We All Fall Down
by NiennaNir

Summary

The difference between victory and defeat often lies in the smallest choices made on the field of battle. When one split second decision has unexpected consequences, the Avengers find themselves taking a hard look at their own individual choices.

Notes

Rated for subjects of a mature nature that are not particularly sexy.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“I’m telling you, it’s the most weak-ass ending to a book I’ve ever read in my life!” Clint insisted vehemently. Phil Coulson looked up from his Stark pad, the faintest smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as Clint Barton shuffled across the kitchen, his long fingers scratching at his scalp.

“I can’t believe you,” Natasha said with a sigh, a pace behind him and a look of disdain marring her features. Most mornings in the main kitchen in Avenger’s Tower bore a striking resemblance to Grand Central Terminal at five o’clock on a Tuesday, with members of the team, and what Stark had termed ‘their entourage’ moving in and out of the space like commuters late for their train. This morning Bucky Barnes was seated on the counter, trying not to be obvious as he studiously watched Pepper feed her bagel into the unnecessarily complicated toaster while Steve eyed them both in amusement, shoveling down Cheerios out of a bowl that more closely resembled a serving dish. Phil’s attention swept back to Clint who shambled past him, his arm barely brushing Phil’s shoulder.

“Morning, Coulson,” Clint half mumbled, one eye still closed, the other seeming focused with singular determination on the k cup machine on the kitchen counter.

“Good morning,” Phil replied, his gaze lingering over the hem of Clint’s T-shirt where the barest strip of skin peeped out over the waistband of his battered cotton pants. Without meaning to, Phil’s eye traced the line of Clint’s hip to the floor where bare toes half disappeared beneath the worn hems that drug the floor.

Clint Barton was absolutely adorable in the mornings.

Clint let out a jaw cracking yawn, leaning over the counter as his face screwed up and he rubbed at sleep-bleary eyes. He hunched just a bit, eyeing the coffee machine menacingly.

“Make me coffee!” he ordered. Phil let out the faintest snort of a laugh as Steve shook his head, fighting back a chuckle.

“You realize it’s not that automated?” Phil pointed out as Clint made a face.
“A guy can dream, Coulson,” Clint protested, fumbling in the cupboard for a mug.

“Don’t bring it up to Stark,” Steve pleaded with a shudder. Bucky winced in obvious agreement, giving the toaster a sidelong look of suspicion as it dinged.

“I mean really, what did you tell me to read that thing for?” Clint demanded, stuffing a mug in the k-cup machine and turning on Natasha with a frown.

“You’re the one that stayed up all night reading,” Natasha pointed out with a withering expression.

“This is over a book?” Pepper asked curiously, smearing cream cheese over her bagel.

“Three books!” Clint snapped, before looking apologetic, ruffling his sleep rumpled hair. “I read three books for the worst ending in history.”

“It was not that bad,” Natasha protested as Steve moved Clint’s mug aside, making himself a cup of coffee while they argued.

“You’re enjoying this aren’t you?” Pepper accused softly, a hint of amusement in her tone as she slid onto the bar stool beside Phil. He nodded, his attention fixed on the pair of spies, his chin propped on his hand.

“I mean, seriously!” Clint complained, waving his arms. “She spends three whole books saying ‘I’m never having kids!’ And then what has she got?”

“Sudden unexpected epilogue babies?” Natasha suggested drily.

“Yes! That!” Clint nodded in wide eyed disbelief. “And is it just me or did you get the feeling Peeta pressured her into it?!”

“I got that impression too,” Phil agreed. Clint turned to him leaning over the counter as Natasha let out a huff, stepping around him and taking over the k-cup machine from Steve who was still busily eating his Cheerios.
“I mean that’s not even consistent with Peeta’s character!” Clint declared hotly.

“Oh, you’ll get no argument from me,” Phil confirmed. “I honestly found the entire ending jarring.”

“What are they talking about?” Bucky asked, shuffling down the counter to lean into Steve’s shoulder.

“Smile and nod, pal,” Steve advised, stirring his cereal absently.

“And what is with that anyway?” Clint demanded angrily. “Why does anyone in a post-apocalyptic society on the verge of collapse even think about having babies? Why would you do that?”

“Because apparently a woman can’t achieve fulfillment without procreating,” Pepper observed with a cynical frown, tearing off a piece of her bagel. Natasha nodded.

“It’s a subtle societal reminder that the value of females is contingent on their ability of perpetuate the species,” She pointed out as Pepper huffed in agreement.

“Don’t get into that,” Steve warned softly.

“Even I know better than that,” Bucky whispered back. Clint stared at Natasha for a moment, his gaze lingering on the mug she held to her lips.

“Aww, coffee, no,” he whined finally, making grabby hands at her stolen mug.

“You set yourself up for that,” Steve insisted, holding his own mug out to Clint and retrieving another from the cabinet.

“You’re my favorite and I love you,” Clint announced with complete conviction, leaning into Steve’s side as he took a gulp of coffee. Steve let out a laugh, draping an arm around Clint’s
shoulder as he mashed the button on the k-cup machine.

“Steve’s everyone’s favorite,” Bucky observed, sliding off the counter and cuffing Steve playfully in the back of the head. Phil hid his smile as Clint reached out, grasping Bucky’s metal wrist and giving him a firm tug so that he crashed into Steve’s back with an umph of surprise.

As they’d settled into Avenger’s tower Clint had continuously put himself in everyone’s space and over everyone’s shoulder, even the Hulk. In a way he had been glue for the team’s emotional issues, a mishmash of broken people dealing with loss and alienation from the rest of the world probably needed a hug more than anyone alive. Clint had constantly offered that in the most unobtrusive manner possible, disguising it as playful teasing. Phil bit his lip to keep from laughing as Steve twisted around, trying to untangle himself from the pair without spilling his breakfast.

“What is this?” Tony asked, appearing in the doorway “Are we using debauchery as a team building exercise now?”

“Tony!” Steve protested as Bucky shied away, his face turning slightly pink as Clint burst into laughter.

“I’m just saying, if it’s a group thing, why wasn’t I invited?” Tony demanded with his most put upon expression.

“Could you be any more offensive?” Steve gave an exasperated sigh, glaring at him.

“He really could,” Pepper answered as Phil nodded in agreement.

“Hey, it’d be better than some of that stuff you come up with, Capcicle,” Tony shrugged, earning a withering glower from the Captain.

“I call dibs on Steve,” Clint declared, slapping him on the back as Steve choked on the remains of his cereal. Natasha gave him a scolding look as Phil and Pepper both struggled not to laugh.

“What? I’m straight, not narrow!”

“I’ll arm wrestle you for him,” Bucky offered, flexing his metal fingers with a grin. Steve let out a groan, turning to rinse his bowl out in the sink.
“Agent’ll kick both your asses, for Spangles,” Tony said with a snort, heading for the k-cup machine as Phil’s ears turned bright red. “I am really offended that none of you are fighting over me.”

“It’s not like you play hard to get,” Pepper remarked, an evil smirk curling her lips.

“Especially you,” Tony added, ignoring her as he turned to Clint. “I thought we were BFF’s, honey bunch.”

“Eww, no,” Clint protested, making a face. “That’d be like shagging my brother.”

“And suddenly breakfast turns into really bad porn,” Phil observed, keeping his voice low.

“I’ve seen really bad porn,” Pepper countered nonchalantly, taking a sip of her coffee. “This is more entertaining.”

“But you’ll salute the poster boy?” Tony asked incredulously, pointing at Steve with his most skeptical expression.

“It’s a little like defacing a national monument isn’t it?” Clint agreed grudgingly as Bucky struggled to stifle his laughter. “I settled on him because he seemed the least emotionally scarring.” Steve, to his credit, said nothing, merely rubbing at his temples as if the pressure of his fingers could push the unwanted images from his mind.

“I can not believe I actually live with all of you,” Natasha said. “Steve, do something about your team.”

“I’m going to make omelets, anyone want one?” he asked, shrugging in resignation. A still silence settled over the kitchen.

“What did I miss?” Tony asked knowingly.
“I’m hungry!” Steve protested in the face of Natasha’s dark glare.

“I gave up the directorship for this,” Phil stated in mild disbelief.

“We all make mistakes,” Pepper observed, patting his arm soothingly.

“JARVIS, would you mind telling everyone that there’s breakfast if they want it?” Steve requested, fishing three cartons of eggs out of the fridge.

“Doctor Banner thanks you,” Jarvis said a moment later. “and reports that he will be down shortly. Master Thor was…. unresponsive.”

“Is he all right?” Steve asked his brow furrowing in concern.

“Jane’s in town,” Natasha interrupted before JARVIS could answer.

“So that’s both a yes and a no,” Steve nodded with a flicker of amusement.

“Did not need that mental picture,” Tony stated, making a face as he shuffled to the k-cup machine, setting up a line of pods so that he could refill faster.

“What about Sam?” Steve asked, looking up at the ceiling curiously.

“Sam’s here?” Phil questioned. Pepper only shrugged.

“Sergeant Wilson has asked me to request that you engage in an display of contortionism that I am fairly confident would be impossible even for you, Captain.” JARVIS said.

There was exactly three seconds of complete silence in the kitchen before Tony and Clint busted up laughing.
“I…” Bucky’s forehead creased in a frown as he blinked slowly.

