or deflect, Steve says, “I think I know what you mean. The thing that does it for me—” Color rising in his cheeks, he stops and downs half his mug of coffee.

“You can tell me,” Clint says softly, in a tone he used for coaxing terrified animals from their hiding places in the post-Chitauri rubble.

Steve keeps his gaze on his hands, his graceful fingers toying with his mug. “I really like being called Stevie.”

This is so not a time for a laugh, but Clint says what he’s thinking. “It’s incredibly hard to think of you as a Stevie.”

Steve quirks a wry smile. “I know. Bucky never broke the habit, because I was half his size for most of our lives. It would tickle the hell out of the guys in our squad when he’d let one slip out.” He flicks a glance up at Clint and says, “Moving on. Tell me more about this Sif. You talked about her last night.”

“Oh no, I can help you there.” A wicked grin dawns on Steve’s face. “You said she puts the breast in breastplate. And that you were really sorry she and I weren’t going to make babies together.”

“Oh god,” Clint says again. “I blame the top shelf booze on Tony’s jet. I’m not usually that much of an idiot.”

“Tell me about her. You said she’s an old friend. So how did you meet her?”

“Alien invasion number one—Thor and friends. He got kicked down here, powerless, after he pissed off his old man. She and her buddies came down to help sneak him back. Loki had other plans, so…fire-breathing robot, big battle—imagine Natasha with a broadsword. It made an impression.”

Steve laughs. “I’d say it did.”

“There was a lot of drinking after the battle, Asgardian style. She drank me under the table. So this time it was more a biker brawl than a battle, and after, she comes over and—” Clint mimes a massive bear hug, booming, “‘Archer!’ And she lifts me off the fuckin’ ground and says she wishes we could get shit upon our faces again.”

Steve’s face takes on that perplexed I don’t get it frown that is so damn adorable. Clint realizes he doesn’t get to see it nearly as often as he used to. Maybe he should start making up fake modern slang just to prompt it.

“Shitfaced,” Clint clarifies—except it doesn’t look like Steve finds it any clearer. “That didn’t mean drunk in your day?”
“Not where I came up.”

Clint’s next thought is derailed by the sound of the wash cycle buzzer in the distance. “Hang on. I’ve got to throw some stuff into the dryer.”

Steve heads to his own apartment for a shower, while Clint gets into his own shower. It had crossed his mind to suggest showering together, but it didn’t feel right, not with their errand to Phil’s place still ahead of them. The boundary of removing Phil’s belongings will make things clearer for Steve. Hell, for Clint too. It’s good.

That doesn’t mean he can’t think about Steve—ass, arms, eyelashes and all—while he stretches his shower out a few minutes longer.
Chapter 36

When he emerges from his bedroom in black jeans and a white button-down, he finds Steve on the sofa. His refilled coffee’s in front of him on the coffee table and Pasha’s draped over one thigh as Steve leafs through a book with an unreadable expression on his face. As he draws closer, Clint sees that it’s the book of his own sketches that Steve’s browsing through.

“Did you know about that?”

“No. I guess Colonel Phillips kept them, and his daughter found them after he died.”

Clint hadn’t really thought about it when he first encountered the book in Phil’s place, or afterward. “Somebody must owe you a chunk of money, then.”

Steve shakes his head. “If the money went where it was supposed to, it helped injured veterans. I’ll do some checking and make sure.”

Something’s still going on, judging from Steve’s expression. Clint sits next to him. “It must feel…”

Shit, what does he know about what it would feel like? He’s never made anything that turned up mass produced decades later. “Weird,” he finishes.

“Yeah. Kind of intrusive.” Steve turns the page to a sketch of a soldier reaching out to bum a cigarette off another. Every detail of the man is exquisitely rendered—tousled hair, crooked grin, slouched posture, while the buddy handing him a smoke is represented by a mere outline of an arm and hand.

It hits Clint a little belatedly. “That’s—“ He’s still hesitant to speak the name.

“Bucky. Yeah.” He turns a page, and there’s another, of Bucky mid-laugh. Another of a face in shadow, hand shielding a cigarette and match. Four of the Commandos playing cards, but somehow the eye is drawn to Bucky, just right of center in the composition. There are sketches of the others, too, tinged with affection. The few self-portraits have a touch of mockery to them; Clint now wishes he had time to study them in depth. But the pictures of Bucky—and the ones Steve turns to of Peggy Carter—are something else.

Intrusive.

It’s love. That’s what sets them apart. That’s what makes them so intensely personal for Steve. “It must seem like your feelings are laid bare.” It’s a little hard to say the next thing, but Clint manages. “Your love.”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t know if it helps any, but I looked at these sketches a lot when I was living with Phil. After that FUBAR of a mission where I was captured. I didn’t see it. I do now, because I know you, and because we’re having this conversation. But it’s probably not that obvious to most people.” Clint huffs a laugh. “Hell, Phil didn’t see it, and he’s the world’s biggest Captain America nerd.”

“Speaking of Phil, do you want to get that done? I brought a box.” Shifting his feet, Steve produces a box from under the coffee table, which is big enough for just the book, the mug and the framed cartoon.

“Oh, thanks for that, but there’s actually more. There’s a robe and comforter in the dryer.”
“Those should fit in the duffel I packed to come here. It’ll be easier than a huge box.”

“Nah, you don’t have to dump out your stuff.”

Steve’s self-deprecating smile makes an appearance. “It’s already unpacked.”

Offering a grin of his own, Clint says, “I should’ve known.”

The dryer buzzer goes off while Steve’s gone to his own suite, and Clint starts reaching into the dryer before realizing how very much he doesn’t want to be gathering up an armload of Phil’s warm laundry. Instead he closes the dryer door and heads for the kitchen to pour himself another cup of coffee. The box Steve brought has some packing paper inside, so he wraps the mug and the Thurber dog to a ridiculous degree and boxes them up, along with the book of sketches.

As Steve returns with the empty duffel, he says, “I thought of something else. The things you donated to the Smithsonian. I guess you should include the receipt you got for those items, too, so Phil can claim them.”

“Thanks, I never thought of it.” Clint doesn’t move from the sofa, though. “Let’s hang for a while. Watch a movie or something. There’s more coffee.”

“You sure? You don’t want to get this out of the way?”

“There’s no burning deadline. We’ve got time to relax.”

Steve raises an eyebrow in response, and that’s when Clint realizes he’s been tapping his index finger on the arm of the sofa as if it’s a ceaseless Morse code SOS. Clint draws both arms in close to his body, crossing them. Not twenty seconds goes by before he starts up the tapping against his own ribs.

“Something’s bothering you,” Steve says.

“Nah. I’m just happy to be hanging out with you.” And this is true, but it’s an evasion. It occurs to him again that every time he’s been more honest with one of his friends, their relationship goes deeper. And deeper is definitely something he wants with Steve. “Okay. I am happy to be hanging out with you. But there’s another thing.”

“Okay.” Pushing the box of Phil’s stuff to one side, Steve sits on the coffee table.

“I have this comfort thing. I love shit fresh out of the dryer. I know it’s dumb, but—“

“No it’s not. Most of my life, everything I wore was dried on a line. So it was always—“

“Oh my god, so stiff!”

“And scratchy.”

“Though I’ve got to admit, it had that great outdoor smell.”

“In Iowa, maybe. We hung ours inside so the air wouldn’t make it dirty again.”

“Holy shit.”

“So I get it about warm laundry. It’s on my list of great things about the 21st century.”

“Phil used to hand me warm towels. I don’t mind that association, but I don’t want to add this one.
It’s not like I have that many comfort things—hell, I’m already giving up several that I used to use.”

“How about this? I’ll get the stuff out of the dryer and fold it into the duffel. You carry the box, I’ll bring the duffel.”

“God, that was easy.”

“I can see it because I’m not in the middle of it, that’s all.” Steve reaches for Clint’s coffee and drains it, then stands. “So let’s get rolling, so we have the rest of the day for hanging out.”

***

It’s not easy walking into Phil’s place after everything, but having Steve with him makes it less hard. And he’s surprised by the friendly greetings from the doorman, maintenance guy and three residents, though half of those are preludes to inquiries about Pasha. As Clint unwraps Phil’s mug from its layers of packing paper and then puts it away in the kitchen, Steve stands rooted in place, beholding the glory of the Captain America Shrine and Library.

“What, the Smithsonian thing wasn’t enough to prepare you?”

“Well, it’s a little different when it’s one person’s apartment.”

“Like I said, world’s biggest Captain America nerd.” Clint unpacks the book of sketches and puts it in its precise place on the shelf. It leaves a slender line in the dust that’s accumulated. “Wow. Weird.”

“What?”

“Having a fully furnished place and being officially dead. Does he ever get back here? It doesn’t look like it. But all the things he has here—all the stuff he likes—is here gathering dust.” Does he miss this place? Does it miss him? He scoffs softly at himself.

“What?” Steve asks again, with that crooked smile.

“Nothing. Just a really dumb thought.”

Steve pauses just long enough to let Clint know he could spill his dumb thought if he really wanted to, then picks up the duffel and asks, “Where do you want these?”

“Just leave them folded on the bed, thanks. Second door on the left.” He’s grateful he’s not going to have to walk into the bedroom he used to share with Phil. When Steve returns, empty duffel slung over his shoulder, Clint is straightening the Thurber dog to align with the rest of its pack.

“How are you doing?” Steve asks.

“I’m…okay. Not great, but okay.” There’s sadness too, but Clint doesn’t think there’s ever been a time in his life when he’s let the word “sad” past his lips.

“Where to now?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Coney Island to play skee ball? See if we can get tickets to a ballgame? Tony’s probably got a box.” Clint pulls out his smart phone as they walk out of the apartment. “Hey, you’re in luck. The Yankees are in town.”

Steve chuckles. “How’s that lucky?”
“I remember you talking about Ruth and Gehrig. Didn’t you go see them during their big home run race?”

Steve full-out laughs this time, taking a moment to subside. “Jesus, no. We hated the fucking Yankees.”

The doors to the elevator slide open on Steve’s last couple of words, revealing a tiny old woman with a cane and lurid hennaed hairdo that matches her lipstick.

Flushing to his own bright shade of red, Steve blurts, “Forgive my language, ma’am.” They squeeze into the elevator, careful not to jostle her.

She flaps a hand in dismissal. “I feel the same. At least that prick Steinbrenner isn’t running things anymore.”

Clint smother a snort of laughter until they reach the lobby and the elderly lady steams across to the mailboxes. When it escapes, it’s not his carefully trained laugh he’s cultivated post-implants, but an inelegant honk. Mortified, he starts to apologize but refrains when he sees Steve’s expression, a mixture of affection and delight. Shit, that’s an unbeatable combination in Clint’s book. If they hadn’t just stepped out onto the street, he’d be inclined to kiss Steve. “So, Coney Island, then?”

“Sure.”

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Since it’s a Saturday, the various parts of Coney Island are open for business, so they take the D train downtown and into Brooklyn. It’s an overcast, blustery April day, colder on the waterfront than it had been in Manhattan, which raises goosebumps on Clint’s arms as they exit from the subway station. Steve, however, seems oblivious, stopped in his tracks to gaze at the skyline. “It’s still there.”

“What?”

“The Wonder Wheel.” He puts on a burst of speed, hurrying toward the enormous Ferris wheel. “Oh wow. And the Cyclone. They were both here when I was a kid. Bucky talked me into riding the Cyclone once.”

“It’s still running. Want to ride it later?”

Steve laughs. “Not a chance! I puked all over Bucky when we rode it back then.”

“Maybe your metabolism can handle it now.”

“That’ll just have to be a mystery for the ages. Let’s hit the boardwalk.”

The beach is sparsely populated, with some walkers, a young guy playing Frisbee with his dog, an old guy sweeping the sands with a metal detector. That had been Barney’s job during the load-out, which pissed him off and earned Clint a few smacks before he learned to evade them. As the youngest, newest member of Carson’s, the job of collecting (and handing over) any lost coins should have fallen to Clint, but he couldn’t hear well enough to operate the metal detector. The wind gusts from the ocean, unbroken by any shielding structures, are making it hard enough to hear now, as well as causing Clint’s ears to ache.

“In the summer,” Steve tells him, “the beach would be so tightly jammed with people trying to beat the heat that you could barely move. There’s a really famous picture of it from my day. You can’t even see the sand.”

“Wow.” That’s what he’d consider a nightmare. “Thank the baby Jesus for air conditioning, huh?”

“Yeah, mostly. Sometimes I miss being out in the neighborhood, everybody sitting out on their stoops, or sleeping on the roof at night. Modern life feels more cut off somehow.”

“Listen, this wind is really doing a number on me.” Clint waves a hand toward an ear.

“Sure, let’s get where it's more sheltered.” Steve touches his arm as they turn back toward the amusement area, blurtling, “Damn, you’re cold! Let’s find that beach shop.”

Clint buys himself a hoodie with FREAK SHOW Coney Island on the front. Steve goes more
understated with a Mermaid Parade sweatshirt.

“Hungry yet?” Clint asks.

Steve laughs. “Always.”

It’s no lie. As Clint watches Steve plow through a series of Nathan’s hot dogs and a mountain of fries, he comments, “Maybe you should consider signing up for the hot dog eating contest in July.”

Steve finishes chewing and swallows a bite of dog before he answers. “I’m guessing there are rules against scientifically enhanced metabolisms.”

“Sure, if you want to be a rules lawyer.”

After lunch they spend the afternoon wandering through Luna Park, Deno’s Wonder Wheel park, and the arcade. To Clint’s disappointment, the revived freak show’s only open one weekend of the month, and they’ve already missed it.

“Buck was a fan of the freak show too,” Steve says. “I mostly ignored the stuff on stage, because it felt wrong to be gawking at them. They couldn’t help how they were. I usually just looked at the incubator babies.”

