Hidden In Plain Sight

by mountain_born

Summary

SHIELD has secrets hidden the world over. When a medical emergency forces River, Clint, and Coulson to land in the middle of the Canadian wilderness they find a few more than they bargained for.

Notes

Thank you once again to like-a-raven, beta extraordinaire and acronym queen!

I'm so mean to Phil. A worm in his head, and now this. If he ever crosses the fourth wall, I so owe him a drink.

July 3, 2011
Somewhere over northern Alberta, Canada

Who the hell had decided that Canada needed to be this fucking big?

Not just big, but full of nothing. Nothing but trees and lakes and fields. Clint had been tensely watching the landscape pass beneath the jet for the last thirty-five minutes. He was pushing the jet just past its maximum safe speed, enough to make occasional shudders run through the frame.

Even at this speed, they were nearly two hours from help.

Behind him he could hear labored breathing overlaid by River’s voice, low and warm and
carefully, calculatedly soothing.

“You’re doing fine, Phil. Steady breaths. That’s good.”

Clint looked back to check out the situation. It looked like a lot of things, but *good* wasn’t even in the running.

Coulson was laid out on the deck on top of a SHIELD issue sleeping bag, surrounded by medical paraphernalia. A small oxygen tank was tucked against his side, the mask secured over his face. River was sitting close beside him. She had one hand resting on his chest, and Clint could see enough to tell that Coulson had a death grip on it. Good. That meant he was still conscious.

Clint had to resist the urge to punch the control panel. Of all the shitty, *shitty* bad luck.

They had been sent up to Canada to do a bit of recon. A small cargo plane belonging to a SHIELD contractor had gone off course, and then off the radar in the area. Ordinarily, it was nothing that would have warranted Strike Team Delta’s time, except that this particular contractor dealt in some seriously hush-hush and volatile products. On closer inspection there had been some anomalies on the cargo manifest that had raised some concerned eyebrows.

Unfortunately, employees going off the reservation and attempting to sell stolen product on the black market was not unheard of.

Whether that had been the plan for this particular flight crew would be up to other people to figure out. The two men themselves would be telling no tales. Clint, Coulson, and River had found the plane’s crash site, the pilot and copilot dead inside. The contents of the hold had been in shambles. They had been prepared to find weapons. That much had been in the brief. What they hadn’t been prepared for, what hadn’t turned up on the cargo manifest, was that the plane had also been carrying several tanks of an experimental and highly dangerous toxin.

By the time they’d figured out what they were dealing with, Coulson had already absorbed a dangerously high dose.

“It’s called BCP-600,” Dr. Levine had told them over the comms. “It’s a neurotoxin. It’s designed to fire up and overstimulate the pain centers of the brain. They bill it as *torture in a bottle*, a way to inflict pain without causing trauma to the body.”

Levine’s tone told Clint all he needed to know about her views on the drug. Which, no shit. Hippocrates would seriously not have approved.

“What do we need to do?” River had asked as she and Clint had feverishly worked to set explosive charges around the plane wreckage.

“You need to get him to a SHIELD base as quickly as possible,” Levine said. “The company has a supply of the antidote, but . . . well, it’s going to take time to get to it. Until it can be administered, he’s going to need to be placed in medical stasis, otherwise . . .”

When their Hail Mary pass was a medically induced coma, Clint wasn’t sure that he wanted to hear the alternative, but he asked anyway.

“Otherwise what?”

“Otherwise his central nervous system shorts out and he dies.”
“How much time do we have?” Clint had asked.

The short answer was that Levine and her colleagues in Medical, who were scrambling to provide information, didn’t know. The drug was experimental and they had no idea of how much was in Coulson’s system. Levine had estimated anywhere from one to six hours.

“The SHIELD base outside of Vancouver is going to be the closest one that can handle this,” Levine told them as Clint had lifted his handler in a fireman’s carry and River had set the timer to blow the crash site. “I’ll call ahead to tell them to get ready. In the meantime, keep him still, oxygenated, and as calm as you possibly can.”

Which was where they were now, River keeping Coulson quiet through the pain and Clint trying to squeeze as much speed as he could from the jet’s engines.

Clint heard a faint tell-tale click on the end of his comm, indicating that the line had opened up again. Levine had been checking in for updates every few minutes.