“It’ll come to you,” Steve insisted, giving Bucky’s arm a reassuring squeeze as he upended a bag of frozen peppers and onions into the frying pan. Clint leaned over Steve’s other shoulder, nearly empty mug clutched in one hand. Phil watched from under his lashes as Clint distracted Steve, then stole cheese slices from the package Steve had set out on the counter.

“Have those two done anything about… them?” Pepper murmured around her mug, her head tilting toward the fridge where Bucky was hovering uncertainly while Natasha picked through the yogurt flavors, no doubt looking for the peach. Phil gave his head a tiny shake, glancing in their direction. Bucky and Tasha has been circling each other in a slowly decaying orbit for months now, the vast majority of their communication involving furtive, uncomfortable glances when the other one happened to not be looking. It would have been charming if it weren’t quite so creepy.

“I think Bruce has a paper under review,” Phil muttered back. “On the mating practices of ex-brainwashed super spies.” Pepper choked into her coffee but no one noticed over the sound of the alarm.

“Before I’m caffeinated?!?” Tony demanded angrily, throwing back his third cup and sticking the mug back into the k-cup machine.

“You can mainline Gevalia later,” Clint snorted, taking off at a run after Steve and Natasha who were already half way across the rec room and heading for the stairs.

“I’ll clean up,” Bucky offered with a shrug, stirring the veggies in the pan as he turned down the heat. Phil gave him a nod of thanks, grasping hold of Tony and physically dragging him after the others.

“See you when I get back from the coast!” Pepper called after them.

“There should be rules about superheroing before dawn,” Tony protested as Phil hustled him up the stairs toward the living room that served as their briefing area. Tony stopped short on the landing, Phil nearly crashing into him as Thor tumbled down the last few stairs above them, dashing past wearing only boxer briefs adorned with My Little Ponies.

“Dude, put on some clothes!” Sam grumbled, shambling after him and muttering what sounded like ‘white boys’ under his breath.
“Earth’s mightiest heroes,” Tony declared, turning to look at Phil with incredulity. Phil only sighed, shoving him hard in the middle of the back.

“I hate to do this to you on short notice,” Maria Hill said with a pinched frown as they skidded into the living room.

“That’s what we’re here for,” Steve answered with a shrug. “What have you got?”

“We’ve picked up some intel on another Hydra base,” Maria stated, her brow furrowing.

“That’s a reason to call before breakfast?” Tony demanded irritably.

“This one’s mobile,” she answered drily.

“Good reason,” Natasha observed, Bruce shrugged in grudging agreement.

“Who’s neighborhood are they running though?” Clint asked curiously.

“We’re tracking them through the Dakota Badlands at the moment,” Hill replied as a holodisplay flickered to life in front of them, showing the base’s position, moving down what looked to be an empty stretch of interstate. “I’m not sure how long we can keep eyes on them, if they detect us they’re sure to jam us.”

“I’m on it,” Tony announced, clapping Steve roughly on the shoulder and hurrying toward the launch balcony. “I’ll keep you kids posted.”

“Do not engage until we get there!” Steve called after him before turning to the others.

“If they’re mobile we should call a code green,” Clint stated, glancing at Bruce before turning to Steve. Steve let out a sigh, nodding.
“I know we said emergencies only,” He said to Sam, looking apologetic. “But if you don’t mind, we could really use another aerial view.”

“Naw, man it’s good,” Sam waved him off. “Been itching to try out the new tech anyway.”

“We’re heading out,” Steve announced turning back to Hill with a decisive nod. “Phil, you want to ride herd from the jet?”

“I’ll relay our status,” Phil agreed, turning back toward Hill as the others headed to the express elevator and the jet bay. “We’ll most likely need cleanup.”

“I’ll have a team inbound for you,” she replied as Phil took a step back, the elevator doors sliding closed in front of him.

“Pants, man,” Sam insisted, eyeing Thor with a sidelong frown. “All I’m saying is pants.” Thor only shrugged, adjusting the waistband on his underwear as Steve and Clint hid their smiles.

“Can we just acknowledge,” Bruce asked hesitantly as the elevator sped down to the jet bay. “That if we’re calling a Code Green on this one, there may not actually be anything for the clean up team to clean up?”

“Was that not the point?” Thor asked in thinly veiled amusement.

“Not helping,” Phil scolded lightly as Clint and Thor tried not to laugh.

“You are really bitter for a National Icon,” Clint observed, teasingly as the doors opened and they crossed the bay to board the jet. Steve threw him a half irritated look that held no heat as Natasha slipped into the pilot’s seat.

“Sam, take the perimeter, keep everything moving back toward the fighting,” Steve instructed as they took off, “Hawkeye, do you want the ground floor or the penthouse view for this one?”

“I’ll be alright on the ground,” Clint stated, pulling his gear from his locker and nodding in Phil’s
direction. “Coulson’s my eyes for this one.”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Steve admitted, opening his own locker.

“Because you’ve never infiltrated a mobile base before?” Clint asked with a grin. Natasha shot a frown over her shoulder as Sam snickered but Steve only sighed.

“Yeah maybe,” he acknowledged, folding his arms over his chest.

“It’s just like concrete and barbed wire, cap,” Clint assured, shedding his sleep pants and half wriggling into his tack suit. “Except when they make a run for it, they take the bunker with them.” Phil turned toward the cockpit, leaning over Natasha’s shoulder as the team changed into their uniforms.

“JARVIS, lock in the telemetry from Iron Man,” She instructed. “And take the wheel while I change.”

“As you wish, Agent Romanov,” he answered politely.

“Love you too, Wesley,” She replied with a teasing smile, glancing up at Phil and then looking back at the rest of the team. “Don’t care for the view?”

“Nothing to see,” Phil replied, tamping down on the flush that threatened to color his cheeks. Natasha leaned back, peering around his shoulder. She grinned, looking back at Phil and this time he did blush.

“Out of curiosity, is there an actual reason you’ve never told him how you feel?” she asked with a scrutinizing look.

“Contrary to popular belief,” Phil answered, his expression even more blank than was usual. “I’m not actually attracted to Captain America.”

“Yeah, I got that,” She replied, sliding out of the pilot’s seat and sashaying toward her locker. Phil
blew out a breath, slumping into her empty seat and staring at the console.

Well, damn,” he sighed under his breath.

Chapter End Notes

This story has been in development since somewhere around the middle of writing 'When the Bough Breaks' and it's kind of been slow going, so don't look for updates every week like my usual schedule. I'm hoping it'll be worth the wait though. This story precedes 'When the Bough Breaks' so if you're just joining us, no pressure to read anything else in the series at this point.

Unless you really want to, it's fine, I promise. ;)

A chill autumn wind stirred the spare tufts of sunburnt grass, sweeping out across the endless plains to where the stonewash blue sky touched the horizon. A pronghorn buck gave chase to a doe, the pair of them playing up and down the sheer cut crags of the hillsides that hemmed in the single untraveled highway, and in the distance a lone bison grazed, his heavy feet plodding down the drying prairie scrub.

He tossed his head at the whine as a streak of red and gold sped through the sky mere inches above him, but he paid it no mind, returning his attention instead to the last of the green sedges.

“You buzzed a buffalo,” Steve said, too resigned to muster any real irritation in his tone.

“He didn’t seem to notice,” Tony observed with just a hint of disappointment.

“One of these days I want a look at your bucket list,” Bruce remarked thoughtfully. “Just for the sheer entertainment value.” He lowered the Nikon he was sighting though, glancing up from his view of the tourist overlook to spy Thor, hunkered down on an outcropping of rock about fifty yards away, shielded from view of the road.

“It would not be an unwelcome diversion now,” Thor stated drily, his boots kicking up dust on the rough-hewn hillside as he peered out over the unbroken horizon. “There is little here.”

“What did you find, Iron Man?” Steve asked with a sigh, crouching down near the top of the ridge he’d just claimed so that he was well hidden. He spared a glance down toward the tourist overlook where Bruce stood, leaning against the motorcycle to fiddle with his telephoto lens.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” Tony answered turning serious. “Everything’s flat as a pancake between here and the abandoned airstrip, they’re going to see us coming from miles away.” Steve’s eye swept over the jagged rocks that seemed to stretch endlessly to the east and south, then turned his gaze back toward the flat expanse to the West, letting out a sigh.

“Falcon, tell me you have something better” Steve insisted, pinching the bridge of his nose.
“Grass,” Sam replied, sweeping almost silently from the interstate to the North. “I got a crap ton of grass, Cap.”

“So we’ve got grass and a giant cow,” Natasha stated with distaste. “I think I’m getting hives.”

“Widow, you’re not actually allergic to the country,” Phil reminded diplomatically, checking all of their positions on the jet’s heads up display.

“Maybe not,” Natasha conceded. “But I still say that buffalo is suspicious. Why is he out here on his own?”

“May we go see The Mountain of Rushmore after this?” Thor asked, a touch of wheedling in his tone. Steve let his breath out in a slow huff, wincing as the others chattered. He squinted down at Bruce’s position once more but the scientist still appeared to be alone.

“Hawkeye, status?” Steve prompted suspiciously.

“I think we might be near where the Wounded Knee Massacre happened,” Clint offered up, his feet skidding slightly over gravel as he scurried up the barren hillside.