“The what?”

“Tiny babies. Born early, I guess. Someone invented incubators for them, but the hospitals wouldn’t use them. They’d put them in the freak show.”

“No fucking way!” Clint blurts.

“It’s true. People would stare at them, exclaiming over how tiny they were. It was crazy how small they were.” His expression turns distant, sad. “I always felt bad for them. Wondering if they’d grow up like me.”

He seems so sad that Clint can hardly bear it. So he deflects. “Jesus, Steve. Your era was fucking weird.”

It gets a laugh out of Steve, which is what Clint had hoped for. “Oh, that’s not the weirdest. Before I was born, there was another park here. Dreamland. My ma used to tell me about it. She had postcard pictures of the place that she showed me. The buildings were incredibly ornate, and it was lit with one million lights. But the really wild thing about it, there was a half-size city in the park where 300 midgets lived. They probably don’t say ‘midgets’ anymore.”

“It’s ‘Little People,’ which includes dwarves. People with dwarfism.”

“They had a fire department in the little city. They’d put on a demonstration several times a day, putting out a fire.”

“So whatever happened to this place? You said before you were born.”

Steve’s lips quirk up briefly. “Here’s where the irony comes in.”

“Oh shit, it burned?”

“Dreamland and the hotel next to it went up in 1911. It’s probably a miracle all of Coney Island didn’t burn. It was all wood.”
“Fuck.” He thinks of the kind of chaos that would have erupted if a fire broke out in even a small outfit like Carson’s. “The people?”

“Nobody died. They even got the babies and the incubators out.”

Clint suspects the animals weren’t so lucky, but he pushes that thought away with great force. Because that was more than 100 years ago, and right now here he is standing on Mermaid Avenue with Steve Rogers, who hates the Yankees, puked on the Cyclone, and felt sad over the preemie babies on display, because they might be slight and sickly like he was. “It’s a weird and wonderful world we live in,” he says, and because not one of the few people nearby is paying them any attention, he leans in and kisses Steve.

Chapter End Notes

After well and truly falling down the Coney Island rabbit hole, I have emerged.

The bit about the incubator babies is absolutely true. Dr. Martin Couney, a Jewish immigrant from Germany, used state-of-the-art incubators to care for premature babies at Coney Island between 1903 and 1943, after hospitals refused to work with him. He treated the babies at no charge to their parents, with 25-cent admission fees covering the incubators, operating costs, food and the wages of nurses. US hospitals finally got with the program in 1939, 36 years after Dr. Couney brought the technology to the States. You can find an article about Dr. Couney--and meet a couple of the grown-up incubator babies--here: http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36321692

One amazing thing that didn't go in this chapter is the legend behind the Wonder Wheel Ferris wheel. It's 96 years old as of 2016, and is currently owned and operated by the Vourderis family. Deno Vourderis told his wife Lula that someday he would buy her the Wonder Wheel, a ring big enough to show the world how much he loved her. And he did so in 1983. Their son and grandson own a little park in Coney Island, and run and maintain the wheel themselves. It has run each day the park is open, except for the big East Coast blackout in 1977--with a perfect safety record, at that. Read more about Deno here: http://www.wonderwheel.com/history.html#verticalTab2
Once they’ve made their slow exploration of the parks, Clint and Steve start hitting the arcade. They play skeeball until they amass coils of prize tickets, which they separately bestow on families with kids. They play every one of the old school pinball machines, where Steve demonstrates his ability to cheat with some hip action that gives Clint seriously filthy thoughts. Clint feels a little mean plunking down his credits at the shooting gallery, but he still knocks down targets until he wins Steve the ridiculous Captain America plushie on the top tier of prizes. Though Clint expects him to give it to a kid, Steve stuffs it under his sweatshirt. They wedge themselves into the bumper cars, and Steve looks so hilariously oversized that Clint can’t resist snapping a picture before the ride starts up and they do their best to ram their cars so hard their teeth clack.

Laughing, they extract themselves from the bumper cars and stagger back outside. “I’m not sure actual cars went that fast the last time I was at Coney Island,” Steve says.

Clint snorts. “You don’t say, grampa.”

“Call me grampa again and you’ve had your last makeout session, pal.”

“Ooh, pal. That’s a danger word, right?”

“You got it, ace.”

“Well then, ixnay on the ampagray.”

Steve laughs heartily. “Good. Because I was kinda looking forward to a makeout session when we get back to the tower.”

“Well shit, why wait? The Wonder Wheel is right there.”

“You know each car holds six people, don’t you?”

“Uh, no.” Dammit.

“There aren’t that many people on line, though, so I doubt they’ll fill up the cars. Let’s see.”

It turns out Steve’s right, so they pay up and wait their turn. The cars aren’t gondolas, but wire cages that completely enclose the seated riders. Not the sexiest setup, but his companion more than makes up for it.

“We’ll wait for the blue one,” Steve says as they reach the ride attendant, who then lets the couple behind them take the white one that’s at the ready.

Clint smirks. “Has to match the uniform, does it?”

Steve offers his own smirk. “Guess I’m just funny about that.”

Soon they’re shut inside their cage, jerking upward in fits and starts. “How old is this thing, anyway?”

“Older than me, that’s all I know.”

It’s got an insane number of struts, though, so it’s probably likely to hold together for another trip around. Clint waits until they’re a couple of stories above the ground, then slides in closer to Steve.
“I’ve been dying to tell you how fucking hot it was, watching you play pinball.”

Steve gives him dubious. “Seriously?”

“Are you kidding me? Your hips were all—“ He tries to imitate the subtle but decisive movements of Steve’s hips, but it’s impossible while seated. “And your hands—“ It’s easier to mimic those moves, fluttering thumbs and fingers against Steve’s sides. Clint slips a hand under Steve’s sweatshirt, but encounters the plushie stashed there. “That is not the Little Cap I was looking for.”

Laughing, Steve says, “That’s the only Little Cap you’re going to get until we get back to the tower. I don’t want all of Coney Island thinking I’m cheap.”

He doesn’t want to risk another “pal,” so Clint moves in for the kissing, which Steve proves to be totally good with. Clint’s just getting into his rhythm when the bottom drops out of the world.

“Whoa, shit! Shit!”

Their car takes a dipping swoop, then pulls up with a rocking motion.

“What the fuck!”

Steve is laughing his ass off, so apparently the ride isn’t shivering to pieces.

“The fuck just happened?”

It takes a while before Steve’s composed enough to answer. By then the car’s gliding back as the wheel moves. Wiping his eyes, Steve says, “We’re on a track from the hub to the rim. The white cars are fixed, that’s why I had us wait.”

“You could have said something.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“You’re kind of an asshole, Steve.”

Steve’s still laughing when it happens again, and now that he’s ready for it, it’s fun as hell. By the third time, he’s laughing too, in that manic thrill-ride way, at least until it looks like they’re screaming straight for the white car ahead. He lets out a stream of curses, genuinely alarmed, but the track holds and Steve’s laughing wildly as their cage rattles backward again.

“You are literally the worst person alive.”

Steve cackles even louder, and because a happy Steve turns Clint into a stupid puddle of goo, he starts laughing too.

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They’re both starving by the time the D train delivers them to the neighborhood of the tower. Clint calls in an enormous order for Chinese takeout the second he has cell reception, and they pick it up on their walk to the tower. As they unload the bags onto the kitchen counter, Clint says, “Jesus, I’m ridiculously tired.”

“I’ve always thought it was the sun and ocean air. Of course, the last time I was at the beach, I was 90 pounds and didn’t breathe so well. But that’s what my ma always said.”

They pile plates with ridiculous amounts of food, which they eat while a baseball game plays on
the huge TV in the shared room between his suite and Tasha’s. Clint conks out before he’s halfway through his meal, and he’s vaguely aware of Steve lifting the plate off his lap and gathering Clint into his arms. The game has given way to post-game analysis when he wakes with Steve’s soft snores ruffling his hair.

“Hey, Jarvis,” he says softly. “Find a west coast ballgame.”

Despite his near whisper, Steve stirs behind him. “Hey,” he says muzzily.

“Hey. Go back to sleep.”

“Nah, if you’re up, I’m up.”

“I could be up.” Clint shifts to look at him, sliding a hand along Steve’s hip. “Depending what you’re up for.”

What they’re both up for, it turns out, is steamy kisses, hickeys and some crotch grinding. And probably a great deal more (Steve playing Clint like a pinball machine, for one very hoped-for example) but for the sound of a voice at the door adjoining Tasha’s suite: “Clint?”

Closely followed by the sound of Pasha launching himself off a chair to greet her.

Clint shows Steve his palm in a gesture he hopes conveys, “Don’t worry, I’ll get rid of her,” and vaults the back of the sofa. “Tash! Hey! When did you get in?” He’d give her a crushing hug, but she has bent to scratch Pasha’s belly, and, well, erection.

“And about four hours ago.” She looks up from her crouch, and clearly sees what’s at eye level. Brows rising, she stands and takes in Clint’s tousled hair, swollen lips and the oh so pleasantly abused skin of his neck. An expression of mischievous delight dawns on her face as she says, “Ohhhh. Am I interrupting something?”

Steve pops up from the other side of the sofa, equally disheveled and wearing what is the Platonic ideal of a shit-eating grin. “Hiya, Natasha. Welcome home.”

Tasha so rarely lets an unschooled expression touch her face that it’s either heartbreaking or hilarious when one does. Her look of jaw-dropped shock makes both Steve and Clint burst out laughing, and together they sweep her into a welcoming embrace.
With Sexy Fun Times put on hold, Clint starts pulling cartons of Chinese food from the fridge to heat up for Tasha, Steve and finally himself, and Steve pours her a glass of wine.

“So when did this happen?” she asks.

“Well, it started to happen over Christmas and New Years. I went down to DC for the week—oh hey, did you see anything about Captain America’s War on Christmas where you were?”

Tasha’s perfectly shaped brows do their thing. “His what?”

“Show her,” Steve says. “I’ll take over the microwave.”

Clint pulls up first Steve’s Christmas day message to the troops, then his response to the manufactured outrage at his greeting to non-Christians as well. As her whole-hearted laughter fills the kitchen, Clint finds himself mildly choked up to realize two of the people he cares about most have given him this gift of their happiness in one day.

“Clint?” Steve asks softly.

He smiles. “It’s all good.”

“So you two have been together since then?”

“Well, no,” Clint admits. “There was kind of a roadblock.” It hits him all at once what that detour was, and that Tasha in all probability doesn’t know. He catches Steve’s eye, and his expression is clouded too. “So we just got this off the ground today.”

“Okay, what just happened?” She looks between them, gesturing with two fingers to indicate their exchanged glance.

“Have you seen Jasper, by any chance?”

“No.”

“Tony?” Because Tony’s outrage over Phil’s not-death news would not let him stop to consider who the best person to break the news to Tasha would be.

“No.” Her expression has turned wary.

“Shit.” Clint presses his fingertips into his eyelids briefly, then looks at her through a momentary screen of sparks. “There’s no easy way into this. I found out in January. Phil’s alive, and Fury has him on some secret strike team.”

Tasha’s face goes terrifyingly blank, her self-protective mode.

“How they brought him back is so top secret they even hid the fact that they did, but he’s been on active duty for around six months now. He’s got a team, Nat. Grant Ward got a fucking promotion to be on his team, but you and me, it’s above our pay grade to even know.” He rubs his hands over his face. “I’m sorry. I’m doing this all wrong; it’s just I’m so fucking angry my hands are shaking. I just got back from seeing him, and it all felt so weird and wrong.”

When Natasha speaks, her voice is so carefully neutral that he knows there’s a lot of emotion
underneath. “Are you sure it’s not—“

“An LMD? I’m sure. And why would they fake him being not dead if they were just going to hide
the illusion that he’s alive? There is something off about him, though. That’s pretty much a given,
considering he never tried to tell us he’s alive.”

“How did you find out?”

“Jasper told me after he saw him a couple of times. The second was just after he’d been captured
and tortured, and he thought I ought to know.”

Steve rubs Clint’s thigh beneath the table, a gesture of comfort, as Natasha takes a moment to
absorb this.

“Who knows that you know?”

Clint laughs sharply. “Oh, Fury, Hill, Fury’s assistant, I’m pretty sure. There hasn’t been any
blowback. Oh, and Hector.”

That gets a flicker of a reaction. “Hector?”

He shrugs. “I punched out the 24th floor men’s room.”

Natasha stands abruptly. “I’m going now.”

“Going?” Steve asks.

“For a walk.”

Steve looks like he’s about to ask another question, but subsides when Clint puts a hand on his arm
and gives him a nod. When the adjoining door clicks shut behind her, Steve asks, “Will she be
okay?”

“She needs time and vodka. I’ll check on her tomorrow. And she knows she’s welcome here
anytime.” He scowls. “I completely fucked up everyone’s night.”

“No.”

“Yeah. She’s off hurting, instead of—“ Clint gestures at her plate. “And you were stuck listening
to another rant about Phil hurting my fucking feelings—“

“She needed to know. What you did was for her, including the rant. That was obvious to me.”
Steve pulls her unfinished plate toward himself and picks up a dumpling with his chopsticks.

“You don’t have to do that.”

Steve offers a rueful smile. “I hate wasting food. It’s a Depression thing.”

Clint studies him, concern rising. Has he completely misread Steve all this time? “You’re—“

“Big D. As in the Great Depression.”

“Oh. Now I feel like an idiot.“

“Hey,” Steve says softly, pulling Clint closer. “Don’t sweat it. It’s just a reference you don’t
share.”
“Would you stay tonight? It was nice waking up next to you this morning.”

“Sure. I’d really like that.”