“Tell me you have something useful,” Clint said without preamble.

But it wasn’t Levine on the other end of the comm.

“Barton.” Clint automatically sat straighter, even though there was no earthly way that Director Fury could see him. “Stand by to receive new coordinates.”

“New. . .?”

Even as he asked, a sequence of numbers scrolled across the flight-control screen. A second later a map came up showing a new flight path in red. Clint frowned. The new course took them off their route to Vancouver, diverting them to a destination approximately forty minutes to the south of their present position.

“What’s there, sir?” Clint asked.

Because as far as he could tell it was just acres and acres of wilderness.

“Help,” Fury said, simply. “Your contact will meet you on the airfield when you land. Divert immediately, that’s an order.”

Clint hated flying blind. He wanted more information, but at the same time he knew that Fury wouldn’t send them to the middle of nowhere without good reason. Not with Coulson’s life at stake.

He was pretty sure.

“Clint?” River said. “What’s going on?”

“Change in plan,” Clint said, changing course. “Keep him with us. We’ll be on the ground in forty.”

*****

River couldn’t see much crouched on the deck beside Coulson, but she could read the tension in the lines of Clint’s back and shoulders as they began a vertical descent. Wherever they were landing, the maneuver was taking up most of his concentration. Clint was a good pilot; his aim with a jet was as good as his aim with a bow, so wherever they were putting down, it wasn’t easy to
She watched as a wall of trees rose up in front of the windshield, then looked back down at Coulson.

“You’re doing fine, Phil. We’re almost on the ground.”

He nodded slightly in response. The pain had been coming in waves, getting a bit stronger every time. The last one had crested a few minutes ago, and it had been ugly. Coulson’s muscles had spasmed to the point that he nearly bowed all the way off the deck and his breathing had hitched long enough that it had made River’s lungs burn just watching it. She’d been hard pressed to keep her voice even as she’d talked her friend through it.

The craft jolted slightly as it came to a rest on the ground, and Clint had activated the ramp even before powering down the engines. As it lowered, River saw a man running towards the jet from across the small clearing, carrying a case. River automatically sized him up as he approached; heavyset, maybe mid-forties, salt-and-pepper hair, and (interestingly, in this literal neck of the woods) wearing a suit.

He was making decent time, though he was huffing and puffing a bit as he ran up the ramp. He didn’t even slow down as he hit the deck. He just flashed a lanyard badge at River and at Clint.

“Mike Koenig, Agent of SHIELD. Give me some room, please,” he said.

Agent Koenig knelt down beside Coulson and opened the case, pulling out a syringe.

“What is that?” River asked. “What are you doing?”

“Relax,” Agent Koenig said. “It’s the antidote. Fury called and had me pull it from the medical stash.”

In one efficient motion, Koenig pushed up Coulson’s shirt sleeve and emptied the syringe’s contents into Coulson’s forearm.

As nasty as BCP-600’s effects were, its antidote worked with gratifying speed. River could actually see the pain and tension bleed out of Coulson’s body and his breathing began to level out. After a few seconds he even reached up and weakly pawed the oxygen mask off of his face.

“Where the fuck are we?” he asked.

Clint let out a brief, breathless laugh and reached down to squeeze Coulson’s shoulder.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” he said.

Agent Koenig rocked back on his heels with a look of satisfaction.

“You’re on the airfield of the Triskelion Remote Emergency Northern Zone Auxiliary Location Offensive Response Encampment,” he said. “Or, as I like to call it, the Tree House. Let’s get you all inside. Director Fury and a Dr. Levine have already video-conferenced in from SHIELD Headquarters. They’ll be anxious to know that you’re all right.”

*****

“Your vitals are within acceptably healthy parameters,” Dr. Levine said.

Her tone seemed to indicate to Coulson, though, that he still had plenty of room for improvement.
as far as she was concerned. He actually had a decent view of the screen from his medical bed and could see Levine, on her half of it, frowning with faint disapproval at the readings that were being fed to her.

On the other half of the split screen, Fury was simply observing.

“Your blood scan shows that the toxin has been safely neutralized,” she added. “It should be out of your system entirely in twenty-four hours. How do you feel?”

“Tired,” Coulson admitted.