“What makes you think that?” Natasha asked incredulously.

“Because the map I picked up in the visitor’s center shows Wounded Knee about 60 miles south of here,” he replied, drawing back his bow.

“Fitting,” Steve gave a derisive snort.

“Because this time the guy with a bow is going to kick the shit out of the guys who’ve got no business being here?” Tony asked.

“Damn straight,” Clint agreed, narrowing his eyes as he sighted into the distance.
“Guys, try not to totally destroy a piece of the nation’s history,” Phil pleaded.

“You heard him,” Sam joked, swooping back around, so low to the ground that he stirred the prairie grass as he passed. “Nobody let Cap get blown up.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Steve replied.

“If it’s not too much trouble,” Phil interrupted with a long-suffering sigh. “The Hydra convoy’s about five miles out from your position.”

“I’ve got eyes on,” Clint stated. “Convoy of six trucks, heading this way.”

“Hawkeye, where are you?” Steve demanded with resigned, if scolding, amusement.

“Take it easy, Cap, I’m blending in,” Clint answered, the corner of his mouth curling up slightly.

“With the tourists, not the wildlife, Barton,” Phil reminded, shaking his head as JARVIS piloted the quinjet back around toward the overlook.

“Too late in the year for tourists,” Clint replied. “Even the wildlife photographers have called it a season. Probably because it’s freezing out here.”

“I’m getting great pictures of the buffalo, though,” Bruce said lightly.

“At least we won’t have to worry about the collateral damage,” Natasha remarked.

“Only good news today,” Steve agreed. “Are we clear Phil?”

“Perimeter’s secure,” Phil answered.
“Convoy’s approaching the junction,” Clint reported.

“I’ve got ‘em,” Sam confirmed.

“We should try to cut them off once they’re around the turn,” Tony stated. “It just gets flatter the farther you go.

“I don’t think they’re heading for the airstrip,” Clint replied. “Yeah, they’re not tuning off, they’re heading South East into the reservation.”

“That bodes ill,” Thor huffed.

“Just why are they here anyway if they’re not trying to transport out of the region?” Natasha asked, scowling.

“Stay on task for now,” Steve ordered. “Suggestions?”

“I could have one,” Hawkeye answered. “But you’re probably not going to like it.”

“I promise to love it,” Steve replied.

“I promise to handle the paperwork,” Phil deadpanned.

“Well, they’re rolling into nothing but switchbacks and rocky hillsides,” Clint observed. “There’s a spot less than a mile south of the junction, they’ll be hemmed in.”

“Great, that’s our point,” Steve nodded decisively. “Thor pick up Widow and be prepared to cut off their retreat.

“I have a plan for that.” Thor agreed confidently.
“Phil, maintain our perimeter and keep the civilians out.” Steve continued, skirting around to gain higher footing on the rocky hillside. “Sam, stay on them. Iron Man I need a pickup, Bruce, get Hawkeye and follow them.”

“Bruce, get going, I’m moving into position now,” Clint interrupted. Bruce watched the last truck pass the tourist overlook before stuffing the camera haphazardly into the motorcycle’s saddlebag.

“Hawkeye, are you anywhere near where you’re supposed to be?” Steve demanded as Tony swooped in, sweeping him into the air.

“He never is,” Natasha stated with a touch of amusement, swinging into Thor’s grasp.

“Relax,” Clint said with a grin. “I’m making sure there’s no traffic before I cross the street, dad.”

“Since when is a rabbit, six hydra goons, and a buffalo traffic?” Tony questioned derisively, pulling up enough altitude to hover unnoticed.

“Don’t forget the three prairie dogs,” Bruce added in amusement, easing the motorcycle out onto the road and following the convoy.

“I do not understand,” Thor lamented, dropping Natasha behind the rocks at the end of the switchback. “They look nothing like dogs.”

“I’ve got point on the end of the first curve,” Clint stated calmly, drawing his bow back. “Sam, where are they?”

“Coming up on you in the next 20 seconds,” Sam reported.

“Hawkeye take the shot when you have it,” Steve ordered.

The bow string dug into Clint’s glove as he slowed his breathing, the howl of the prairie winds
muted by the sound of his own heart beat, the soft brush of air on his lips. He stilled, every muscle taut as he breathed in.

The first truck rounded the bend ahead of him and he fired.

The explosion burst apart the pavement and blew the grill off the front of the truck, its mangled pieces kicking up into the tire wells. The cab slipped sideways, skidding down the highway several yards before it overturned, rolling the trailer and wedging it across the road. The second truck hit it at near full speed, crushing the front of the cab.

“Damn, what’d they make these trucks out of?” Sam demanded, swooping in to grab Clint, circling closer to the convoy before dropping him on a rocky outcropping to the south of the road.

“At least they’re keeping it interesting,” Steve shrugged, hitting the ground running as Iron Man dropped him on the shoulder of the turn. A Hydra strike team scrambled out of the back of the second truck and Steve took two of them out with his shield. The ground shook under the sound of shattered stone and he whirled, his gaze darting to where a massive boulder obscured the entire road.

“Escape has been prevented.” Thor announced.

“Oh, you are putting that back when this is over!” Phil protested as Hulk bounded over the top of the boulder to land on the last truck, pummeling it with both fists.

“This is not going as planned,” Natasha observed with a cocky lilt in her voice as the trailer barely dented under the Hulk’s assault. Another strike team emerged from the back, scrambling out of the way as Hulk made a grab for them.

“Keep them contained,” Steve ordered. “There’s not that many of them, we’ll eventually out-gun them.” He took out three more assailants in quick succession, ducking behind the twisted tire of one of the big rigs as Iron Man let off a strafing run of repulser fire.

The back of the fourth truck began to fold open from the top, the pneumatic hinges squealing under the pressure.
“You had to say it, man,” Sam snorted derisively.

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” Tony observed, cringing as he eyed the massive laser canon that seemed to be unfolding like some twisted evil transformer.

“What the hell is that thing?” Natasha demanded.

“Ya ever heard of ‘bad news’?” Clint asked. “That, my friends, is what it looks like.”

“Thor, Iron Man, try to put a dent in that thing,” Steve ordered. “Phil, how are we doing?”

“We’ve had better days,” Phil replied, making a face as the doors of the back of the fifth truck swung open, spilling out Hydra soldiers. “Widow, I have a few escapees from the first truck trying to swing around and gain ground on Hawkeye.”

“I’m on it,” she answered, scuttling up the nearest hillside.

“Seriously, what is this thing made out of?” Tony demanded angrily, firing off shot after shot that appeared to only singe the canon. “Do not kill the lab coats! They need to tell us what this is!” He ducked back, barely missing the blast of the canon as a bolt of lightning arced though the air, striking its base.

“It appears undamaged by my efforts,” Thor observed.

“No shit,” Tony snapped, zipping sideways out of the line of fire.

“Keep trying!” Steve ordered, continuing his relentless plow though the Hydra strike force. “Falcon, I could use a hand with these guys!”

“On my way to you, Cap!” he answered.
“What is with these idiots?” Natasha demanded, garroting one of their attackers and tipping him over the side of the ravine along the edge of the road. He let out a strangled yell as he tumbled down and she kicked out, sweeping the feet out from under another attacker. “They’re not exactly the best strategy fighters I’ve ever seen.”

“They’re a distraction,” Steve declared, looking around worriedly, pausing to slam his shield into the face of one of the soldiers. “They’re trying to keep us busy so we don’t notice… something.”

“I’m going to go with that,” Clint replied loosing an arrow that exploded as it impacted the side of the third truck that was folding open in a screech of metal gears, revealing a second canon.

“I really hate days like this,” Natasha sighed, tucking and rolling out of the way as the second canon let off a shot in her direction.

“Hulk, smash the,” Steve never finished the sentence. One of the laser bolts caught Thor square in the chest, sending him flying. “Thor!”

“He’s okay,” Phil assured quickly, his eyes wide at the Asgardian’s vitals. “Thor?”

“I am,” Thor let out a cough, half prying himself out of the rock face he’d crashed into. He wobbled a moment before landing on his backside in the dust. “largely undamaged.” He flopped back, sprawled out along the side of the road with a tired groan.

“I think Thor’s down,” Phil stated, his voice deathly calm.

“Iron Man do not let that thing hit you!” Steve warned.

“Yeah, got that bit,” Tony said drily. “We’re going about this wrong, the old fashioned way isn’t going to work. We need to flip it over so it can’t target.”

“Hulk!” Steve called. “Turn the trucks over!”

“Remind me to lodge a complaint with Fury about the intel on this op!” Sam snarled, nearly getting
caught in the crossfire of both canons as Hulk grabbed hold of the top of the first canon, letting out a growl as he struggled to pull it over.

“I’ve found the lab coats, they’re in the second truck,” Natasha announced.

“Get them secured!” Steve ordered, vaulting over one Hydra soldier and driving him into the ground before kicking another in the chest with both feet.

“I have S.H.I.E.L.D containment on standby,” Phil announced, quickly typing out a reply to the field commander who had just reported in.

“Cap, be careful!” Clint warned just as Hulk tipped the first canon. It let out a whine, going off one final time and blowing a hole in the rock face mere inches from where Steve stood. The concussive blast knocked him off his feet, sending him skidding along the shoulder and nearly toppling him into the ravine.