Once the dishes are washed and the leftovers put away, Steve makes a run to his apartment for pajama bottoms and fresh tee. To Clint’s surprise, neither of them is immediately inclined to rip them off him on his return. Instead they curl up together on Clint’s bed, Clint in boxer briefs and a t-shirt depicting the Statue of Liberty giving the finger to a Chitauri rider.

“Thanks for today,” Clint says. “Going with me to Phil’s place and then to Coney Island. I really liked hanging out with you and hearing stories about what it used to be like, and what you used to do.”

“It was fun. I haven’t laughed that hard in a long time.”

Clint gives him a fake scowl. “Because you are literally the worst person alive.” He stretches toward the bedside table and fumbles for his phone. “Almost forgot.” He shows Steve the picture of him wedged into the bumper car.

Steve laughs just as hard at his own ridiculousness as he had at Clint on the Wonder Wheel. So maybe he’s not the absolute worst person alive. Clint tosses his phone back on the nightstand and settles back into Steve, nestling against his chest.

“This is kind of weird,” Steve says.

Clint starts to pull away, but Steve wraps an arm around him, snuggling him back in place.

“I’ve just always been the little spoon.”

“The what now?”

“You never heard that? Like spoons in the drawer. I’ve always been in front. The little spoon.”

“What was that like? When you were smaller. Were you a premature baby?”

“No. Just poor. Bad nutrition when my ma was carrying me, and when I was a kid. Then I got sick, and it damaged my heart. I caught everything that came around. I was too stubborn to die, Buck always used to say, but there wasn’t a lot left over for growing.”

“Wow.” It reminds him of his own endless rounds of ear infections, but on a much more drastic scale. He never had to wonder if he’d live through the night. “You were you, though, right. Except in a little, fragile body. What was that like? I can’t imagine you accepting limits without a fight.”

Steve’s soft laughter ruffles Clint’s hair. “You’re right about that. I was always trying to prove myself. Fighting bullies. Striking out with girls all the time. I told you about Bucky setting me up with girls, because that’s just how it was back then. But I didn’t even have to be at bat to strike out. A dame would see me walking toward her on the street, and I could see it happen. She’d register my presence, then a big flashing neon NOPE above her head. Eugenics was a big deal then. I was nobody’s idea of great genetic material. No dame wanted a brood of kids made out of me.”

Clint shuts his eyes. “Okay, that makes my heart hurt so bad that I’m going to just slide right over it and make a big deal out of the fact that you said, ‘dame.’”

With a soft snort of laughter, Steve pulls him closer. “I’m good with that.” He kisses Clint’s neck.
“Mm,” Clint responds. “I’m good with *that*. Their loss, my gain.” Clint shifts until they’re face to face. “God, Stevie. I can’t believe my luck. Stupid dames.”

The smile that dawns on Steve’s face at “Stevie” eases a touch of Clint’s heartache, and they begin to kiss in earnest.
It turns out that Steve’s not completely virginal when it comes to guys. When they pause for the Likes? Squicks? Triggery shit? checklist, Clint discovers that pining for his best friend didn’t stop Steve from taking the edge off now and again. Furtive mutual handjobs. Blowjobs, which Steve calls BJs, to Clint’s everlasting amusement. All prior to his Army days, so Clint is unsurprised to learn that he’s never topped.

With some encouragement Steve consents to trying out his pinball skills on Clint’s willing body. His hands and hips adapt to the different contours and action fairly quickly, and he sets off all the right lights, bells and buzzers.

“Fuck, Stevie,” Clint pants as he collapses into the sheets. “Tattoo your initials on me. High scorer.”

“Aw, cut it out,” he says, but his voice betrays his pleasure at the compliment.

They linger in bed, making plans. Steve says he’ll wind up his work at the Smithsonian and tell SHIELD he’s relocating to New York City.

“Tony will lose his goddamn mind. He’s been dying for you to move in here permanently.”

Steve winces. “That apartment…. I feel ridiculous calling it an apartment when it’s an entire floor. It’s too much.”

“I’m pretty sure ‘too much’ is how Tony shows friendship. Shit, he flew me out to Kansas City to a reading of Irene’s, and gave me new clothes for the trip and a haircut that I can’t even imagine the cost of. He’d spend it on himself, so he doesn’t think twice about money when it comes to his friends.”

“I guess,” Steve says dubiously. “But I’d feel more at home in a one-bedroom in Brooklyn with the bathtub in the kitchen.”

“Tell Tony that, and I bet he’d build you a perfect replica on your floor now. If you ask real nice, I bet he’d even turn off the heat at random during the winter.”

That teases a laugh from Steve. “Are you trying to tell me I’m a little too attached to my Depression baby identity?”

“You’re the one who said it.” He lets his fingers play aimlessly with Steve’s hair. “Y’know, I’ve spent some time thinking about how I could possibly equal Tony’s gifts. I’m pretty sure the answer is to take them and let them make me happy. Don’t tell him it’s too much, because that’s like saying he’s doing it wrong. Be his friend, and don’t let the money throw you.”

Steve turns his face toward Clint. “You’re a very smart man, Clint Barton.”

“Aw, cut it out,” Clint says, hooking a leg over Steve’s. “How about round two of the pinball tournament?”

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When Steve heads back to DC in the late afternoon, Clint goes looking for Tony, who of course is in his workshop. The little one-armed robot wheels up to greet him with a series of beeps and
whistles.

“Hey there, Cambot.” He pets the bot on its camera head, which swivels in vain trying to see what’s happening.

Tony’s standing in a cloud of glowing schematics, absently fidgeting with a tool between his nimble fingers. In the midst of a white-hot creative fever, Tony waves Clint over to see his thought process shimmering in the air. Clint doesn’t understand much more of this show-and-tell than the one he’d witnessed after he’d pulled out his receivers, but it doesn’t matter. He just enjoys the spectacle of Tony’s brilliance and the frenetic joy he takes in it.

When Tony’s monologue winds down a bit, Clint gets to the point of his visit. “I wanted to say thanks for the use of your jet. And your AI.” Looking toward the ceiling, he says, “Thanks, Jarvis.”

“You are most welcome,” Jarvis says. “It was my pleasure to assist in any way I could.”

“What he said,” Tony adds. “You found Phil.”

Clint nods.

“Was he the trauma patient?”

“No. It was one of his strike team. Looks like she’s going to be okay.”

Tony swipes away the schematics, leaving the air clear between them. “He has a team. That’s not us. I’d almost forgotten to be pissed off about that.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve had enough pissiness for the both of us.”

Tony’s gaze takes on that focus he gets when he’s working on a delicate piece of machinery, only it’s directed at Clint. “You don’t seem angry.”

Clint’s quick laugh is razor sharp. “I’ve been ragey so intensely and repeatedly that if I were Bruce, I wouldn’t have a pair of pants to my name. I’m burned out. I’m done with it.”

“You don’t exactly seem burned out, either.”

The urge to deflect grows too strong to resist. “You know how you absolutely flip your shit when you’re the last person to find out something?”

Tony’s laser scrutiny morphs into irritation. “I have never, as you call it, ‘flipped my shit’ and—Christ, I can’t even make that remotely believable.”

Clint grins. “No, you can’t.”

“But it never has a thing to do with what I know when. That’s just petty.”

“Uh huh. So anyway, I thought I’d give you the word first. Steve and I—“ Shit. How does he say it in a way that doesn’t sound like high school shit? We’re dating? We’re boyfriends? I’m wearing his letter jacket? “We’re a thing. I mean, we’re together.”

Eyes narrowing, Tony snaps, “That’s the joke? Your set-up and timing really could use some work.” He flicks the schematics back into the air.

He’s hurt, Clint realizes. Of course he is. Friendship is not something you playact with Tony Stark, and that’s what he thinks this is. “I’m not joking. We were halfway there over the holidays when I
was in DC, then right after I got back I found out Phil was alive.”

Tony turns from the glowing diagrams to regard him, his eyes suddenly widening. “Is that a hickey?”

Clint’s hand flies up to his neck, two fingers feathering over one of the marks Steve left.

“You have a Captain America hickey. Captain America is gay? Or bi, pansexual—”

“It’s a Steve Rogers hickey.”

“Nah, your neck is all red, white and blue.”

“Ha ha. Anyway, Steve’s going to close up his place in DC and move back up here.”

As Clint expected, this news lights Tony’s face. “Finally. I’ve been trying to get him to move in for two years. If I’d known that’s all it took—”

“Danger, Will Robinson.”

Tony waves a hand dismissively. “Yeah yeah. So what do you guys need?”

“Existentially? I don’t know, a world where we’re not going to be overrun by paparazzi the second we step out of the building, every time we step out of the building, would be a start.”

“No, I mean what do you need me to get for you? Bigger bed, heart-shaped jacuzzi—”

“We don’t need anything, Tony. I’m just telling you.”

“Why?”

An incredulous laugh escapes him. It’s not one of the carefully cultivated ones. “Oh my god, Tony,” he says in a burst of irritation. “Because I wanted you to know. We both did. Do. You’re the first person I’ve told, but Jesus, you might be the last.”

“I’m the only person who knows?”

“Well, Natasha knows, but that’s because she walked in on us making out.”

“Thor—no, he’s off-world. What about Bruce?”

“I assume Bruce is oblivious, unless he’s developed super spy skills.”

“You told me first.”

“Yep. You’re my friend.”

There’s a pause of 2.647 seconds that, for Tony, qualifies as a long, awkward silence. Then, in response to a glimmer of movement off to the side, he whirls and shouts, “Hey. Dum—Hey. Hey. You ridiculous robot. Put that down. Put it down now.”

Deflection achievement unlocked. Clint’s work here is done.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

And Peggy.

Chapter Notes

Content notes for ageist attitudes and character with dementia (mostly referred to).

Clint takes the train down to DC to help Steve with the move. On the morning after his arrival, he refills their coffee cups and gathers the breakfast dishes, saying, “When the liquor stores open, I’ll get some boxes. I can get started on the books while you’re at the museum.”

“You should save the books for when I’m home. I won’t need to take everything with me, so I can weed them out while we pack.”

“Are you kidding me? You have a fucking floor. Plus I may want to read some of your rejects. We’ll take them all.”

“None of the are rejects. They’d just be ones I’ve read.”

“Even more reason for me to want them. We’re taking them.”

Steve laughs. “All right, whatever you say.” He grabs a dish towel and starts drying the plates Clint has washed.


It makes Clint wonder why there’s no art area in Steve’s apartment. There are sketchbooks around, which he doesn’t feel he should browse through without invitation (no matter how much he wants to), but based on the amount of books on painting he would expect some canvases and supplies. Did Tony’s ridiculous tendency to overplan extend to creating an art space on Steve’s floor? He wonders if it would be out of bounds for him to call Tony and set that in motion. Screw it, he decides. Steve has left his Avengers Tower space an impersonal base for when he’s in town. It’s about time he had something of himself, something to create as well as a space to pound heavy bags into oblivion.

He calls Tony, setting the juggernaut in motion.

When Steve gets in from the museum, Clint has packed all the books, marking various boxes with ART, HISTORY, GEN NONFIC and LEND TO CLINT. He’s willing to even the score, as far as that goes. In Clint’s opinion, Steve’s in dire need of some FIC.

Steve arrives with a plan—they’re to meet up with his friend for burgers and beers at the place on
the corner. Clint likes Sam, a VA counselor, pretty much on sight. Watching Steve and Sam give each other shit is priceless. They meet up with him the next few mornings to run on the Mall, and after the first three “On your left”, Clint says, “You made friends with him after you knew what a dick he can be?”

Sam laughs. “Indoctrination. My uncle gave me his old Captain America comics when I was a kid.”

“Oh, be sure and mention those when you get a chance. They embarrass the shit out of him.”

“I used to play Howling Commandos with the neighborhood kids. We’d fight over who got to be Gabe Jones as often as we did who got to be Cap.”

“Don’t leave that out. Though actually, if I know Steve, he’ll spend all afternoon telling you why Jones was a great choice. He made sure the Smithsonian exhibit he’s been working on tells as much about the Commandos as him.”

Apparently singing the praises of Steve gets to be too much, so after the next time he passes them, Sam and Clint double back and hide behind Lincoln in the memorial. It doesn’t take Steve that long to figure out where they went, but by the time he does they’re giggle-snorting like a couple of idiots.

Clint also gets to meet the museum team, who throw a farewell party for Steve. They’ve clearly moved past the hero worship stage, and there’s an easy affection that runs both ways. The one person Clint doesn’t get to meet is the nurse who lives next door, one of the women Tasha keeps encouraging Steve to ask for a date. They try knocking on her door a few times, but she’s always out.

After a last night of pizza and beers at Sam’s house, they make the move back to New York. It couldn’t be easier—Tony sends a Stark Logistics truck and moving team, so the boxes disappear on their own. Steve seems especially restless, getting in the movers’ way trying to be helpful, until Clint finally says, “Let’s go out and get some lunch.”

At the cafe Steve’s still fidgety, picking at his food until Clint finally asks, “What’s going on? Second thoughts?”

“What? No.” With an effort he shakes off his distraction. “I’m sorry. I just—there’s someone else I should see before we leave. I don’t—you’d be welcome to come, but it’s not really fair to ask you.”

“Why’s that?”

“Peg is in a nursing home—Peggy Carter, that is.”

Clint blurts, “Oh, shit—I could get to meet Peggy Carter?”

Steve blinks in surprise, then laughs a little. “You want to meet her?”

“Hell yeah. She founded SHIELD. The only worthwhile years of my life are the ones I’ve been at SHIELD.”