He sounded it, too, even to his own ears. An hour-plus of feeling like he was being eaten by acid from the inside out had been a serious drain.

“I don’t doubt it,” Levine said. She turned her full attention back to the screen, looking at Clint and River who were standing with Agent Koenig. “The main thing he needs right now is to rest. Minimal activity. I’d prefer that he not travel until the twenty-four hour window has passed, just to be on the safe side.

“I’m not allowed to ask where exactly you are.” At this, Levine’s eyes flicked to the side in such a way that indicated to Coulson that she had just glanced at Fury. “But Agent Koenig and Director Fury both assure me that the facility is well-equipped to handle anything you might need, and that Agent Koenig has had extensive field medic training. I’m going to remain on call here until you get back, just in case.”

“Thank you, Dr. Levine,” River said.

“Yeah. We’ll make sure he keeps his ass in bed,” Clint said.

Coulson refrained from rolling his eyes only because he didn’t think he had the energy.

“Thank you, Levine,” Fury added. “You’re excused from the remainder of the debriefing.”

It was as diplomatic a dismissal as Fury ever issued, which said something about how much the Director liked Dr. Levine. She nodded and touched a control on her keyboard, exiting the conference. Fury’s feed expanded to take up the entire screen.

“Agent Koenig, thank you for the fast action,” Fury said. Koenig nodded. “Agent Coulson, Agent Barton, Agent Song, I know you three have had a hell of a day, so I’ll keep this brief. The number of people who are aware of the existence of the Tree House and its exact location is extremely and deliberately limited. I fudged my own protocols by sending you there because frankly, Coulson, I like having you alive. I know I can count on you all to keep this information in the strictest confidence. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” River replied for the three of them.

“Thank you, sir,” Coulson added. “I’m grateful.”

Fury could have just rolled the dice, let them go the two hours to Vancouver, and then let the chips fall as they may. The man wasn’t exactly sentimental. He hadn’t needed to send them here, hadn’t needed to share classified secrets.

“Just do me a favor and try to keep your ass out of mortal danger for the next few days, Phil.” Fury actually cracked a smile. “Barton, notify me when you’re ready to depart tomorrow. In the meantime, I leave you three in Agent Koenig’s capable hands.”
The first order of business was food. Even Coulson was hungry after the day’s ordeal, which River took as a very encouraging sign.

“What would everyone like? The pantry is fully stocked,” Agent Koenig said. The man reminded River for all the world of a natural hostess whose house had been under quarantine for a month, eager to entertain company. “There’s a frozen meatloaf that’s actually really good. Or there’s salmon. Or there’s the breakfast-for-dinner option if people just want some comfort food.”

River went along with Agent Koenig to help with dinner while Clint stayed in Medical to keep an eye on Coulson. She looked around curiously as Koenig led her through the Tree House.

“Fury established this base to function as a command center in the event that SHIELD HQ and/or the Triskelion were ever compromised. Hence the intense secrecy,” he told her as they walked through a common area that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a five-star hotel. “Don’t let the encampment part of the name fool you. Everything here is state-of-the-art. All of SHIELD could be run from here if the need arose. Which we hope it never will, but Fury is nothing if not overly prepared.”

“I’m fairly certain that truer words about the man have never been spoken,” River replied.

It was interesting to note that the Tree House seemed to have been designed for comfort as much as functionality. The common area was equipped with overstuffed furniture, rugs, and digital pictures that showed a variety of picturesque landscapes. (No windows—the Tree House was, ironically, underground.) There were shelves full of books and an entertainment center that took up one entire end of the room. There was even a fireplace. Remote bases, in River’s experience, weren’t usually so heavy on the creature comforts. She was pretty sure she saw Psych’s stamp on this place, and after a quick review of the evidence at hand, River thought she knew why.

“Are you up here all by yourself?” she asked as they moved on into the kitchen.

“Yeah,” Agent Koenig replied, looking over his shoulder with a grin. “Oh, it’s not bad, though. I keep busy, I’ve read almost all the way through the Michener collection, and my brother and I game online almost every day. It’s awesome to have some company, though. Fury must really think a lot of you three to let you in on this place.”

“The intelligence is really that restricted?”

“I’m pretty sure the number of people who know is in the single digits.” Agent Koenig started rummaging in a cabinet, pulling out canisters and boxes. “So. Pancakes?”