“Cap!” Sam shouted. Steve let out a muffled groan as he pulled one foot under him, clambering half upright on one knee as the second canon swung into position, taking aim for him.

“Oh no,” Steve whispered, blinking dazedly into the barrel of the canon.

“Hulk! Smash!!” Tony shouted. “Hulk!”

“Head down, Cap,” Hawkeye warned, his voice calm as he drew back his bow.

“What?” Steve asked blearily, his eyes swinging up to the ledge Clint occupied just beside the third truck.

“Hawkeye, don’t!” Phil protested. “You’re too close!”

“Clint!” Natasha shouted.
The explosive arrow hit the pavement almost directly beneath the third truck, the force of the blast rolling the entire rig onto its side with a screech of metal. The canon barrel swung around, the shot intended for Steve instead hitting the hillside beneath Clint’s feet. The rock gave way, sliding into the ravine and Hawkeye let out a yelp as he slid down the embankment.

“Clint!!” Steve shouted, scrambling to his feet and over the rubble and charred pieces of the truck. “Clint? Oh god, no. Clint?” He skittered down the side of the ravine, his boots sliding in the gravel as he made his way down toward the mass of rocky debris shrouded in a cloud of dust.

“Sam cover him!” Tony barked out, darting back around to target the remaining ground troops that Hulk was pursuing with bitter ferocity.

“JARVIS!” Phil called out, panicked.

“I have his life signs,” The AI answered, “eight meters to your ten o’clock position, Captain.” Steve scrambled forward, grasping hold of one of the small boulders and heaving it aside.

“Oh Clint, no,” he whispered, dropping to his knees.

“I am not detecting any damage to his neck or spine, Captain,” JARVIS reported. “There is however significant damage to his skull.”

“Yes, I can see that Jarvis!” Steve choked out, ripping Clint’s shirt and using it to wipe away the blood on the archer’s face. “Clint, stay with me, open your eyes, I need you to open your eyes.”

“I’ll round up the stranglers,” Tony ordered, his tone subdued. “Widow, get the big guy and then check on Thor.”

“On it,” Natasha answered, her voice tense.

“Phil we need evac!” Steve declared into the coms.

“JARVIS, land the jet,” Phil ordered, his face white as a sheet.
“Agent Coulson, that maneuver is not advised in this,”

“Land the goddamned jet!” Phil snapped, scrambling free of his safety harness as the jet made a rickey landing on the shoulder, practically wedged between the overturned truck and the ravine. He half stumbled down the ramp, his polished black Armani shoes sliding in the gravel as Steve scrambled up the edge of the ravine, Clint’s limp form clutched in his arms.

“Oh god,” Phil whispered, turning white. “JARVIS!”

“He’s still breathing,” Steve reported shakily, striding up the ramp and gently sliding Clint onto the bio-bed.

“JARVIS, stabilize him and mobilize the med team back at the tower,” Tony ordered. “Take off as soon as everyone else is on board. Thor, you okay buddy?”

“No harm but to my pride,” he answered, chagrinned, leaning on Natasha as he shuffled up the ramp, Bruce trailing blearily in their wake.

“He looks okay,” Widow confirmed, dumping him into one of the seats and grabbing a blanket for Bruce.

“Back up, Back up!” Sam snapped, landing on the ramp and striding up to Clint, shuffling Phil out of the way as Steve backpedaled before turning and sliding into the pilot’s seat.

“I’ll coordinate with the SHIELD boys,” Tony advised, letting off a few repulser blasts that drove the last remaining Hydra strike force toward the SHIELD agents at the perimeter. “See you at home.” Steve didn’t answer, only giving a tight nod before his image winked out on the HUD and the jet took off again.

“Jay, how’s Barton?” Tony asked cautiously, carefully searching the remains of the convoy for any additional threat, though it seemed unlikely, from the moment the second canon had gone offline Hydra had made a break for it.
“He has sustained several fractures to the Frontal, Parietal, and Temporal bones along his left side,” JARVIS reported, a scan flickering to life on the HUD highlighting the damaged areas. “There appears to be a hematoma forming along the Temporal Lobe near the site of most obvious impact. Sgt. Wilson has activated the hyperbaric settings.”

“You and Sam coordinate with medical,” Tony instructed. “And call Helen personally, make sure she knows what’s going on.”

“Right away, sir,” JARVIS answered.

“Put me through to whoever’s running the SHIELD show, I want to turn this over,” he added, circling back toward where the fleet of black SUV’s was winding up the road.

Chapter End Notes

If you've never been to South Dakota, Pinnacles Overlook, the spot where Bruce parks the motor cycle, is on Hwy 240 about 8 miles South of Wall, SD and North of the Pine Ridge Reservation in Badlands National Park. The switchback is a half mile south east from there. I haven't been there in about ten years but to see it on Google Maps, it hasn't changed a lot.
The Pokey Little Puppy

“I’m going to be sick,” Bucky announced, turning his back to the glass wall that separated the waiting room from the surgical bay where a handful of doctors and nurses swarmed around Barton in the Tower’s medical wing. Bucky listed to the side a fraction so that his arm was brushing Steve’s who was staring fixedly at Clint’s still form on the treatment bed.

“You are really squeamish for an assassin,” Tony observed, his sock-clad feet swinging back and forth idly as he sat on the sofa table, still wearing the lounge pants and t-shirt he’d shuffled out of bed in that morning. Natasha rolled her eyes at him from where she was sprawled, leaning over the back of the couch, her chin propped on the heel of one hand.

“It’s the machines,” Bucky said, making a face. Tony stared back at him blankly a moment as Thor reached out to give Bucky’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze before shifting the ice pack on his head and slumping back in the chair he’d occupied.

“Whatever you’re thinking, Tony, don’t say it,” Bruce pleaded serenely, his legs folded in front of him as he sat in the middle of the floor facing half away from them and toward the windows that looked out over New York. Tony opened his mouth to offer a retort and Bruce cracked one eye, barely more than a sliver, to glare at him. Tony’s mouth clicked shut as he looked away.

“Does that actually help?” Natasha asked curiously, eying Thor’s ice pack with obvious skepticism.

“No,” he admitted sheepishly. “But I do not wish to argue with the nurses and I find it soothing.”

“No one wants to argue with the nurses, man,” Sam advised, slumping into the glass wall beside Steve.

“I think they’ve finished the reconstruction,” Phil observed softly, his arms folded over his chest as he stared distractedly into the surgical bay where the medical team was painstakingly disengaging the equipment.

“He was stable when we got him here,” Sam reminded, not for the first time since the team had returned to the tower. Steve let his forehead fall against the glass with a soft thump.
“He should have let me get shot,” He lamented miserably, folding in on himself.

“Man, I like you, but you’re an idiot,” Sam observed, poking Steve in the side. Bucky let out a faint snort of agreement.

“Samuel is correct,” Thor chided softly, moving his ice pack to the other side of his head. “Such a wound would have surely killed you, Stephen.”

“Better me than him,” Steve replied bitterly.

“Stark, why didn’t your old man fix his stupid?” Bucky asked, turning slightly green as he let his head slump against Steve’s shoulder.

“My old man liked stupid,” Tony replied with a shrug as Thor handed the ice pack to Bucky who held it to his forehead, his breathing unsteady.

“He was stable when we got him here,” Sam repeated with a touch of irritation. “I was pararescue, I’ve seen soldiers with similar injuries come out of it fine and that was with traditional surgery.”

“How many similar injuries weren’t fine?” Bucky asked worriedly, peering at Sam from under the ice pack. Sam’s only reply was a withering look.

“There’s no point in obsession and blame,” Phil said resignedly. “It won’t fix anything. The only thing we can do is wait.” Steve stiffened, straightening so fast the Bucky’s head slid off his shoulder and the others were on their feet moments later as a petite brunette broke off from the group of physicians, crossing the med bay toward them.

“What’s the verdict, doctor?” Bruce asked hesitantly, clambering to his feet last. Helen Cho pressed her lips together in a thin line for only a moment, her eyes darting to Phil who had slipped around Sam to stand between Tony and Steve and then to both men on either side of him.

“We’ve repaired the fractures,” she said finally. “And we’ve knitted the skin back in place, apart from the normal sensitivity after the procedure he should wake feeling reasonably normal.
“So he will wake,” Phil prompted, latching onto the idea like a dog with a bone.

“We were as minimally invasive in treating the hematoma as we could be,” She replied. “And according to our data he’s responsive, we’ve kept him unconscious but he should be coming around soon.”

“I’m sensing a but here Helen,” Tony stated sourly. “You know I don’t like buts.”

“This is where Clint would make a crass joke,” Bucky observed a tad mournfully.

“You’re really not helping, Buck,” Steve sighed, choosing to ignore the looks of fond amusement on both Tony and Natasha’s faces.

“His CT scans indicate normal brain activity,” Helen stated. “From what we can tell there’s no sign of actual brain damage, but that doesn’t preclude the injury affecting things like balance or vision. Depending on the severity of his brain injury he could be in for a long recovery.”

“But he’s going to recover,” Natasha stated.

“He’s going to live,” Helen replied. “We’ll need some time to get him on his feet before we’re certain he can be out in the field again.” No one said anything for a long moment.