That seems to throw Steve for a moment, then he clears his throat and says, “Well, the thing about Peg….” He takes a sip from his water glass. “She has good days and bad days. On the good ones she’s as sharp as she ever was. On the bad ones, she has no idea who I am, or else she doesn’t know what year it is. Sometimes she goes right from one kind of day to the other.”
“Damn. I’m really sorry to hear it. Will it help if I come? Help you, I mean.”

“I think so. But if she’s—if she’s not doing well, it’s probably best if you hang out somewhere while I see her. There’s a nice cafe on the first floor.”

They head for the nursing home on Steve’s bike. With his arms around Steve, Clint can feel the tension he’s carrying, and wishes there was some way he could make it better, but all he can think of is to snug his arms tighter.

The main hallway of the place is set up to recreate a small-town main street on one side, with a small general store, barber shop, salon, library and the cafe Steve had mentioned. The other side is a windowed wall overlooking a pretty courtyard with a gazebo and plenty of benches. A landscaper is working at one of the garden patches between benches.

The Steve who moves through this fake town is not like any versions of him Clint has ever seen. He’s familiar with Fighting Cap and Public Relations Cap, and Steve Rogers is a newly discovered book Clint’s avidly reading. This Steve is a whole new chapter. He greets the residents they pass by name, pausing for the ones who want a chat.

He offers salutes to old guys with blurry blue tattoos, compliments old ladies on their hair and polished nails, crouches to speak to the residents in wheelchairs, whether they’re alert or unaware. Steve isn’t faking interest in what they have to tell him; he is interested. Clint knows a lot of the persona that became part of Captain America’s legend after his supposed death—not just brave but Good—and this is different. It’s kindness, and it’s all Steve.

As they walk through the halls, Clint feels his stress levels amping up—why? The large windows look over an enclosed area, not the street. There’s just the landscaper and a couple of geezers sitting at some distance from one another.

That’s it. The old guys. Clint realizes how very little time he’s spent around elderly people at all. The way the fat melts from their frames, making their hands look long and clawlike. Their paper-thin skin, mottled with very large, very dark moles. There is no reason to be creeped out by these people, he tells himself. They’re just old.

This little pep talk does him no good at all, and he realizes he’s had virtually no experience with people this ancient. Clint had never even known his grandparents—dead on his dad’s side and cut off on his mother’s. His dad kept them isolated enough that no church or community groups brought them into contact with the elderly, and circus life was a blur of audiences forgotten by the time they hit the next town. Neither his criminal career or his life with SHIELD gave him any experience with the super old. Being surrounded with them—with Steve acting as a giant beacon drawing them all toward him, slowing down to interact with all of them—is taxing every one of Clint’s coping strategies.

This is just stupid. His therapist is going to make him talk about this ad nauseam, he’s sure. But for now he follows Steve, trying to focus on the first thing he’d noticed, his kindness. Steve extends it to the staff as well, asking about nursing school classes, families or pets (sometimes Clint isn’t always sure which of the last two is under discussion, when Steve inquires by name—Pablo, it turns out, is a cat).

When they finally reach the nurse’s station, Steve asks the one question that’s crucial to him: How’s Peg doing today?

“She’s having a real good day,” the nurse—Callie—tells them. “She’s in the atrium.”
As he follows Steve, Clint steels himself. He absolute cannot have an Old People Freakout in front of Margaret Fucking Carter, co-founder of SHIELD. Or Peg, Steve’s favorite old person. To his relief, the height and expanse of the atrium, with skylight and view of the courtyard gardens, eases the tightness that had been gathering in his chest.

Steve finds her like she’s got a homing beacon mounted on her head. She’s seated in a wheelchair at a table by a potted ficus, a photo album in her lap and a mug of tea by her elbow. She looks up before they’re halfway across the room, apparently also equipped with a homing device. Her face lights up at the sight of Steve as she calls out his name.

Clint hangs back as Steve bends to take her hand and kiss her cheek. After they exchange a few private words, Steve turns to gesture for Clint to approach. “Peg, I’d like you to meet my friend, Clint Barton. Clint, Peggy Carter.”

As she turns her bright, aware gaze on him, Clint’s not sure he’s ever felt more like an Iowa hick in his life. “Ma’am,” he says, taking her extended hand. He’s so worried about sounding like an idiot that he stammers his way through “It’s an honor to meet you.”

“He’s with SHIELD,” Steve says. “And the Avengers, but it’s SHIELD that made him want to meet you.”

“Is that so?” she responds, speaking directly to Clint.

“Yes, ma’am.” Say it. Get this right, goddammit. “I think maybe SHIELD saved my life. Lengthened it, anyway.”

Her direct gaze doesn’t waver. “That is indeed a good thing.”

“My handler was a real SHIELD history man. I picked it up by osmosis, plus a few weeks holed up in a safe house. I always liked the stories about you best.”

“Aren’t you kind.”

“No. I mean, they actually were my favorites.”

“Your source must have been holding out on you. The Howard Stark stories are rather entertaining.” She turns a dazzling smile on Steve. “Steve, would you be a darling and bring me a fresh cup of tea? This one has gotten cold.”

“Oh hey,” Clint says. “I can do that. You two talk.”

“Steve knows exactly how I take my tea. He’ll only be a minute.”

“Be right back, Peg,” Steve says. With a touch on her shoulder, Steve heads off on his mission.

Peggy Carter turns to Clint and says, “He looks happier than I’ve seen him in a very long time. I gather that’s your doing.”

Clint has nothing in his mouth but tongue and teeth, but he nearly chokes on them. “Ma’am?”

“I’ve worried about him since he returned. So many losses and so little time to come to terms with them. I’m not certain the work at the Smithsonian was the best thing for him, at least at the beginning. He’s made me afraid sometimes. He’s so rash, and I didn’t see much holding him here.”

This statement pierces him through. Before he can even formulate words, she goes on:
“That’s actually been true since Sgt. Barnes died.” She grasps his hand. Though hers seems fragile and birdlike, her grip is strong. “You’ll watch out for him, won’t you? He’s often very stupid about taking care of himself.”

“I will,” he says fervently.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Releasing his hand, she settles back in her wheelchair, looking tired, and Clint feels a pang of guilt.

Fortunately, Steve returns with her tea, and Clint’s off the hook. Steve pulls up a chair and sits close to her, their knees almost touching. “Peg,” he says, taking her hand. “I wanted to see you and let you know. ‘I’m moving to New York. I’ll be down to visit you as often as I can.’

“You’ve been restless of late,” she observes. “The Smithsonian isn’t enough for you anymore.”

“That’s true,” he admits.

She flashes a quick look between the two of them. “I think you’ll be happy there.”

Clint fades back from the conversation as Peggy drinks her tea. Steve tells her about the ridiculously huge suite Tony has constructed for him. As he talks, Clint can see the sharpness in Peggy’s gaze start to fade away.

“Oh, Howard always has been one for excess,” she says.

After a while, she asks Steve to take her back to her room.

“Go on,” Clint says. “I’ll hang out here.” She ignores him, having forgotten his connection to Steve, as he wheels her out of the atrium.

When Steve returns, he looks weary and sad.

“That was rough,” Clint says, wishing he could pull Steve into his arms. He’d probably cause multiple heart attacks in the old dudes around them.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s blow this dump.” As Clint hoped, his characterization of this insanely pleasant place makes Steve huff the slightest of laughs.

To Clint’s relief, they make the return trip through the center at a much faster clip. When they reach the parking lot, Clint pulls in a deep drag of the warm spring air, aware of Steve doing the same.

“You okay?” Steve asks.

Clint so does not intend to tell his ninety-year-old boyfriend that he just discovered old people creep him the fuck out. “I was just going to ask you the same.” He gestures toward the motorcycle. “How about letting me pilot that thing?” Steve looks as though he could use some time to feel what he needs to feel.

“If you want to, sure.”

“You know me, Steve, I’m all about having something huge and powerful humming against my crotch.”
That gets him the barest ghost of a smile, so Clint knows he has the right idea. He takes the key from Steve and they head back to see the movers off, then set out for New York City.
Tony, of course, wants to throw a welcoming dinner. Steve’s still signing off on the manifest when he appears in the box-clogged entryway.

The guy who’s in charge of the clipboard notices Tony first. “Captain Rogers, are you sure you don’t want us to move things where you’re going to want them?” A question he’s already asked, but when the big boss is on site, no one wants to look like a slacker.

Clint knows Steve would just prefer them to leave. “For fuck’s sake, look at his arms. That’s like five minutes of warm-up lifting.”

They laugh, and Steve peels off some bills from his money clip as he thanks them. Once they’re gone, Tony launches into his dinner invitation, and Clint can see Steve start to deflate like a day-old circus balloon. “I think tomorrow might be better,” Clint says.

Steve offers a tired smile. “I’d be a little more up for it then,” he says apologetically.

“Sure,” Tony says. “More time to plan.” As if he hasn’t already got the catering team on high alert. “I’ll let everyone know.” Catching Clint’s eye, he makes a little gesture toward the interior of the apartment and raises his eyebrows.

It takes Clint a second to realize he wants to know if Steve’s seen his art setup yet. “We’re just gonna chill tonight at my place. Get started unpacking tomorrow.”

Poor Tony. Delayed gratification is so not in his wheelhouse, even when it’s someone else’s gratification. “Well. If you need anything when you get going, let me know.” He reluctantly drifts toward the door.

Steve rouses himself. “Thanks, Tony. For everything. I’m looking forward to the dinner.”

Tony’s still a little subdued as he says goodnight and steps into the elevator.

“I think I blew your advice,” Steve says. “On how to accept a gift from Tony.”

Clint slips his arms around Steve’s waist. “You’ve had a long day. Tomorrow you’ll do seventeen backflips from joy, and he’ll be happy.” He plants a chaste kiss on Steve’s mouth. “Now c’mon to my place. We’ll have some beer and pizza and put on a game.”

***

They last through three slices of pizza and four innings of exceptionally boring baseball before they shuffle toward Clint’s bedroom. When Clint emerges from the bathroom, he finds Steve sitting on the edge of the bed, still dressed, one shoe half toed off. Shoulders slumped, he’s gazing sightlessly at a random point on the bedside rug.

“Hey,” Clint says softly, kneeling on the rug to finish pulling off the shoe and start on the sock.

Steve pulls his foot back. “No, don’t. You don’t have to.”

Clint reaches again for Steve’s foot. “Yeah, yeah. Gimme.” As he slips the sock off, he says, “I can’t tell you how many times someone had to take my boots off after a mission.” Usually Phil, but on rare—and pretty dire—occasions Nat.
“But this—“

“Yes it was.” He shucks the other shoe and sock off, then settles into a cross-legged position on the floor and starts rubbing Steve’s foot. “You had to watch one life getting packed away, and you had to go tell Peggy Carter you’re leaving DC. It’s a lot.”

“Okay, but no foot rubbing.”

“What, are you ticklish?” He feathers a fingertip along the sole of Steve’s foot, but Steve doesn’t squirm.

“No, I just—“ Steve pulls his foot away and stands, starting to unbutton his shirt. “I’m good now.”

“Wait, you’re embarrassed about your feet? They’re perfectly normal.”

“They’re huge.”

“You’re huge. Surely you’ve noticed. If your feet weren’t parade floats, you’d keel over from the weigh of your pecs.”

That finally drags a snort from him.

Encouraged, Clint says softly, “So Stevie, what size spoon do you want to be?”

“What?”

“Big or little?”

The look Steve gives him is priceless, incredulous and faintly amused.

“Oh, I can big spoon any motherfucker,” Clint says.

Steve steps out of his pants, now down to his boxer briefs and tee. “Bring it on, pal.”

Clint snickers. “‘Pal.’”

“In my old neighborhood, that’s the ‘pal’ that translated as ‘motherfucker.’”

“Well, get your ass in bed, pal, and prepare to have it spooned.”

Steve laughs softly as Clint gets in bed with him, clicks off the light and settles himself up against his back. It takes a bit of adjusting, but when they finally get it right Clint can feel the tension bleeding out of Steve’s shoulders. For a while they just lie there, syncing their breathing.

“I’ve always hated my feet,” Steve says into the dark. “When I was smaller they were…dainty. I hated going to the beach because they looked so girly. Not to mention, they hurt most of the time, because I had flat feet. Now they just seem monstrous. When I was in the Army, I never had a pair of boots that fit right. If we were on the march, I got blisters every day. They’d heal overnight, then the next day it was the same thing all over again. So I’m kinda sensitive about them.” He shifts slightly. “That’s about enough bellyaching from me.”

Clint snugs his arms a little tighter around Steve. “Nah, it’s good. Now I know.” After a moment of quiet he says, “I hate my nose. It’s always been kind of a blob, and getting it busted a few times hasn’t improved it any.”

“In my old neighborhood, it doesn’t even qualify as a nose unless it’s been busted a few times. I
like it. It’s got character.”

“Your ass has got character.”

That finally draws a whole-hearted laugh from Steve, and they lapse into silence for a while. Clint’s almost starting to drowse when Steve says, “Thanks for today. Your patience with everything. I hated leaving Peg.”

“I know.”

“What if she forgets I told her? What if she can’t understand why I’m not visiting regularly?”

At some point, Clint knows, she will forget Steve entirely and won’t worry about his absence. He knows this because that’s what happened with Phil’s mother. Life’s cruel enough without Clint adding to it, so he keeps this to himself. “DC and New York aren’t that far apart, only a few hours by train. Hell, Tony would lend you one of his planes, you know he would.”

“I do. But it’s so hard watching her decline. Knowing how smart she was.”

“She still is, when she’s all there.” That sounds flippant, so he changes it to Phil’s word. “When she’s present. You may be too focused on the other times to see it, but she can be scary sharp. She knows about us.”

Steve turns in bed so quickly that he plants an elbow in Clint’s forearm, which ow. “She what?”

“She totally knows.”