River shook her head with a small smile. Eager hostess, indeed. “Sure. I’ll fry the bacon.”

It was far from the first time that Strike Team Delta had eaten a meal together in a medical facility while one member was laid up. Agent Koenig seemed to find it moderately weird, but he gamely joined them and actually did most of the talking. It took a specially calibrated type of personality to be able to handle long, solitary assignments in remote locations. River had no doubt that Agent Koenig had passed psychological muster for Fury to trust him to man this place, but he didn’t seem to mind having his solitude interrupted.

Coulson started nodding off halfway through his pancakes. Clint leaned over and carefully removed his plate before he got syrup on the sheets. With Agent Koenig’s help, River and Clint moved a pair of rollaway cots and bedding into the medical bay so they could settle in for the
night.

“The Tree House has guest quarters. You’re welcome to them,” Koenig did say as they pushed the folded cots up the corridor. “You can spread out a little, have your own space. You don’t need to all crowd in. The monitors will let us know if Agent Coulson needs anything during the night.”

“Thanks, but this is good for us,” Clint replied. “I guess we’re just a little more...”

“Pack-oriented,” River said around a stack of pillows.

“Yeah, what she said,” Clint said.

Agent Koenig just shook his head, but he helped them get their beds set up and told them to help themselves to anything from the common room. River found a legal pad and a pen. She settled down comfortably on her cot and started to make some lists of things to take care of when they got back to base tomorrow. It wasn’t that she was worried about forgetting about something; list making was simply a soothing activity.

Clint had picked out a book from the common room’s extensive shelves. He stretched out on his own cot, perpendicular to the foot of River’s. He only read for a short time before he started yawning. River saw him rub a tired hand across his eyes.

Days like this were rough on Clint.

“Why don’t you go quiet for tonight?” River said.

Clint glanced over at her. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll get up if Phil needs anything.” Besides, there were probably as safe as it was possible to get here in the Tree House. Fury’s top secret hobbit hole. “It’s been almost a week. You need the break.”

Clint nodded, sitting up so that he could reach into the pack beside his cot and pull out a small case. He carefully extracted his hearing aids and packed them away. River knew that the devices were as comfortable as it was possible to make them. SHIELD R&D had been tweaking the design ever since Clint had lost the majority of his hearing, three years before she’d met him. He still needed to take regular breaks from them or run the risk of some pain and irritation.

Plus, she knew that under the right circumstances, Clint found the silence calming. River watched as he stretched back out again with a contented sigh. Her internal clock automatically started counting.

172 seconds later, he was asleep.

River remained awake in the small pool of light cast by her reading lamp late into the night.

She made a list of debriefing tasks they’d need to take care of once they got back to headquarters, and a list of questions to run by Dr. Levine about potential problems with Coulson’s recovery. She made a short list of groceries she wanted to pick up to replenish the small kitchenette in her quarters on base and another list of books to request from the base’s library.

It was peaceful, relaxing to be sitting up alone like this. It was dark and quiet, and her two favorite people were close by, safely and soundly asleep. River wandered out to the kitchen at about 0100 hours and made herself a cup of tea which she took back to Medical. With practical matters tidied away in orderly columns of blue ink, River turned her pen to completely irrelevant things. She
listed the monarchs of Britain in reverse order and all of Shakespeare’s plays. She wrote out the Greek alphabet, the fifty states of the US in alphabetical order, and all sixty-two colony planets of the Zhenya Emporium.

River turned to a new page and started making notes for the report on this mission. Someone was going to have to write it up, even though half of it would probably be immediately redacted. Fury had clearly gone to great lengths to keep this base under wraps. He wouldn’t want it turning up in a run-of-the-mill report.

*We were directed to coordinates that took us to the Tree House (Triskelion Remote Emergency. . .*

River sat straight up on her cot. The last few hours of serenity immediately evaporated as words and letters swirled in her mind’s eye.

She slowly turned to a clean page and began writing.

*Triskelion Remote Emergency Northern Zone Auxiliary Location Offensive Response Encampment*

River’s pen hovered over the page for a long moment before she continued on the line below.

*T.R.E.N.Z.A.L.O.R.E.*

“Holy shit.”

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!