“Doesn’t matter,” Tony insisted finally. “We’ll get him the best physio money can buy.”

“When can we see him?” Phil asked.

“He should be waking up soon,” Helen answered. “Given his history it would be best if one of you were with him when he does, but don’t crowd him.”

“You and you,” Tony announced decisively, pointing at Phil and Natasha. Steve opened his mouth to protest and Tony turned on him as Natasha and Phil moved toward the door. “Not you, you look like you just got back from a funeral.” Steve mouthed at him wordlessly for a moment before turning to look at Bucky.
“You kind of do,” Bucky admitted.

“Hang back and try not to look like your dog died,” Tony stated, patting him on the chest before following after Natasha and Phil. “The rest of you, stay out here for now.” Steve’s brow creased in an outraged expression.

“Don’t,” Sam protested firmly.

“Even I find your morose canine expression distressing,” Thor admitted.

“Dude, it’s a ‘sad puppy face’.” Sam corrected.

“I hate all of you,” Steve glowered, shouldering past them as Bucky tried not to laugh.

“He’s nearly awake,” the nurse announced as Phil slid into the chair beside the treatment bed, his fingertips resting on the back of Clint’s hand where it lay unmoving at his side. The nurse stepped around Tony who had taken up the spot near the foot of the bed before crossing the room to slip past Steve and Bruce who were hanging back near the door. The others crowded the window, looking on with a sense of tension.

“Clint?” Natasha prompted softly, leaning into the side of the bed so that she was in his line of sight but not hovering over him. “It’s time to wake up.”

“Report, Barton,” Phil said, a smile curling his lips as Clint’s eyelids fluttered. “You missed your checkin, do you have any concept of the paperwork involved?” Natasha let out a soft laugh, shifting her hand so that Clint’s was covering hers and he let out a mumbled sigh, his fingers flexing to barely grip her hand.

“Clint?” Phil murmured. Clint’s eyes blinked open to bare slits, his lips curling in the faintest smile as he slowly focused on Coulson’s face.

“Hi, Phil,” he finally rasped out, his glassy eyes heavy lidded as he smiled blearily. Tony let out a snort of a laugh, a wide, pleased grin spreading across his face as Steve let out a sigh of relief.
“Hi, yourself,” Phil answered, allowing his shoulders to sag just the slightest bit. “How are you feeling?”

“My head hurts,” Clint admitted, his brow creasing in a frown. “Kind of a lot.”

“You took a pretty bad spill,” Phil replied as Natasha ran her fingers idly through Clint’s hair. “You cracked that thick head of yours, but the doctors say you’re going to be okay.”

“Sorry,” Clint winced, looking properly apologetic. “Did I fall off the horse again?” Phil swallowed down his laugh, shaking his head. He opened his mouth to answer as Natasha’s fingers curled around his wrist, silencing him with the pressure of her fingers.

“Clint?” She met his gaze with a questioning tone and Phil frowned as Bruce cautiously crept from the doorway, sidestepping Tony to take his position at the foot of the bed.

“Hi, Tasha,” Clint smiled up at her with that same hazy look, his eyes slowly sweeping down to Bruce. “What’s up Doc?” he let out the faintest giggle, struggling to stifle it but Bruce didn’t smile in return.

“Clint, I want you to do something for me,” Natasha said, her tone gentling. “Who’s that?” Her hand flicked in Steve’s direction and the Captain tilted his head, a frown marring his face.

“Steve,” Clint replied, grinning in reply. Steve balked, his eyes growing wide in surprise. Clint almost never called him by his first name.

“Who’s that?” she asked, pointing at Tony. Clint swung his head back around, letting it lull against the pillows.

“Iron Man,” he announced confidently. Tony froze in shock and he reached out, his fingers curling into Bruce’s arm as if to hold him back or use him for an anchor.

“Can you tell me Doctor Banner’s first name?” Natasha asked gently. Clint opened his mouth to answer but then slowly closed it with a frown.
“No,” he admitted, suddenly looking concerned.

“What about me,” she questioned, running her fingers soothingly through his hair again. “Do you remember my full name?” Clint stared up at her for a long moment before slowly shaking his head. Bruce turned instantly on his heel, shaking off Tony’s grip and ducking down the side hall, his muffled voice calling for the doctor.

“Clint what’s the last thing you do remember?” Natasha probed.

“Barney told me to meet him,” Clint replied hesitantly. “He’s gonna be mad I didn’t show.”

“Oh god,” Tony choked out.

“Everyone stay calm,” Steve ordered, his tone perfectly even as he moved forward, motioning to the others to stay out in the waiting room. “It’s fine, Clint, you’ve got a couple gaps in your memory because you bumped your head. We’ll just call the doctor and have her check you over.” Clint opened his mouth to reply but seemed uncertain what to say. He struggled for a moment, searching for words before reaching out, his fingers clawing at Steve’s shirtsleeve as if scrambling for a hand hold.

“It’s going to be okay,” Steve promised, his voice cracking slightly as he grasped hold of Clint’s hand, hanging on.

“Natasha, stay with him,” Tony insisted, grabbing hold of Steve’s shirt in one hand and pulling him back while prodding at Phil with the other, herding them ahead of him. “give the doc some room.” Phil made to protest but Tony all but forced him out into the waiting room as the medical staff swarmed back into the room.

“What the hell just happened?” Steve demanded hoarsely, staring at the others with eyes the size of saucers.

“I don’t know,” Phil admitted, his worried gaze settling on the closed door.
“Amnesia isn’t like you see on TV,” Helen Cho explained, glancing over her shoulder through the window to where Clint was half sitting up in bed, his hands twisting in the blankets as Thor regaled him with some Asgardian folk tale about a fox who had defeated an army. Thor had been making shadow puppets on the wall for the last ten minutes and Clint had been by turns both amused and anxious. He rolled his eyes at something Thor said, struggling not to laugh.

The cognitive tests had taken another hour and in that time Jane and Darcy had emerged from the labs and Pepper had called to say she was flying in from the West Coast. Of them all Thor seemed to be dealing with it best, despite the fact the Clint seemed to barely remember him. He’s only shrugged, taking that fact as an excuse to tell some of his favorite tales all over again to a now fresh audience.

Natasha had started circling the room at a rate too slow to be pacing but too methodical to be casual, as if she were patrolling a perimeter around Jane, Darcy, and Bruce who had set up camp on the sofa, Darcy between them and occasionally rubbing one of their backs comfortingly. At the moment it was Jane who bit her lip, wringing her hands.

Tony was slumped against the arm, staring at a point on the floor as if trying to block out everything around him while Sam and Phil watched Clint and Thor intently through the glass.

“How can he know us and not know us?” Steve asked, clearly distressed as he leaned into Bucky’s back. Bucky had pressed himself into the corner of the glass, angled where he could watch Clint but not be readily seen and then had stoically not moved so much as an inch.

“The brain doesn’t store memories the way a computer would,” Doctor Cho explained patiently. “The hematomas is primarily in a portion of the brain that records event memory, it’s completely separate from other types of cognition. So he remembers individuals but not necessarily how he met them or shared experiences.”

“At least he seems to know who we are,” Bruce remarked.

“Some of us,” Sam corrected. “He didn’t make eye contact with me or Bucky.”
“He looked nervous when we went in,” Bucky lamented softly. Steve shifted his shoulder, nudging closer to him.

“He called me Iron Man,” Tony declared, stricken.

“He didn’t remember that he was an Avenger, either,” Natasha stated reluctantly. “I can’t make any sense of what he remembers and what he doesn’t.”

“There isn’t a lot of sense to be made,” Dr. Cho sighed. “We really don’t know enough about how the brain functions to understand what’s happening to him. What we do know is that he’s lost a rather large portion of the details of his adult life. He did know he was in Avenger’s tower and he could put names to faces with most of you. He just doesn’t seem able to access events from his personal timeline.”

“Like corrupted data on a hard drive,” Bruce observed with a frown.

“If it was a hard drive, I could fix it,” Tony insisted with a touch of anger.

“It’s not a completely inaccurate analogy,” Helen observed. “All of his memories prior to early adulthood appear to be in tact, so we know he hasn’t lost the ability to recall memories. Apart from the memory loss, we haven’t found any other signs of brain damage.”

“He doesn’t seem like himself though,” Darcy observed, switching to rub Bruce’s back as Jane curled into her shoulder.

“We underestimate at times how our experiences shape our personality,” Helen replied. “A lot of our attitudes, our preferences, even our sense of humor is a learned response that we develop throughout our lives. My best guess is that this is probably what he was like as a teenager.”

“He must have been a really sweet kid,” Tony observed softly, his eyes flicking up to Clint who was holding in a belly laugh at Thor’s animated arm flapping.

“Kind of makes you wonder what happened to make him such a cocky asshole,” Barnes remarked. Steve jabbed him sharply in the ribs and he scowled. “Hey, I wasn’t the only one thinking it. It’s not like I have anything against cocky assholes!”
“Lucky for me,” Steve said drily.

“You are kind of an asshole,” Tony agreed but Steve didn’t rise to the bait, instead he glanced in at Clint with misty eyes.

“I shouldn’t have let him,” Steve began but Phil cut him off.