“How would you—“

“When she sent you for tea, dude.”

“What did she say?”

“Most of it I’ll leave between us.” And water down the rest. “She said to take care of you.”

Clint hears the rustle of the pillowcase as Steve shakes his head minutely. “She used to tell Bucky the same thing.”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure she knew how you felt about him, too.”

“No,” Steve says, but Clint’s dark-adapted eyes can see the way he chews at his lower lip.

“You should see her again soon. Talk to her about it. You have a chance to be real with her. Show her who you really are while you can.”

“You’re sure?”

“When you went off for tea, all I thought I was in for was some strained conversation about the weather. She turns to me and says you look happier than she’s seen you in a long time.”

“She said that?” Steve’s tone is full of wonder.

“Yeah. To a guy she just met. It makes me think she knows she doesn’t have time to fuck around.”

After a brief fumble beneath the sheet, Steve finds Clint’s hand and draws it up to place over his own heart. “Thank you.”
Clint’s urge to deflect wars with his desire to stay in the moment. “You already said that.” His hand
twitches slightly, but Steve covers it with his own.

“For what you just said,” Steve responds. “It’s really important.”

“Okay.” He leaves his hand on Steve’s chest, sandwiched between the warmth of his hand and the
steady heartbeat below, Steve’s breath softly ruffling his hair in rhythmic waves. It’s no time at all
before he drifts into sleep.
Chapter Summary

There is virtually nothing life-changing in the following conversations. Steve has opinions about quiche.

The morning brings a text from Natasha, and Pasha’s asshole about two inches from Steve’s face.

“Oh hey, he likes you.”

“Ummmm?”

“You’ve been elevated to co-mom status. It’s a leftover kitten thing. Show your asshole to Mom, make sure you’re ready for school.”

“And, uh, what if he’s not? Ready for school.”

Clint raises up to see if Pasha’s presenting anything out of the ordinary, which he’s not. “Spit bath?”

Steve shudders, picking up Pasha and handing him over.

Snorting a laugh, Clint says, “You are thinking about this way too hard. Cats are self-cleaning modern miracles. I have a packet of butt wipes, but I’ve only used one. You ever have a pet?”

“No. During the Depression, we had enough trouble feeding ourselves. Plus I had asthma. If I played with a feral cat, I had a good chance of ending up in the hospital.”

Clint runs his hands through Pasha’s fur, triggering the purr engine. “Sucks.”

Steve shrugs. “It’s just how things were.”

At this point Clint’s phone buzzes with a text alert. Pasha me-yaks a protest as he stretches to snag it. “Oh hey. Nat says let her know when we’re 30 minutes from up for company. She’s bringing breakfast.”

“I could stand to be eating in 30 minutes.”

“I was hoping you were gonna say that.” Clint kicks off the covers, reaching for his sweat pants. “You shower first. I’ll see if Nat needs any help.”

When he crosses to her suite and presents his offer, she smirks. “I do pretty well dialing a phone on my own.”

After staying to chat a few moments, he heads back to start some coffee brewing and take his shower. Twenty minutes later, she arrives at Clint’s door clutching a large plant.

“That doesn’t look terribly edible, Nat.”

“It’s coming.” She blocks the door open with her hip, and a fully loaded three-tier cart rolls in
behind her.

“Supersoldier brunch special,” announces Tony, who is pushing the cart.

“Wow, Tony,” Steve says.

“Don’t thank me,” Tony says. “Red Sonja here is the one who ordered it. I’m just the caddy.”

“Just a wild guess,” Clint says, “but I’m thinking there’s enough if you stay.”

“We’d like that, Tony,” Steve adds. “I appreciate your people helping with the move.”

“Just tell me where to set up.”

They settle on Clint’s kitchen, where they load the table and counter with fruit, pastries, quiches, breakfast meats, OJ, more coffee and a samovar with Tasha’s tea. There are even mugs, cutlery and warmed plates so there’s no cleanup required on their part.

“If only we had about five more supersoldiers to eat all this,” Clint says.

“Help me out here,” Steve says. “I don’t recognize half the pastries.”

Natasha guides him through the babka, cheese danish, scones, and paper-clad muffins.

“What about these?”

“I think this one’s the house special,” Tony says. “It’s spinach, red peppers and red onion. The other one looks like your standard quiche Lorraine,”

“But what is it?”

“It’s quiche,” Natasha says. “Pie crust, obviously. Egg, cheese, cream, and savory stuff. Tony called it on these two. The quiche Lorraine has bacon and Swiss cheese.”

“There was a big thing in the Eighties about how real men don’t eat quiche,” Tony says, “but you should try it.”

Steve’s already cutting himself a big piece of the quiche Lorraine. “What kind of idiot wouldn’t like bacon, eggs and cheese in a pie?” When he’s done with that, he also helps himself to a slice of the spinach as well.

“It’s too bad you weren’t around back in the day to call bullshit,” Tony comments.

Clint says, “Tell them about that fake pie thing you used to eat.”

Steve describes the mock apple pie, much to Tony’s horror. “No, it wasn’t bad. Mostly tasted like cinnamon, and the texture was close enough. If I could believe in the Shadow, mock apple pie wasn’t that hard.”

Steve’s story prompts Tony’s recollection of his favorite childhood food. His mother occasionally took him out for hot chocolate at a place called Rumpelmayer’s in the winter, and to Serendipity 3 for frozen hot chocolate when the weather was hot. “Jesus, I loved those. I could never drink it slow, and I always got brain freeze. Unbelievably painful—have you ever gotten it?”

Clint can tell by the wry laughter who’s had the pleasure. He and Steve are definite yeses, but Natasha’s a no.
“If the cold hits your soft palate just right—or wrong—it’s like an ice pick to the brain,” Tony elaborates for her benefit. “Nothing else hurts like that—well, Afghanistan hurt like that, but I’m repressing the fuck out of that the best I can. And it lasted longer than twenty seconds.”

“In the midwest we called that an ice-cream headache,” Clint said. Though he got his mostly from the Slurpee-like drink they sold at the circus. Barney would make a big deal out of buying one for Clint, then laugh when the pain hit him, and take the cup back when he put it down to clutch his face. Clint fell for it every time. With that memory, Clint’s ready to move the conversation forward. “Do you have a favorite, Steve? Or is it the pie?”

“The Christmas orange, definitely. But if we’re talking about things I could get anytime I had a spare nickel, 3 Musketeers.”

“What’s a Christmas orange?” Natasha asks.

“You know, a regular orange,” Steve says. “That’s what I used to get for Christmas.”

“An orange?” Clint blurs. “That’s all?” And he thought his holidays were shitty.

“There was usually a handful of nuts and some hard candy too.”

“Just when I thought I couldn’t feel any sadder,” Clint says, “here comes the hard candy.”

“What do you have against hard candy?” Steve asks. “Never mind. Natasha, do you have a childhood favorite?”

“There were these little tea cakes. Almost too pretty to eat, but they were so good. Light as air, filled with whipped cream. I always wanted more, but they were a rare treat.”

“Holidays and birthday?” Steve asks.

“Mm,” she says as if affirming. Clint knows it’s a false impression. The cakes were rewards, given for achievements like besting a trainer in hand-to-hand. For winning a marksmanship competition. For her first kill, and those that followed.

“I guess Steve and I should get to work,” he says, before Steve or Tony can probe for further details. “Feel free to keep hanging out here. There’s plenty more to eat. Thanks for that, Tasha. It was amazingly good.”

“Yes,” says Steve, “it was a really nice welcome, and it’ll get us through a few hours of unpacking. Thank you.”

“I’m game for helping with that, too,” Nat says. “Let’s just get things in the refrigerator.”

“I’m in too,” says Tony.

It doesn’t take long to get the food split between Nat’s and Clint’s fridges and take the stairs down to Steve’s floor. Clint, at Steve’s invitation, brings Pasha along to serve as foreman. Tony’s done some tweaking of the floor since Clint was last here. Mostly in the living quarters. It’s still A Lot [TM Tony Stark], but it’s somehow cozier. Or maybe Clint’s just seeing it that way, now that it will really be Steve’s home, not just a temporary place to crash when he’s in town.

“Why don’t you take a walk-through of the whole apartment before we start opening boxes,” Tony suggests. “Get a clear idea of where you want things to go.”
“Good idea,” Steve says, and he leads the way.

After he passes, Tony gives Clint a significant look, but says nothing. A couple of times along the way, Steve consults with Clint on where a particular item would look best or be more practical. To Clint’s amusement, Tony gets more twitchy with each delay of his big reveal.

Finally they reach the room where Tony has set up Steve’s art studio, where Steve’s exhalation of wonder makes it worth the wait. “What— Holy—” He makes a slow 360 to take it all in. “Where did this come from?”

“I’d say the art fairy,” says Tony, “but I think that would have unfortunate connotations.”

“Tony? I don’t know what to say.” Steve runs his fingers reverently over the supplies laid out for him. Picks up paints to read labels.

Anything, Clint thinks, as long as it’s not too much.

“This is t—“

Even as Clint loudly clears his throat, Steve makes a course correction.

“Terrific. It’s amazing. I never even dreamed of paints this nice when I was at the Art Students’ League.”

“It was actually Barton’s idea, but he was busy helping with the move.” Deflection mode: Engaged. “I had it set up in here because of the north light, but it’s yours to move or rearrange however you like.” Deflection mode: Warp 2.

“Thank you, Tony. It’s been too long since I’ve spent any real time at this. Clint—thanks.” His voice a little hoarse, Steve stops there.

Clint’s good with it; he has the feeling he’ll get thanked properly later on. Besides, too much more and it’ll need a whole second round of deflection. ‘Well, let’s get to it.”

“Wait,” Steve says. “What’s this?”

Leaning against one wall is a tall, wide box, only three inches deep. “That’s your housewarming gift from me. You can open it when you’re more unpacked.” He feels an unexpected flutter of nerves at the thought.

The four of them have shifted the big pieces where Steve wants them and are halfway through moving boxes when Jarvis alerts them to an incoming call from Fury. Once they get Bruce up to Steve’s place, Jarvis routes Fury’s video feed to the middle of the living room, projected like Princess Leia.


“Look on the bright side,” says Natasha. “It’s only one ship, not armies.”

“Suit up,” says Steve. “At the quinjet in ten.”

Scooping up Pasha, Clint heads for his own place to get his weapons and tac gear.
Chapter Notes

Many thanks to anyone who hasn't given up on this story. I had a long struggle with this chapter, and with writing in general. Some days all I got out was a sentence. But one sentence, then two, and recently the logjam has broken up.

I hope you find this chapter worth the wait.

The whole thing feels off from the start. Not that there’s a standard alien invasion in Clint’s experience. This one seems like more of an alien incursion. An alien scouting party. An alien beer run gone wrong.

Despite Tony muttering, “Sure, it’s one until hundreds more pour out of the giant sky hole” as they were suiting up, it seems limited to just the one sleek ship. It appeared out of nowhere, streaking through the cloud cover over Camden, New Jersey, its attention trained on a complex of high-rise apartment buildings. The Avengers had learned this much before leaving for the quinjet, from the shaky video from a drone. They didn’t get more than a middle distance view before a searingly bright white bolt of energy shot out from the ship and incinerated the drone. Though that was pretty instructive in itself.

*At least it’s not blue,* Clint had thought, then silently cursed himself for stupidity.

Now, on the jet, Cap asks what they’re all wondering: “Why Camden? Philly’s right across the river.”

“Practice?” Clint suggests.

They get closer to an answer when Sitwell takes over the briefing. “We’ve got some intel on the area. Low-income housing. Two high-rises and a mid-rise. There’s been tension and some disturbances since late last month. There’s a community garden on the property, and one of the gardeners turned up an artifact of some kind, and now the place is swarming with archaeologists. They’ve taken over the garden and they’ve got their eye on tearing up the playground there too.”

“No, it’s human in origin, but they must be close to turning up something. We’ve got casualties already.” *Shit.* “Five civilians and one local law enforcement. The law has drawn back, set a perimeter.”

Fat lot of good the perimeter does for the people inside the buildings.

“ETA three minutes.”

Clint realizes one of the things making the back of his neck prickle is Iron Man. He’s flying solo in the suit, as usual, but his usual chatter over the comms is noticeably absent. Tony Stark does not miss an opportunity to harsh on New Jersey.

It pings for Cap at the same time. “Iron Man, what’s your status?”
The ragged laugh in Clint’s comm link sounds halfway to something else. “In a relationship, but thanks for asking.” The effort to speak throws his breathing off kilter.

“Early stages of a panic attack,” says Bruce from behind them, off the comms. “He told me he was having them after the Chitauri invasion. They’ve subsided, but this—“

“Iron Man, fall back,” Cap orders. “Until we get eyes on the current situation, I want you watching our six.”

“Got it.”

Clint turns up the feed on Iron Man’s comm, relieved to hear Tony’s breath coming under control.

A second drone arrives on the scene and transmits, which Jarvis combines and converts to a 3-D image for the team to study as Clint sets the jet down on a high-rise roof.

“I don’t see an obvious way in,” says Cap, “unless that thing opens like a clamshell, but I don’t see a seam there either. Not even a gunport.”

Clint has a look at the image as he grabs his gear. It’s silver, gleaming as if it hasn’t just burned through atmo, surface smooth as a ball bearing. Clamshell was an apt description: it’s oval, tapering on one end. It hovers just a few feet above the dig site.

“Sitwell, are there security cameras we can tap into?”

“No. Those went after the dig started. There was some sabotage.”

”Then it’s time to get eyes on this thing.”

As they spread out on the roof, it’s impossible to tell whether the ship has taken notice of them at all. The outer shell is blankly shiny, revealing nothing. It’s eerily quiet, no engine sounds. It fits with the scene around them: two bodies inside the perimeter of the dig area, blackened, limbs drawn up in the pugilistic posture of death by intense heat. Outside the twisted fence lay two more bodies in similar poses, and just inside the entrance to the grounds is a fifth body next to a wheeled cart filled with ash and charred cans. Exploded glass jars have sprayed diamonds across the pavement.

After a few hushed curses from the whole team, Cap says, “I don’t want anyone on the ground until whoever’s in there comes out. I want to see what we’re fighting.”

”You think maybe it’s a drone?” Bruce asks.

“I couldn’t tell you why,” Cap answers, “but I don’t think so. Hawkeye, can you find a good vantage point to wait for them to show themselves?”

“I might even be able to make them show themselves. I brought my A-plus toys. But there’s not much cover out here.” A couple of balconies on the high rise across the way have rugs draped over the railings, but that’s the closest thing to cover he can find.

“I thought I’d go for a little more firepower for that,” Cap says. He looks toward Iron Man, brow raised.

“I’m in.”

Without warning, they hear the crack of a gunshot and the high ping of a ricochet.
“What the fuck?” Tony blurts.

“Sniper,” Clint and Steve say simultaneously.

The crack of another shot follows almost immediately, and Steve says, “Two snipers.”

“One’s across the courtyard, probably on a terrace,” Clint adds.

“Jarvis has him from the drone feed. Fourteenth floor, third terrace from the left.” It’s one of the spots Clint had noticed, with a tarp or rug providing visual cover. “The other’s below us. Seventeenth floor.”

“Take me down there,” Clint says. “The one directly below.”

“No,” Steve says.

“I’ll get a better angle. And maybe the shooter’s got some information that we can use.”

“The key word being shooter,” Steve says. “I don’t want you wading into a situation with at least two unknown snipers.”

“I got this,” Tony says. Before Steve can object, Tony’s launched himself into the air above the courtyard. “Gentlemen, if we could call a ceasefire,” he says over the suit’s external comm. “The Avengers would like to give you a hand with the silver clam assholes here. I’d like to put our sniper in place, and the two of us will draw them out so the whole team can deal with them.”

At their assent, Tony ferries Clint to the seventeenth-floor balcony, where Clint clammers over the railing to crouch with Sniper #2. Clint gets a glimpse of close-cropped hair under a Mets cap before he turns his attention to the situation below. “Gentlemen,” says the voice next to him. smoky and sardonic and, to Clint’s ear, decidedly female.

As he adjusts the blankets on the railing to allow him better sightlines without unnecessary exposure, Clint says, “He’s under the impression badasses only come in one flavor. I’m —.”

“Hawkeye. I know. I’m Tiana.”

“Nice to meet you,” he says, though his eyes and hands are busy with setting up his gear. “Anything you can tell me about these mooks? Have you gotten a look at the actual passengers?”

She snorts at mook “Motherfuckers are blue. Human shaped, from what little I saw.”

“Number?”

“Two is all I saw. We started shooting as soon as they showed their faces. They clammed back up inside and haven’t come out since. We’ve been taking potshots here and there to keep it that way.”

“What about the people they killed? Did the fire come from the ship, or the aliens themselves?”

“From the ship. There are gunports at this end—two above and two below. They look like those pep-up headlights. I don’t know about the other end.”

Clint clicks his comm for Sitwell. “‘Bugs, Mr. Rico. Two of ‘em. And I’m a-burnin’ ‘em down.’”

“Funny, asshole,” Sitwell says. He knows his Heinlein, though, so he’d emitted a soft snort. “What’ve you got?”
“Apparently humanoid. Motherfuckers are blue, according to our civilian spotter.”

“Veteran,” Tiana mutters.

“Correction: vet. She saw two before she and another shooter drove them back in their buggy.” To Tiana, he asks, “Anything else you can tell me about the spaceship? How it opens?”

“Like a clamshell, but from the end.”

Clint relays her report to Sitwell and the Avengers. Steve starts issuing orders. As Clint nocks an explosive arrow, he tells Tiana, “It’s about to get hot. Might want to take cover in there.”

“Hell, no,” she says, and he finds himself glad of her presence at his side, a rare luxury for him.

Iron Man lets loose a couple of repulsor blasts, and the gunports emerge from the spacecraft’s smooth silver skin. Clint sends an arrow down the nearest port and nocks another for the next one, but his angle isn’t great. Securing the bow and arrow, he then takes a running leap for the next balcony, grabbing its railing like a trapeze bar. He flips himself up and over and takes another leap to the next one.

Meanwhile, Iron Man’s focusing his repulsor beam on the other topside port, so Clint switches to a balcony-by-balcony descent for better aim at the lower ports. When he finds a workable position, he sends another explosive arrow toward the nearest port. He’s just a second too late, and the arrow’s obliterated in the white energy bolt directed at Iron Man, who narrowly dodges it.

Clint releases another arrow, as Iron Man pours repulsor blasts over the ship’s entire surface. He takes advantage of the cover to find another balcony, and just as he’s reaching for the railing, a new voice comes over the comms.

“Avengers, stand down.”

At the sheer surprise of hearing Coulson’s voice, Clint fumbles his grab and falls, bashing his arm on the unforgiving balcony floor on his way to the ground. He lands on his back, driving the breath from his lungs in an explosive rush. Voices collide over the comms, but Clint can’t make them out over his own wheezing attempts to draw air.

There’s no mistaking the one voice he does hear, which isn’t amplified by the comms. It tears through every other sound, shaking the ground, announcing that the Hulk has entered the fray.

“Shit!” Cap says fervently into the shocked silence that follows.

“Avengers. Stand down,” Coulson repeats.

“The hell you say,” snarls Cap.

“My team is prepared for this. ETA three minutes.”

Meanwhile, Hulk is punching the silver clamshell with focused intent. Iron Man is flying erratically, one of his thrusters evidently damaged by a blaster shot from the ship.

“Iron Man, status.”

“I’m a little singed, Cap, but the suit took most of it.”

“Fall back.”
From the ground, Clint spots movement in the ship’s one remaining gunport as its weapon tracks Iron Man. Yelling a warning, he reaches for his bow, but Hulk blocks the shot, punching the gunport into a crumpled bellows, then resuming his all-over pounding.

Again Coulson orders them to stand down, and Cap responds, “At this point it’s the Hulk. The rest of us are just watching. Tell him to stand down.”

Cap reaches Clint and offers a hand to help him up. “Status?”

“Banged up some. Nothing broken.”

“We’ll get that confirmed—“

The rest of that sentence is swallowed by the arrival of Coulson’s “bus,” landing in the deserted street outside the complex. It disgorges the team, Coulson in the lead. Hulk leaves off beating up the ship to face Coulson and aim an angry roar in his direction. Then he gives the ship one last blow and stalks off.

With that, the Avengers stand down. “Fuck it,” Cap says, which may be a Steve Rogers first. “Maybe they have the can opener that’ll work on that thing.” They stick around to be sure Coulson’s team has it under control, and afterward take over the community room in one of the buildings for debriefing. When Clint pops out of the room to find the building manager for Steve, he finds Tiana waiting for him. Now that they’re not crouching behind a blanket-covered railing, Clint sees that she’s quite tall, with medium brown skin dusted with a scattering of freckles, high cheekbones. The close-cropped hair, he sees, is only on one side. The other is styled into chin-length twists.

“You okay?” She asks. “I saw you fall.”

“Nothing that won’t hurt like hell tomorrow.” He offers her a grin. “Nah, it’s nothing serious. Banged my arm, got the wind knocked out of me, is the worst of it. Wait for me, would you? I have to find someone for Cap, then we can talk.”

When he returns after a couple of minutes, he says, “Thanks for sticking around to have my back out there.”

“Thanks for having ours,” she says. “Why are aliens invading fucking Camden?”

“Apparently they left something here, and they wanted it back. My bet is, we’ll never know what. The suits and squints have got it now. Anyway, the reason I wanted to talk to you. How long have you been out of the service?”

“About eight months.”

“If you haven’t found a career yet, you should think about joining SHIELD. I’ll put in a word for you, if you’re interested.”

Tiana shakes her head, setting the twists to moving. “They’re not going to be interested in me. I’ve got a record. Small stuff, related to the protest out here, plus dumb shit from before I enlisted.”

“Ever shoot somebody?”

The twists sway more emphatically with the sudden jerk of her head. “No. You can take your assumptions and—“
“I did.”

She stops mid-sentence, lips parted in surprise.

“She’s dubious, but by the time Sitwell arrives, Clint persuades Tiana to take his card, and gives her his own contact info in case she has questions. He drifts out to the perimeter that’s been set up around most of the courtyard. A team has begun Christo-izing the area around the spaceship, as they’d done with Thor’s hammer out in the desert. Clint doesn’t know what Coulson’s team did to neutralize the ship—no doubt some super secret tech from the masters of super secrecy.

The others standing here at the perimeter, he realizes, are not lookie-lous. They’re not here to gawk at the ship, but to watch the teams that are crouched by the bodies. The shock is beginning to wear off for them, and sounds of distress are rippling through the crowd. He doesn’t belong here; this is private. Taking one last glance at the barrier being erected around the spaceship, he turns away. He doesn’t belong there, either.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

A long overdue conversation.

Clint’s mood continues through the trip back to the tower. There’s no need for it to change, or for Clint to hide it. Natasha is quiet beside him as he pilots the quinjet, possibly thinking along the same lines. Bruce sits alone in back, subdued as he always is after an appearance by the Other Guy.

Steve had sent them on ahead, while he and Tony continued their extended conversation with various official types who’d appeared once the danger passed.

When he’s back in his suite, Clint pulls off his tac gear, dropping each piece as he goes, wincing with every protest of abused muscle. He turns on all the jets in the shower and allows himself a nice long fugue as he eases the aches from his fall. Pasha sits on the toilet, yowling his habitual strident warning about the dangers of falling water.

As Clint is freeballing it in sweatpants, wrestling his way into a twisted-up t-shirt from the clean laundry pile, the doorbell rings.

This is an unusual occurrence. Packages always go through screening and get delivered to his floor by building staff. Natasha uses the door between their suites; Steve knocks and then enters; Tony just enters, halfway through a dense monologue. Thor and silent approach are at completely opposite ends of a spectrum. It could possibly be Bruce.

“Jarvis?”

There’s a significant enough delay before Jarvis begins, “My apologies sir—“ that Clint reaches for a weapon on his way to the door. “—but my protocols have been bypassed.”

Only an idiot would place themselves directly behind the door to use the peephole in these circumstances. “Show me—“

Before he can finish speaking, Clint hears the distinctive sound of Pasha jumping down from his high perch where he typically broods when his shower warnings are ignored. The cat trundles to the door and uncorks a loud, aggrieved meow.

Clint’s brain runs through all these details at the same speed he calculates trajectory, wind, target movement, and comes up with—

Unbelievable.

Coulson.

Clint opens the door. “There’s actually a protocol for visitors to the building.”

Pasha adds a meow that is distinctly That’s right, motherfucker in tone.

Phil wears an expression that Clint is no longer sure whether it means I’m about to be honest with
“You or Relax, I’m the good fed. “May I come in? We need to talk.”

“Huh. I thought we talked already.”

“I…uncovered some new information.”

Clint steps back out of the doorway, making a show of diffidence. For a moment he’s tempted to let this conversation happen in the shared space, just to watch Nat express her anger and betrayal right to Coulson’s face, but instead he leads the way to his own suite. Pasha follows on Phil’s heels, making a pretty good case for his own rage.

“Have a seat. Wherever.” He can hear the note of truculence in his voice, but he makes no effort to soften it. “Get you something? Beer?”

“No, I— Yes, actually.”

The hell? Coulson nervous?

Clint fetches a couple of beers from the fridge and, by habit, dumps a bag of snacks in a bowl. Dumb, he thinks mid-pour. This isn’t a snacks occasion. But he empties the bag and carries the bowl and two bottles out to the coffee table. Retreating to the farthest chair from where Coulson sits, Clint settles cross-legged on the carpet in front of it. Pasha leaves off directing his eye beams of death at Phil, padding over to Clint and inserting himself in the bowl of Clint’s legs.

“It has a lot of personality,” Phil says. “What’s its name?”

“Yeah, he does. His name is Pasha.” There’s an awkward silence that Clint allows to stretch out. He’s shared plenty of silences with Phil, but none of them has been awkward.

Phil clears his throat softly. “First off, I wanted to be sure you’re all right. I heard you fell from a balcony before we arrived.”

“Yeah.” He’s getting fucking tired of this topic. “Fine. I just lose my rhythm when someone tells the Avengers to stand down, the big boys are here.”

It’s petty, but Clint enjoys the flash of guilt on Coulson’s face. Absently scratching behind Pasha’s ears, Clint waits for him to get to the point.

“This is hard.” Phil leans forward, planting his elbows on his knees and cupping his hands over the lower half of his face. Looking up, he continues, “When you came to Zurich I didn’t have the answers you were looking for. I didn’t really understand what the questions were.”

Taking a long drink of his beer, Phil gathers himself for what’s next. “I don’t know how much you know about what happened to me shortly before you found me.”

“I heard you were grabbed. Tortured.”

“That’s what I’ve let my colleagues think.”

Clint’s fingers stop gently coming through Pasha’s fur. “What looks and sounds like torture to a trained agent that isn’t exactly torture?” What makes Phil Coulson scream that he wants to die? He will not ask that, because the thought makes him sick.

“They…forced open a door to some memories that had been nailed shut.”

Pasha unsheaths his claws and presses them into the back of Clint’s hand to remind him to resume
his petting.