“Nobody’s blaming you,” Phil insisted, his brow furrowing in a hint of anger as he turned toward Steve. “Hawkeye made a dangerous call in the field, something you’ve all done I might add. He knew the risks, don’t insult him.” Steve gave a tight nod, folding his arms over his chest as Bucky turned to drape his good arm around Steve’s shoulders. Phil drew in a shaky breath, letting it out slowly before turning to Doctor Cho.

“What do we do from here?” he asked.

“Medically there isn’t much more we can do at the moment,” Helen answered. “He should rest, we should do another CT scan in a few days. It’s entirely possible that the memory loss is temporary and he’ll regain his memories once the damage has healed.”

“And what if it’s not temporary?” Natasha asked, her brow furrowed.

“He’ll have to adapt,” Helen replied.

“Well that’s not good enough,” Steve insisted. “We’re not talking about a few months here, we’re talking about big chunks of his life, who he is. There must be something we can do.”

“You know, throwing your shoulders back and putting your hands on your hips doesn’t actually fix anything, right?” Tony asked with a frown.

“Really, Tony?” Bruce asked in exasperation as Steve sputtered.
“Super-dudes, this is not helping,” Darcy scolded, her arm tightening around Bruce’s shoulders as they stiffened in tension

“You know we wouldn’t even be in this position,” Tony began bitterly.

“Guys,” Sam interrupted finally. His eyes narrowing as he glared at the room. “We can keep going around on this all day. Let’s just acknowledge that everyone’s feeling guilty and angry and worried and put that all aside and concentrate on what we’re going to do about Barton for the next three days.”

“Three days?” Tony asked drily.

“Little steps, man,” Sam insisted. “We get through the rest of the week, we can worry about the next one.”

“We?” Steve asked, in surprise “You’re sticking around?”

“Really, Rogers?” Sam demanded with his most incredulous look. “You have to ask that?”

“See, I’m right, he’s an asshole!” Tony pointed out but Jane shushed him.

“What do you recommend?” Bruce asked, turning to Doctor Cho.

“Psychology isn’t particularly my thing,” She admitted with a shrug. All eyes turned on Sam.

“What, it’s my thing?” he asked. The only answer was Steve’s apologetic look and Sam let out a resigned huff of a breath. “Yeah okay, We should… not push. Don’t ask him if he remembers particulars. It’s okay to remind him of facts; names, places he’s been. Try to keep the subjective stuff to yourself. Let him fill in the blanks on his own if he can.”

“And what, hope he gets better?” Natasha asked.
“That’s what I got,” Sam shrugged. “Unless you can find a specialist in superhero memory loss.”

“I can do that,” Tony stated confidently, glancing at Bruce who nodded in agreement. “There’s got to be at least one neurologist in the world with some idea what to do with this.”

“I’d like to keep him under observation tonight,” Helen said, her eye sweeping over all of them. “We’ll run tests in the morning and see how he’s progressing.”

“I think maybe one of us should stay with him,” Bruce suggested hesitantly.

“I’ll stay,” Phil said softly, glancing up to meet Natasha’s eye. She gave him a hesitant nod and he stepped back from the glass, shifting past Helen and slipping into the surgical bay, the muted voices of the Avengers silenced as the door wooshed shut behind him.

“That’s a dumb story!” Clint insisted as Thor chuckled in amusement. He glanced over his shoulder, his face lighting up in a bright smile. “Hi Phil!”

“How are you feeling?” Phil asked, pulling up one of the chairs and settling at Clint’s bedside.

“Better,” Clint insisted, his hand straying to his forehead absently. “Dr. Cho gave me something for my head. When can I go home?”

“Helen,” Phil began then paused. “Dr. Cho wants to keep you here in the medical bay tonight. They’ll run a couple of more tests in the morning and then… this is home now, you live here in the tower with your teammates.” Clint’s brow furrowed and he looked over at Thor as if for confirmation. Thor gave him a soft smile, reaching out to give Clint’s arm a reassuring squeeze.

“I should speak to Stephen,” he said standing to his feet. “I’ll be nearby if you need me.” Clint nodded and Thor moved off toward the door, laying a hand on Phil’s shoulder as he passed.

“Thor wouldn’t tell me where Barney is,” Clint admitted, swallowing thickly. “Does he know I got hurt?”
“Clint,” Phil began, then shook his head with a sigh. “You and your brother had a… disagreement. You haven’t seen him in a while.” Clint stared back at him with a startled, frightened expression.

“It’ll be fine, Clint,” Phil insisted, his fingers curling around the archer’s wrist in a gentle, grounding pressure. “I promise you, everything’s going to be fine.”

“I’ve lost more than a few memories,” he declared hoarsely, the faintest hints of panic beginning to set in.

“It doesn’t matter,” Phil replied vehemently. “We remember you. You’re a good man and a good friend and we remember everything you’ve ever done for us, even if you don’t. You don’t need to worry, we’ll look out for you. We’re going to do everything we can to help you remember.”

“What if I can’t?” Clint asked in a small voice.

“I guess we’ll just have to help you make new memories then,” Phil replied. Clint twisted free of Phil’s grasp, his fingers curling around Phil’s hand, gripping tight as if hanging on for dear life and Phil returned the pressure, gentle but firm as he met Clint’s gaze with a reassuring smile.
“Clint, it’s all right,” Natasha’s voice drifted down the hall from the elevator and Phil’s head snapped up, a pinched expression on his face as he leaned back in his chair at the breakfast bar. He couldn’t see from this angle out into the hall and, not for the first time, he rather wished the non-structural walls of the tower were clear rather than frosted glass. Tony shot him a look and he straightened, fiddling with the handle of his coffee mug before glancing up at Steve who was leaning against the opposite counter, nursing his own nearly cold coffee. Steve’s shoulders were unnaturally rigid as he deliberately avoided glancing at the doorway, his eyes darting between Phil and Tony who had produced a screwdriver out of seeming thin air and had set about attacking the electric juicer, pulling it apart and examining its inner workings for no apparent reason.

Whatever Clint’s reply, it went unheard over the muffled voices out in the rec room where the remainder of the team had congregated. Sam and Thor were engrossed in a video game, Bucky watching them with only mild interest as Bruce lost himself in the pages of his latest scientific journal. Most of them had been there for the better part of the night, unwilling or unable to sleep. Phil had spent most of the wee hours keeping vigil in the medical bay. Natasha had wandered in and out, too worried to keep still for long. Steve had loitered on the periphery, finally insisting that Phil leave and get some sleep. Instead Phil had wandered into the kitchen only to find the rest of the team still awake and in various stages of brooding as they bickered over coffee and stole each other’s snacks.

Natasha appeared in the kitchen doorway, Clint not more than a pace behind her, his head ducked down and his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans. Tony straightened, too quickly, forcing a grin that made his face look uncomfortably tight.

“Hey look who’s up!” he said with far too much cheer as Natasha headed for the fridge.

“Tony, be nice,” Steve admonished softly, his tone without its usual bite.

“I’m always nice,” Tony insisted. “What did the doc say before you escaped, cupid?” Clint’s head snapped up, his expression startled as if he were surprised at being spoken to directly.

“Rest,” Clint replied hesitantly, rocking slightly on his feet where Natasha left him near the doorway beside Steve. “Don’t climb the wet walls, don’t shoot anything.”

“So basically don’t be yourself?” Tony teased.
“Stark,” Steve gave him a warning look and Tony made a face at him.

“Are you okay?” Clint asked uneasily, his shoulder brushing Steve’s arm as he shoved his hands deeper into his pockets.

“I’m,” Steve hesitated, tilting his head in an attempt to meet Clint’s side eyed glance. Barton was shuffling uncomfortably on the balls of his feet, watching Steve with obvious worry. “I’m fine, why do you ask?”

“He asked me four times while we were trying to get out of medical,” Natasha remarked, casting a look over her shoulder at them as she rifled though the fridge. “He’s been worried about you.” Clint’s cheeks colored but he didn’t deny it, instead he ducked his head, his shoulders curling down as if to make himself smaller. Phil frowned, the obvious display of shy discomfort was a bit unsettling to say the least.

“Does he,” Tony’s voice broke off, his face crumpling in a conflicted expression as if he were trying to hold in the words.

“Don’t remember how I got hurt,” Clint stated with a shrug, staring at his shoes as he toed at the floor. “The doctor asked that. I kind of remember being worried about Steve. I don’t remember why.”

“Hey, I’m fine,” Steve said softly, his hand settling on Clint’s shoulder. Clint stiffened almost instantly and Steve balked, blinking back at him in surprise.

Phil only stared blankly, his brain stuttering over what he was seeing. In a moment’s breath he saw Tony’s shoulders go rigid as if seeking out a threat and Steve make to pull away at the tense look of panic warring for place on Clint’s face.

“Steve, it’s fine,” Phil stated before he could stop himself. Clint’s head swiveled toward him, his eyes grateful and perhaps a little scared. Steve, who had taken a half step back shifted subtly forward, his arm carefully sliding around Clint’s shoulders and reeling him in with just enough pressure to be welcoming without insistent. Clint drew in a shaky breath, letting it out as he sagged into Steve, his arms tangling around his own waist as if to protect himself.
“It’s all right,” Steve insisted, giving Clint’s shoulder’s a gentle squeeze. “You’re just a little off your game right now, but it’s going to be fine.”