“Memories of the time just after Loki…killed me.” The frown that freaked Clint out so badly when he first saw it has made a reappearance. “What I went through was unimaginable. Operations and terrible pain, alternating with medically-induced comas. But I’d forgotten all that. Been made to forget it. They put a wall around those memories, and plastered it over with false memories of a very pleasant convalescence in Tahiti. So the—well, torture isn’t a completely unreasonable word for it—tore down that wall. It was like going through that agony all over again.”

Phil raises his beer bottle, sighs and sets it back down on the coffee table.

“Another one?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Urging Pasha off his lap despite his strident protest, Clint rises to head for the kitchen. He gets no more than three steps when Phil, leans forward, hand low to the ground, his index finger out.

“Hello, Pasha.”

Though Clint had been heading for the coffee table to retrieve Phil’s empty bottle, he veers onto a direct course for the kitchen. His hand shakes as he takes a beer out of the fridge and then grabs another for himself. Leaning back against the counter, he makes himself breathe like he’s focusing on a target.

When he returns to the living room, Pasha is finishing his scent investigation, allowing Phil to scratch him behind the ears.

“My neighbor has a cat just like this,” Phil says. “She walks him outside on a leash.”

So many fucking responses run through his head. Clint pushes them all back until he can speak in an even tone. “Your recovery wasn’t all they took.”

Phil looks up at him. “No. It wasn’t. That’s why I’m here.”

Clint hands him one of the beer bottles, then settles on the carpet on the other side of the coffee table.

“When you confronted me on the Bus, by Skye’s bedside. As you walked out, I called after you. Skye woke up then, and she said, ‘That’s Clint?’”

Clint surges back to his feet, too agitated to remain still. He’d heard, but he’d pushed it out of his mind. He stops before his bookshelves, trying to pull himself together. Just about every third title brings up some memory he can’t deal with right now—trading books during long weeks in some safe house, gifting books to one another. And Christ, Irene’s book.

“She told me I’d been shouting your name.”

“Jesus,” Clint blurts. Pasha paws at his leg. Clint bends to pick the cat up, grateful to hold him to his chest and have a reason not to look at Phil.

“I’ve had a lot of digging to do in the aftermath. Things that were done to me medically. I’m not even sure ‘medically’ is the right word.”

Feeling vaguely sick at this statement, Clint raises his eyes to meet Phil’s. It’s the least he can do.
“That’s been the most urgent priority,” Phil continues, “but I’ve been trying to tease out some answers on what I’m missing.”

“Turned up anything interesting?” In his head, Clint’s question is loaded with sarcasm, but he manages to keep his tone neutral. It’s a high wire act, especially for someone who only recently mastered a larger range of tones.

“It seems you’re in my will.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“That led me to certain conclusions. They might explain why you changed handlers, and some of your reactions.”

_Fuck the high wire._ “Oh Jesus Christ. Ask Jasper. Ask Nat. Ask me, for god’s sake. Fury knows, too, but I sure as fuck wouldn’t trust him to tell the truth.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Phil says mildly, “To ask. So we were together.”

“Yeah.” Pasha squirms in his arms, so Clint lets him go and settles into a chair. “Since Thor and his robot friend made the scene in New Mexico. That’s where we stopped dancing around it, anyway. So, a year. We lived together for a few months. That probably happened a little ahead of schedule. I had an op that went south. None of this rings a bell?”

Phil doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t have to.

“It’s weird,” Clint says after a long silence. “There are little islands that got missed. You knew I’d want to read Irene’s book, but you didn’t remember that she was my best friend during the time I was with the circus. You remembered this—” He holds out his finger in the cat greeting gesture—“but not that you got Pasha for me.”

Phil’s face is unreadable, but Clint can tell what he sees is not emotion but its stifling. “I don’t quite know what to say. I’m sorry.”

Surprisingly, that stings. “Hell, what have you got to be sorry about? It’s your ten years that got vanished into the ether. I’m just a bystander.”

“Right now, it’s…distant. I’m still in the middle of trying to discover everything that happened medically.”

“Does this have something to do with why you didn’t want them to give Skye that injection?”

Phil startles at the question.

“I was there,” Clint reminds him.

“It’s nothing I can talk about,” Phil says, but Clint knows it’s a yes. The idea bothers him a lot, enough that he doesn’t push on the memory issue. “So,” Phil adds after a long pause, “I thought we both needed some answers—whatever answers are possible—and you deserve some closure.”

_Closure._ He’d thought he already had that, but now he’s been gifted with some extra closure that isn’t closure at all. He’s tired, though, and none of this changes anything. “Thanks,” he finally says.

“How are you?” Phil asks.

“I’m—okay, mostly. I am okay. Just thrown a little—a lot—by this. But I’m seeing someone, and
it’s good.”

“I’m glad.” And that’s the first thing Phil’s said that feels pure and uncomplicated. “How is Natasha?”

“What do you think? Right now she’s feeling some kind of way and not talking about it. You need to ask her.”

“You’re right. I’ll find time——

“Make time. And just so you know, you’d be surprised how many people were hurt to find out you let us think you were dead all this time. Surprise—Tony Stark. He was a deliberate pain in your ass, but he liked and respected you.”

“You know I was under orders.”

“I know you tell Fury to go fuck himself when it suits you.”

There’s a slight twitch at the corner of Phil’s mouth. “That’s ‘Go fuck yourself, sir.’ But I get your point.”

He’ll take that for now. “How are you?”

The micro-smile flashes again. “Feeling some kind of way, but too busy to deal with it.”

“That only works for a while,” Clint says.

“I am aware,” Phil says wryly. “Do you know if Natasha’s in?”

“She came back with me. So unless she’s gone to the range or the gym, she’s here.” He directs Phil to her door, then returns to his own suite.

Clint gathers up Pasha and they curl up on the sofa together, both feeling some kind of way.
Chapter 46

Some time later, as Clint is drowsing beneath a gently snoring Pasha, the doorbell chimes again. He’s not ready for another round with Phil, but his time it is Bruce, his hair still slightly damp, freshly showered and meditated. Maybe Clint could stand to learn that shit, but it’s a little late now.

“Hey,” he says, stepping back to let Bruce in. “How are you doing?”

“I came to ask you the same thing.”

“Battered and bruised, but I’ll survive. Want a beer?”

“I’d rather have tea, if you have some.”

“Sure, if caffeine is okay.” He leads Bruce into the kitchen, where Bruce settles in at the table while Clint puts water in the kettle.

Pasha pads along behind them and sits at Bruce’s feet, staring intently up until Bruce takes a couple of cat treats from his hoodie pocket and presents them to his royal highness. “Anyway, that’s not what I meant,” he says. “About how you’re doing.”

Clint gives him a puzzled look.

“I was with Natasha when Coulson told us to stand down. She went completely white. Then she went very red.” He makes the self-deprecating half-smile that’s so at home on his face. “I went a little green.”

This is a surprise. He’d thought the Other Guy came out because Tony had been hit. “Was that the first you realized Phil was alive?” He doesn’t remember telling Bruce, but he wasn’t thinking all that clearly around that time.

“Tony told me a while back. Well, Tony had an extended rant, which I was the audience for. At any rate, I know you worked with Coulson even longer than Natasha, so I thought I’d check in.”

“I’d say battered and bruised still covers it.” Clint turns to the cupboard for the tea he keeps for Natasha. Though it’s right where he can find it, he pretends to rummage for it as he says, “He was just up here an hour or so ago. We had the kind of breakup where one person doesn’t remember there was a relationship in the first place, and the other has already moved on. I don’t think I handled it all that well.”

“Wait, you and Coulson were together?”

He turns, setting the tea and a pair of mugs on the counter. “Tony didn’t tell you that?”

“No.”

“Well, call Page Six. Tony Stark does the discreet.”

“Back up a bit. You said he doesn’t remember? How much time is he missing? Was there brain damage?”

Wincing as the kettle begins to shriek, Clint hastily turns off the burner. “That right there is a brilliant fucking question.” He pours the steaming water over into their mugs. “Take anything in it?”
“No, this is good.”

Clint sets a saucer between them for the tea bags. “Tasha hates that I use tea bags, but I refuse to dick around with a teapot, especially since touching cold, wet tea leaves makes me want to puke.” Barney had picked up the chewing tobacco habit from the roustabouts, and occasionally thought it was hilarious to slip some into Clint’s food when he was distracted. “So, it might be brain damage, but it might not. When they brought Phil back, they fucked with his memories.”

“They what?”

“I know, right? They did something, implanted new memories about recovering in Tahiti. Because he was in so much pain—“ Once more, the resistance to saying “that he wished they’d let him die” is stronger than he is. “So the memories of the year we were together just happened to be right next to the screaming agony ones, whoops—“

“—Or it was intentional.”

“Or it was brain damage. He actually did die, Fury said. I got the impression it wasn’t just Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep. Clear! Zzzzzzt!, and he’s back. Real dead. Several times. I don’t know what they did to bring him back. It’s top secret.”

Bruce’s thoughtful expression gradually turns troubled. “Any idea who the leader of this project is?”

“I’m not even supposed to know about this project. I’m surprised Fury even told me as much as he did.”

“He would have signed off on this.”

It’s not a question, but Clint answers anyway. “Yeah.”

Bruce falls silent, gazing into his tea until he senses Clint regarding him and looks up again. “I have feelings about human experimentation,” he says dryly. “Especially when it’s being done by government organizations without a lot of oversight. And by ‘without a lot of oversight,’ I mean zero.”

“I can see how you would,” Clint says, matching Bruce’s dry tone.

There doesn’t seem a lot more to say on that topic, but it’s already sucked the air out of the room. They sip in silence for a while, until Bruce decides to spend the next day at the Bronx Botanical Gardens to work on his chill. “You want to come along?”

“That sounds great,” he responds. “I’ll let you know for sure tomorrow. Steve’s place still isn’t sorted out, but he’ll probably stay here for the night anyway.” By the lift of Bruce’s eyebrows, Clint can tell that was another juicy item Tony hadn’t passed along.

“Tell Steve he can come if he wants to.”

“I will, thanks.”

His tea finished, Bruce takes his leave. Accompanying him to the door, Clint lingers in the space he shares with Tasha to search his shelves for a comfort read.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

It's been a half-sentence per writing session, if that. Then I went to breakfast after a car maintenance appointment, thinking I was wasting precious time, and all this writing that's been in my head broke through.

Clint’s not ten pages into his reread of *A Wrinkle in Time* when his phone buzzes with a text from Natasha.

*u ok?*

She’s not, which is clear from her lack of complete words and sentences. Not that he’d expected her to be. *Working on it. How are you?* When ten minutes go by without an answer, he texts again. *Get over here.*

She will or she won’t; that’s Tasha.

A few pages later she appears in her most nondescript sweatpants and tee, hair pulled back from her makeup-free face, cradling her own mug of tea in her hands. Wordlessly she comes to sit next to Clint on the sofa. No sooner has she settled herself than Pasha transfers himself from Clint’s lap to hers, leaving his restless tail to quest blindly over Clint’s thigh.

For a long time, they sit in silence, Tasha leaning against Clint’s shoulder. Once her tea is finished, they start a boneless slide to the horizontal until the only thing missing from the human-cat burrito is the wrapper.

At last, Tasha says softly, “He’s upset. In a very Phil kind of way. He knows this hurts you—I won’t say, ‘he knows how much this hurts you,’ because he can’t.”

“He should be upset for himself.”

“You know how Phil is. How he’s always been.”

Of course he does. He could be bleeding out, but he’d insist on taking care of his asset’s flesh wound. “Question is, does Phil remember how Phil is? Does he remember us at all?”

“Yes,” she says immediately. “He does. That much is the same.”

As much as Clint wants to protest that nothing’s the same, he can’t. He remembers when he found Phil at the Trauma Center, and his first question was if Tasha was hurt. “What’s he planning to do now that he knows what they did. Is he gonna keep soldiering on like a good SHIELD agent? Am I?”

Natasha shifts to regard him, intently searching his face.

“Fuck,” he says. “Don’t—I don’t fucking know. Just don’t look at me like that.” She settles herself back against him, her cheek pressed to his chest. “Is what they did right? Would they do it to either one of us?”
“You don’t seriously think—“

“No. Not really. We’re not high level enough to invest that kind of money. But who’s to say they wouldn’t do—“ He cuts himself off. “SHIELD—Phil and Jasper and Fury—they knew what I was, and they saw something. They made me into a person. So this—“

Tasha rises up again, this time with her eyes flashing. “Bullshit! You were always a person.”

Well, she didn’t know him before. But he knows better than to say this. She reads it on him, though, and subtly shifts her weight so that her elbow resting on his chest digs into a pressure point. “Ow. Okay, okay.”

Without even seeming to move, she eases off the pressure. “Just…don’t do anything rash, okay?”

“Well, me?”

That prompts her to laugh, as he’d hoped, and she settles back against him. Not five minutes has passed when Pasha abruptly sits up, attention focused on the door. He jumps down, grunting his little squeak-toy sound—Clint loves that he can hear this. He’d known about meows and purrs, but not the squeak-toy grunt—and trundles to the door just as Steve walks in.

He’s still mussed and smudged, but somehow he’s managed to stop off somewhere and pick up two large carry-out bags of what smells like Chinese food. “I hope you’re both hungry. I am, so I think I overdid it on the takeout.”

Pasha rises up and paddles his paws against Steve’s shin. “Hang on, buddy.” He sets the bags down and runs his hands over the belly Pasha presents.

Tasha, meanwhile, rolls onto her feet and goes for the bags, whisking them toward the kitchen.

Pausing in his attentions to the cat, Steve looks up at Clint. “You doing okay?”

He repeats the response he’d given Natasha. “Working on it. Kind of a long story. I’ll catch you up later.”

Pasha grabs Steve’s hand in both front paws, giving it a little claw action to make his several points.