“Sorry,” Clint murmured, tucking his chin against his chest.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Steve answered.

“I’m a complete asshole after I’ve been injured,” Tony added, nodding as he moved to Clint’s other side and tugged him from Steve’s grasp, steering him toward the breakfast bar. “If he can tolerate me, he can stand you being a little tense. Have a seat with Coulson. You hungry? Thirsty? You want a Gatorade?”

“Do… is there soda?” Clint asked hesitantly. Tony gave him an odd look, shaking it off quickly as he gently shoved Clint into one of the bar stools.

“Steve drank all the Coke again, JARVIS,” Natasha observed blandly. Steve blushed, his lips twisting to hide his smile.

“I shall have more delivered shortly, Agent Romanov. The AI promised.

“We’ve got Fanta,” Steve suggested, leaning into the open fridge over Natasha’s shoulder and snagging a bottle.

“I’m surprised you’ll drink it,” she teased, glancing back at him before looking at Clint. “How about root beer?”

“Hey I liberated more than one case of Fanta in my day,” Steve answered with a grin, taking the root beer from Natasha as Clint nodded. He flicked off the top with his thumb before crossing the kitchen and sliding it down the bar.

“It’s alright,” Phil said softly as Clint took a long pull from the bottle before setting it down and staring at it. Steve and Tony had fallen back into ribbing each other as Tony returned to his disassembly of the juicer and Natasha had pushed herself up on one of the counters, pretending to watch them under the pretext of keeping an eye on Clint. “You’ve had a rough couple of days, your team won’t hold it against you.”
“Natasha says I’m an Avenger,” Clint said in a small voice, his eyes never straying from the bottle as he twirled it slowly between his fingers.

“That’s right,” Phil nodded.

“How about targets?” Clint asked, looking up at him with wide, nearly frightened eyes. Phil paused, his gaze assessing.

“Hawkeye the World’s Greatest Marksman?” Phil suggested softly. Clint startled, his ears turning bright red as he ducked his head again.

“I’m… that’s…” Clint drew in a deep breath, looking back up at Phil. “But that’s targets. I just shoot balloons and fire rings and quarters. I’ve never shot… anybody?” He said the last words with a faint sense of horror. The kitchen had gone terrifyingly still and Phil spared a glance over at Steve, Tony, and Natasha who were collectively holding their breath.

Phil allowed himself two full seconds to take in Clint’s pleading expression as he stared at Phil with wide, innocent eyes, his chest rising and falling with the short, sharp breaths of rising panic. It was exactly one second too long.

“Oh god,” Clint whispered, taking Phil’s silence for the admission it was. He let out a choked sound, hunching down over his knees.

“Clint,” Phil repeated, reaching out to squeeze his arm. “You don’t remember, and that’s all right. It’s not your fault. No one is going to ask you to do anything you don’t want to do. I promise you that, it’s going to be all right.”
“Easy, Clint, we’ve got you,” Bruce murmured gently, appearing at Phil’s side and running a soothing hand down Clint’s arm to his wrist, checking his pulse. “I need you to take a deep breath for me, just one.” Clint’s shoulders rose as his lungs filled, the air coming out in a rush that sounded like a whimper.

“Oh, and another,” Bruce prompted.

“What happened?” Sam muttered, half under his breath as Bruce coached Clint through his panic attack. Phil looked up at him, his brow creased in worry.

“Reality check,” Phil replied with resignation. He glanced at the doorway to the rec room to see Steve hovering just out of sight, the others had abandoned the kitchen entirely and were milling in the rec room nervously. Sam made a face, shaking his head.

“No right answers, Phil,” Sam reminded reassuringly. “wasn’t going to go well no matter what you said.” Phil nodded in agreement. There is no good way to explain to someone how they become a sniper and a superhero without making it sound terrible.

“That’s better,” Bruce soothed, his hand running up and down Clint’s arm. “You’re okay, can you sit up for me? Just whenever you’re ready, take your time.” Clint rolled up slowly, his eyes shining as he scrubbed at his wet face, his breathing still unsteady as he gazed at Phil with a broken expression.

“Hey, Clint,” Sam said, leaning over Phil’s shoulder with his usual amiable smirk. Clint glanced at him uneasily and Sam’s teasing smile widened a fraction. “it’s cool if you don’t remember me, I promise not to take it personally.”

“Sam,” Clint stated, ducking his head awkwardly.

“Yeah,” Sam nodded, his expression turning serious. “It’s okay, man, you’re kind of treading water here a little. Nobody’s going to give you a hard time if you lose it.” Clint nodded stiffly, staring at his feet, his shoulders up around his ears.

“How did I get here?” Clint blurted out, his face crumpled in a pained expression and he rubbed at his face with his hands, drawing in an unsteady breath. “I’m not… I don’t have superpowers or anything… I don’t have super powers do I?” The last question he directed at Phil with a fresh dose of alarm.
“You don’t have super powers,” Phil said, shaking his head.

“Then how did I get here?” Clint demanded. “I mean, I can only think of a couple of ways and none of them are good!”

“Clint, I want you to listen to me very carefully,” Phil stated, meeting his gaze unwaveringly. “I’ve know you since you were eighteen years old. You are one of the best men I have ever met in my life. Whatever you might have forgotten, whatever might have happened, I want you to remember that.”

“Phil’s right,” Bruce nodded in agreement.

“And you’ve seen the kind of company we keep,” Sam added with a hint of teasing as he jerked his head toward the doorway where Steve was still eying them worriedly. Clint’s expression faltered in a half smile and Phil reached out, squeezing his shoulder gently.

“You should be proud,” Phil stated. “I know I am.” Clint gave him a watery smile, ducking his head as Bruce rolled out of his crouch at Clint’s side.

“Let’s check you over, just to be safe,” he suggested. Clint nodded, his hand reaching out clumsily to grasp at Phil’s wrist. Phil turned his hand, grasping hold of Clint’s and giving it a reassuring squeeze that Clint returned.

Steve glanced over his shoulder once more as Bruce fished his stethoscope from his pocket, his attention darting to the vital readings JARVIS was displaying surreptitiously behind Clint’s head. Clint was still holding tight to Phil’s hand like a scared kid who didn’t want to admit how frightened he was while Sam attempted to soothe his tension with somewhat less than his usual luck. Steve let out a sigh, finally turning away.

“So,” Tony stated, drawing in a slow breath as Steve crept cautiously from his vigil in the kitchen doorway, “Barton’s out of the rotation.”
“Thank you for stating the obvious,” Steve replied bitingly.

“Do not quarrel,” Thor chided gently from where he sat on the back of the sofa, leaning over it to rest his broad hand between Natasha’s shoulder blades in a comforting gesture. Steve winced, throwing Tony an apologetic look.

“How are you holding up?” Steve asked, turning toward Natasha.

“Grand,” she replied drily, unfurling enough to let her feet slip to the floor. “My best friend’s been Total Recalled, just another day at the office.”

“That was a weird movie,” Steve shook his head.

“Did you see the new one or the original?” Thor asked curiously.

“There’s two?” Steve questioned in bewilderment.

“It does not get any less weird watching the old one, Fabio,” Tony insisted, shaking his head.

“Boys, you’re derailing the train again,” Natasha reminded, rubbing her temples with a sigh. Thor only shrugged.

“I think it’s pretty clear he’s not combat ready,” Steve stated after a long pause. Tony let out an irritated huff in reply. “We need to accept that Hawkeye isn’t going to be in the field for a while, maybe never.”

“I’m not okay with that,” Tony stated.

“We were bound to agree about something eventually,” Steve pointed out, running his fingers through his hair with a sigh before looking up at Thor. “Is there anything you can do?”
“My people understand well the subtle workings of the body,” Thor answered. “But we still struggle with the intricacies of the mind. More so when that mind is born of another world. We may do more harm than good.”

“Let’s all agree not to go there?” Tony pleaded. Natasha nodded, glancing up at Steve who gave a sigh and a sharp nod of agreement as well. They all looked at each other uncomfortably for a moment.

“I’ll… I’ll take over for him while he’s down,” Bucky offered from the corner of the room where he’d retreated, his shoulders stiffening uncomfortably as he looked away, pretending to be distracted by the view out the window.

“Buck,” Steve protested gently. “Sam’ll stick around for a while.”

“Everybody’s thinking it, and no one’s saying it,” Bucky shook his head with a sigh. “You need a sniper.”

“That doesn’t mean,” Steve began.

“If… if everyone’s comfortable with that,” Bucky interrupted before Steve could make more than a token protest. He glanced at Tony and then at Thor before looking away again. “I mean if you weren’t, I’d understand why, I’m not sure I trust me so if any of you don’t… If the team wants me, I’ll cover for him.”

“James,” Natasha soothed, rolling to her feet and crossing the room to him, her hand settling on his arm. “We trust you completely.”

“Absolutely,” Tony agreed, conviction clear on his face. “Trust isn’t an issue.”

“It’s not like we can’t get by for a while,” Steve added. “You haven’t been back in action since…” His voice trailed off uncomfortably and he winced

“You need a sniper,” Bucky pointed out, unruffled. “I’m good.”
“We need a sniper,” Natasha agreed. “And you are more than good.” Steve made to protest again but Tony settled a hand on his chest, crossing the room until he was looking up into Bucky’s face.