Rising from the sofa, Clint asks, “Want me to tell Nat to hold up so you can shower?”

“No, we’re all hungry. I’ll wash my hands and face.” He hoists and passes the cat back to Clint, who settles Pasha on his shoulder and heads for the kitchen.

Natasha greets him with “You need more serving spoons.”

“How is two not plenty? That’s what came with the silverware set.”

“Well, you have eight containers.”

Opening the utensil drawer, Clint narrates each item he pulls out and stabs into a container. “I have a spatula, tongs, ice cream spoon, a pie thingie, a bigass fork and this—“ He pauses with the last item in his hand. “—gravy scoop,”

Tasha emits a tiny hiccup of a snort as Steve enters the kitchen. “Gravy scoop.”

“Well, I don’t know what it’s called. This is its first trip out of the drawer since I moved in.” He
hands Steve one of the plates Tasha has pulled from the cupboard. “You were gone a long time.”

“We had a few things to sort out with SHIELD, and then some plans to make.”

“Plans? With SHIELD?” He can hear the edge in his voice, and from the way her gaze cuts to his face, he knows Tasha can too.

“Not exactly. Give me a sec, and I’ll fill you in.” Steve lays in a base of white rice on his plate, then goes for the kung pao chicken. Holding up the spatula Clint had stuck in the container, he asks, “What’s this about?”

“I told you,” Natasha says smugly.

Setting it aside, Steve uses his own fork to scrape a heap of food onto the rice, and proceeds to follow the same procedure with several other containers.

Clint busts out laughing, and by the time his outburst extends to a snort, Tasha has joined in.

“Did I miss something?” Steve asks, that adorable bemused half-smile on his face.

“Just silliness.” Tasha says.

Clint remembers how much he hated being left out of jokes and conversations because people couldn’t be bothered to repeat something he’d missed. “She told me I don’t have enough serving spoons.” Using Steve’s technique, he begins to fill his own plate.

Steve says, “Back in my day, we were so poor we didn’t have any spoons. We’d stand over the soup pot and take turns drinking from the gravy ladle.”

Natasha jabs Clint hard in the ribs. “Gravy scoop.” Directing a raised eyebrow at Steve, she asks, “No bowls?”

“The bowl was for Thanksgiving and Christmas.” Steve says, but his straight face begins to wobble, and they all laugh.

As Clint watches him, Steve’s amusement morphs into a quiet happiness, and Clint takes it in hungrily. He wonders if this feels something like family to Steve, sitting over a meal with people you can tease, laughing together without the threat of violence.

After a few bites, Steve says, “So, about SHIELD. Tony and I leaned on them a little, and came to an agreement. They have two weeks to excavate and clear the site. The people in that complex have been through enough.”

“I don’t see that happening,” Clint says. “That kind of dig gets done with teaspoons and makeup brushes.”

“Tony’s offering the use of some kind of tech. He says it can lift those segments of earth without damaging or displacing any of the artifacts—human or otherwise. Once that’s removed, they’ll refill the area with clean fill dirt and topsoil. That’s where their part ends and we step in—well, Tony and I, and anyone else who’s interested.” The quiet happiness, Clint realizes, has kindled into something more. His eyes sparkle and his gestures get more expansive. “Tony’s going to design a new play area for the local kids—that’s why I took so long coming back—listening to Tony blue sky the whole thing took longer than browbeating SHIELD into their part. We also talked to the residents for a while, but there’s going to be more of that.”
“You said you and Tony,” Tasha says. “What’s your part?”

“I’m going to work with the residents to replace the community garden.”

“Because a New York City boy has so much farming experience,” Clint jokes.

“Hey, I had a victory garden before I joined up,” Steve says. “But if we’re going by geography, you just volunteered to help, Iowa.”

“I want to,” Clint blurts, with such vehemence that it surprises everyone, including him. He wants to see Steve express this joy through the physical work of gardening. He wants to help people in a tangible way, not indirectly through government-sanctioned wet work.

Steve’s smile breaks like sunrise over ocean waters. “Great.” He raises his brows. “Natasha?”

“But my manicure,” she says with a complete lack of intonation. Then: “Sure. I’m in. I’d love to help pick out the flowers, too.”

Steve’s joy has transferred itself to the two of them, and changed the whole feel of the day. This isn’t something like family, Clint thinks. It is family.
Holy cats. Can it really be over a year since I last updated? [Narrator: It can.] I have been in a big writing funk, and I hope I'm out of it for good.

When Steve emerges from the shower, in boxer briefs and tee, Clint says, “Hey, I almost forgot. Bruce came by to see if I was okay and invited us to come with him to the Bronx Botanical Gardens tomorrow, if we want. I guess it’s one of his chill-out spots.”

“I was going to do some sketching for the garden project, but that’s an even better idea. If you want to, that is.”

“Sure, yeah, sounds great. And I could use some chill too.”

Steve settles on the bed, angled so he’s facing Clint. “How are you doing? You said you’re working on it.”

“Better. Hanging out with you and Natasha helped a lot. But—well, it was more than just hearing Phil’s voice over the comms. He came up here to talk to me. It was weird as fuck.”

“What made it that way? You’ve seen him before, so it’s something else.”

“Yeah. The SHIELD docs did something to him. They brought him back from the dead, I told you that. But he wasn’t operating table dead, he was morgue drawer dead. So maybe it wasn’t something they did on purpose, but a side effect. Or it could just be brain damage.”

“What?” Steve gently prods. “What’s different?”

“He doesn’t remember me. I mean—he remembers Agent Barton me, but nothing about the relationship we had. Fuck, he didn’t even remember Pasha, and Phil got him for me.” Phil’s fingertip offering to Pasha, the one little scrap of memory he had unknowingly displayed, plays in Clint’s head again. “Fuck.”

Steve slings an arm around him and pulls him close. They pass a considerable amount of time as Clint and Natasha had, sprawled together on the bed, their legs tangled and Pasha purring on top. After a long silence between the two of them, Steve says, “I wish I knew what to say.”

“You said it just right,” Clint tells him.

“It seemed like something was going on with Natasha,” Steve observes. “Maybe beyond the Phil thing.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s afraid I’ll quit SHIELD.”

“Why would she think that?”

“Probably because I said something about wondering if I should continue being a good soldier for them.”
Steve shifts to regard him, much as Tasha had.

“Look, I’m weirded out by this mad scientist shit. I don’t know if the memory thing was part of the plan, but just the idea that they put him through so much to keep him—to make him alive—freaks me out.”

Steve’s brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“I haven’t told this part. To anyone. Jasper told me.”

In the pause that follows, Steve adds no verbal prompt, just pulls him closer again. Pasha trills.

“One of Phil’s team heard him reliving the treatments—or whatever you want to call it. He’d been grabbed by some group of assholes, and they broke through this wall of implanted memories. Yeah, I guess I forgot that part. They also created some memories, of his extremely pleasant recovery in Tahiti. SHIELD implanted them, I mean.”

“Can’t tell the players without a scorecard,” Steve murmurs.

“Pretty much. So when they broke through, this agent heard him screaming.” Feeling his breathing go wonky, he pauses to try to regain control.

Steve pulls him closer, settling Clint’s head under his chin. “Take your time.”

“He wanted to die. Not because of what they did to make him remember. He was in the moment. He wanted the docs to let him die.”

Steve lets out a long breath. “Wow.”

“Yeah. I’m all for people I love being alive, but what cost is too much? And do I want to have my life in the hands of people who would ignore him and keep doing whatever they were doing?”

“You think they’d do that to you?”

“I told Tasha no. Hell, we don’t even have the clearance to be on Phil’s new team, so I doubt we’re worth the money. But they’d do it—“ The implication of what he’s about to say strikes him, and the realization sends a sick wave of light-headedness through him.

“They’d do it to me,” Steve finishes quietly.

“They’ve got a lot sunk into you.”

Steve huffs a laugh. “1942 dollars. And I think they got their money’s worth.” After a quiet moment, he says, “It’s worth keeping in mind. Maybe get Tony looped in so if something does happen, he and his lawyers are on it.”

“It’s a good plan.” Poor Tony. Everyone’s go-to for lawyers, guns and money. Except not guns, these days. “Now let’s change the fucking subject from how we both want to stay dead when we die. How about figuring out the next time we go play pinball at Coney Island?”

Steve gets a wicked grin, exactly the one Clint had been hoping to see. “I don’t know. I think I might need to work on my skills first. Especially my hip action.”

“Don’t forget to practice your fingering.”

“Let’s get right on that,” Steve says, and soon Clint has better things to think—or not think at all—
Clint wakes when the light is beginning to shift from the artificial glare of streetlights and building floodlights to soft pre-dawn glow. Jarvis could block out all of that, along with the sounds of delivery trucks and early-morning noise, but Clint actually likes waking up to it. So, he’s discovered, does Steve.

Realizing that he’s not in bed next to a living furnace, he turns to find Pasha curled up on the pillow Steve had been using. The cat uncorks a mournful little meow.

“All right. Give me a minute to piss.” Maybe Steve has already started coffee. When he stumbles out of the bathroom and the kitchen, though, the kitchen is dark. As he flips the light and attends to feeding Pasha, a thought occurs to him.

“Have you been fed?”

A sad mrowp.

“You’re not lying to me, are you?”

The response is a muted but distinctly insulted yowl.

“Jarvis. Art room?”

“Indeed, sir. For ninety-two minutes now. I must say the captain seems quite happy with his gift.”

His grin lasts him through the brew cycle and the trip upstairs to Steve’s.

* 

Steve is already waiting for him, door open wide, reaching for the thermos and leftover pastries he brought. “Best idea ever.”

Clint fervently concurs. Steve’s hair is ruffled, with streaks of red and blue paint along the peaks left by his fingers. More smears of color mark the tee he’d worn to bed, which is rucked up just enough to show a stripe of skin above his low-slung sweatpants.

After Steve deposits the offerings on the counter he opens the box beside it, which bears Clint’s scrawled COFFEE. Clint reaches in for a pair of mugs and pours them each a cup.

“I woke up around 3:00, and my mind was going a mile a minute with ideas about the garden. So eventually I decided to come up and play around with my paints. Which—again—thanks for that.”

Clint doesn’t bother pointing out again that it was all Tony and his money. Steve’s aware. “So you’re going with a Captain America theme?” Clint flicks a hand toward Steve’s paint-smeread shirt. “What?” He tugs at his tee to get a look. “Shit! No! Shit! I didn’t even—“

By this time, Clint is laughing so hard Steve gives up his protestations and laughs too.

“Well, at least I got that color scheme out of my system before anyone else found out.”

“You might as well let me see now,” Clint says.

He lets Steve lead the way so he can watch his ass all the way down the long hall to the art room.
The downside of this is immediately apparent when Steve starts gathering up his watercolor papers carelessly into a stack and moves to tip the whole thing into the trash basket.

“Hey hey hey!” Clint grabs the paintings from his hand and spreads them out on the flat file cabinet. They’ve smeared, some more than others, but from what Clint can tell, they were fairly abstract.

“I was mostly getting a feel for the brushes and the paper,” Steve says. “And throwing some color on the paper.”

“Now this I like,” Clint says, pointing at a heavily smeared watercolor. “Make sure you get a lot of purple in there.”

“That is nice. We’ll do that. Hey,” Steve says suddenly. “Your box. We never got to that.”

“Wow. That hardly feels like just yesterday morning.” He steadies the box upright as Steve moves the drafting table away, and the flutter of nerves he’d felt when Steve had first noticed it returns with a vengeance. It’s so big, and he’d been presumptuous to choose it for someone like Steve, who surely has his own tastes in art. “Listen, if you—“

Steve pauses in his careful slicing of packing tape. “Are you about to run down my present before I even see what it is?”

“No,” Clint says quickly.

“Uh huh,” Steve says knowingly.

Clint knows what’s good for him, so he shuts the hell up while Steve carefully unboxes his gift, then unwraps the layers of foam sheets around the painting. At last he peels back the last sheet and says, “Oh” on a soft exhale.

“Is it—“

“It’s amazing.”

It’s a painting that Pepper’s people helped him find, of the Wonder Wheel at dusk, its red, white, and blue lights on but not yet overwhelming the sky’s own light. What catches his eye, though, is the indistinct images of the people in the foreground. Now that he’s viewing the painting in person, he sees the way certain colors of their clothes—soft blues and purples—come to vivid life in the fading light. Clint has noticed that quality in real life, at twilight or on rainy days. There have been periods in his life when that mysterious beauty provided the only pleasure he felt in a day.

He hovers a hand over the figures in those hues. “I love this. The way these colors just glow.”

“So do I.”

“Make sure you use these colors in your garden plans,” Clint says in a rush. “Give this light to those people.” He’s certain he sounds like an idiot, but he can’t explain what this subtle brightness has meant to him at times.

“That’s a great idea,” Steve responds, then falls silent for a long moment, leaving Clint with the echo of his last awkward remark in his head.

“After the day we spent at Coney Island, I looked up the Wonder Wheel on the internet,” Steve says. “There was a Greek immigrant who’d take his sweetheart to Coney Island, and he’d tell her
someday he was going to buy her the Wonder Wheel as a wedding ring, so that everyone could see how much he loved her. They got married in ’47, and in 1983 he bought it. Their sons run it now, and their grandkids work there.”

Clint lets out a long breath. “Wow. That’s romantic as fuck.”

Steve gestures at the painting. “This is romantic as fuck too. That was a big day for us. C’mon,” he says, pulling the last of the packing away from the painting. “Let’s find the perfect spot for this.”

“Where are you thinking?”

“Living room,” Steve says, and somehow it feels like a declaration as bold as the Wonder Wheel guy’s promise to his girl.

Works inspired by this Avengers vs. Worst. Christmas. Ever. by nwhepcat

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