“If you think you’re ready, that’s great,” Tony stated. “It’s more than great. We’ve all seen your range scores, hell, we’ve all had to listen to Clint bitch! If you want to get back in the field it doesn’t have to be a temporary thing. There’s a place on the team for you, if that’s what you want. Dad always said.”

“I killed him,” Bucky blurted out, going white as a sheet. “I sabotaged the car, I… how can you… He was my friend and I…” Steve’s face crumpled in a stricken look.

“Damn it, Barnes, do you think I don’t know that?” Tony shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose a moment. He drew in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Look, I’ve done some things I’m not proud of, and it was my choice. I had a choice and I didn’t do a hell of a lot with it. So I’m in no place to judge someone who didn’t have a choice at all. I trust you now a hell of a lot more than I could trust myself then. So we’re good, okay?”

“Bucky, you don’t owe us,” Steve insisted, folding his arms over his chest with a worried expression. “I know you feel like you do, but you really don’t.”

“Maybe not,” Bucky shrugged in grudging agreement. “But I kind of owe Clint.”

“You know he wouldn’t see it that way,” Natasha reminded, leaning into his side.

“I know,” Bucky nodded. “But you know if he gets his memories back and anything happened to any of you while he was down, he’d feel responsible.”

“And all that’s a sign of is how messed up he is to begin with,” Tony huffed in irritation.

“Oh, for god sake,” Steve let out a groan, rolling his eyes as Natasha and Thor struggled not to laugh.

“Hey, just because I’m willing to admit this place is a cross between a frat house and a funny
farm,” Tony began but Thor interrupted him.

“James do you feel you are ready to return to the field of battle?” he asked, point blank. Bucky hesitated a moment, pausing just long enough to take a careful breath.

“I think so, yeah,” he nodded. “I might be a little rusty, but I think I can handle it.” Thor gave a single decisive nod before turning back to Steve.

“He has my support,” Thor announced, folding his arms over his chest.

“Are you going to beat up the rest of your teammates if they don’t fall in line?” Steve asked drily. Thor only gave him a small smirk.

“Okay, fine,” Steve sighed, shaking his head.

“Yeah I wouldn’t want to take on Marley either,” Tony stated, thumping Steve on the arm as he passed. Steve winced.

“Where are you going?” he demanded to Tony’s back as Stark strolled toward the elevator.

“I’m going to go find me a superhero brain-fixer,” Tony announced. “Can you order those on Amazon?”

“Ebay,” Thor suggested, vaulting over the couch and landing on it with a bounce as he swept up his Playstation controller. Steve gritted his teeth in irritation.

“Did he just compare Thor to a golden retriever?” Bucky whispered to Natasha who shushed him with a hand over her mouth to hide her smile.

“JARVIS, is the juicer still in pieces on the counter?” Steve asked.

“It is, Captain,” JARVIS answered with the faintest hint of amusement. Steve let out another resigned sigh, heading back toward the kitchen.
“I think Stark only does that so that Steve will learn how things work putting them back together,” Natasha observed, a faint smile curling her lips.

“How,” Bucky paused, grimacing as if he were struggling to get the words out. “How are you really?”

“James,” she began with a hint of warning, glancing over at the back of Thor’s head as he started up another binge round of Skyrim.

“Because you’re keeping it together really good,” he rushed on, lowering his voice. “And, well, I know what I’d be like if it was Steve. So…” Natasha turned an appraising glare on him.

“Very touching,” she observed. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“Little bit, maybe,” he allowed, holding his thumb and forefinger an inch apart. She fought back her smile until it crumpled, her eyes misting. Bucky mouthed at her wordlessly a moment, grasping for something to say.

“Oh, shut up,” she sighed, leaning into his chest. He raised his arms awkwardly for a moment, unsure of what to do, before finally drawing her closer, settling into the embrace when she didn’t pull away.

“I’m sorry,” He whispered against her hair.

“For what?” Natasha asked, her voice wavering only slightly.

“For everything,” Bucky admitted.

“That’s a lot to be sorry for,” she replied.

“Yeah,” he agreed, holding her tighter.
“I don’t know, Tony,” Jane sighed, folding her arms in front of her on the lab bench and letting her forehead thump against them. “You get that this isn’t really my area, right?” Tony let out a grunt, his eye fixed on a dark corner of the three dimensional image of a brain that surrounded him. He turned his ruling chair slowly in a circle, following a lit synapse with his finger as the spark of thought trailed along the holographic display.

“He doesn’t get that,” Bruce assured, making a face as he pinched the bridge of his nose with a stifled yawn. “He has never met an area that wasn’t his.” He shoved aside the empty Chinese takeout containers that littered the bench in front of him, leaning into it and staring at the vitals that ticked by on the display with bleary eyes. They had been running analysis for hours now and seemed no closer to a solution. The moon was a pale sliver outside the window of Tony’s lab, its hazy glow in the inky black sky a sharp reminder of the late hour.

“What do you think it’s like inside his brain?” Darcy asked curiously, draping herself over the back of her lab stool with a frown.

“A cross between Burning Man and San Diego Comic Con,” Tony answered readily, half ignoring her, his fingers skating lightly over the area of scar tissue in the 3D model. Jane dug her fingers into her scalp, tousling her hair as she rubbed at it furiously.

“Brains are so squishy,” She huffed in frustration. “Can I get something with plasma in it?”

“We’ll set Tony on fire,” Darcy suggested, propping her chin in her hand as she went back to staring at the smaller brain-shaped projection in front of her, twirling it slowly with one finger. Bruce struggled not to laugh as Jane sprawled face first across the lab bench in exhaustion.

“Tony I don’t think a couple of digital scans are enough data to draw any sort of reasonable conclusion,” he said, shaking his head. “The damaged area is still showing inflammation.”

“Minor,” Tony corrected gruffly. “Minor inflammation. And what the hell am I paying for anyway? You’d think the best medical and scientific minds in the world could heal a brain!”

“Tony, we’re lucky he’s alive,” Jane stated without emotion, her face still pressed into the tabletop enough to muffle her voice slightly.
“Don’t say that,” Tony snapped. “Don’t you dare say that. That’s not good enough, that is nowhere near…” His voice broke off and he swallowed, licking his lips as he looked away.

“You do know scientists aren’t like… Pokemon or anything?” Darcy asked carefully, eyeing him with skepticism and a touch of sympathy. “You can’t just catch ‘em all and train them and then go up against Mewtwo and expect to come out in one piece, right?”

“I have no idea what you just said,” Tony declared, staring back at her in obvious bafflement.

“Okay,” Darcy said with a sigh, turning back to the projection, smushing her face with her fingers. “going back to pointless staring.” Tony glared at the back of her head.

“We’re all tired,” Bruce stated, rubbing his eyes. “We should call it a night, get some sleep.”

“Hope he’s better in the morning?” Tony asked sarcastically. He let out a breath, glancing at Jane who was still sprawled face first across the lab bench before turning back to his own projection. “You guys should definitely get some rest, come at it fresh in the morning.”

“Tony,” Bruce shifted closer to him with an exasperated if resigned sigh, moving around his bench on tired feet.

“I’m good,” Tony insisted firmly. “I’m just going to check over all the data one more time before I call it a night.”

“Is workaholism a thing they teach in science school?” Darcy asked curiously, “Or is a lack of moderation just a feature of the personality type?”

“Poly-Sci,” Jane declared, her forehead still pressed to the lab bench as she waved one hand dramatically in Darcy’s direction.

“You know if, instead of analyzing me, you put that effort into what you were supposed to be doing,” Tony began with a generous layer of sarcasm.
“What am I supposed to be doing?” Darcy asked seriously. “Because I don’t know. I barely passed biology. My minor was in computer programing so unless you’re planning to build a Borg or something, I’ve seriously got no idea what I’m doing here.”

“Don’t think it,” Bruce warned as Tony opened his mouth to reply. “We are not putting some weird, arc reactor in Clint’s brain.”

“SHIELD will hack is head and then where will we be?” Darcy agreed, nodding as Tony’s mouth clicked shut.

“Fair,” he muttered half under his breath as Darcy rolled her chair away from her desk, looking upward through the giant projection that took up most of Tony’s corner of the lab.

“God I wish I could put up a firewall like this,” she sighed, giving the darkened corner of the 3D brain a vicious poke. “Wiretap that shit, why don’t you?”

“Darcy you sound like one of those conspiracy theory nuts when you start in on that paranoid nonsense,” Jane sighed, hauling herself off of the lab bench enough to shake her head.

“It’s not paranoia when your government has actually been caught doing it!” Darcy protested, slowly spinning her chair in a circle.

“Say that again,” Tony said, staring blankly.

“She’s a paranoid nutter?” Jane questioned.

“No,” Tony pointed at her, his finger swooping down toward Darcy as he continued to stare ahead at a distant point on the wall.

“The government reads my email?” Darcy offered hesitantly, leaning slightly farther back in her chair to look up at him.
“No, the other thing,” Tony barked impatiently.

“I… wish I had a firewall?” Darcy asked.

“Holy shit,” Tony gaped.

“What?” Bruce asked warily.

“Look at it. Really, really look,” Tony insisted, grabbing the brain out of the air and compacting it before dangling it in front of Bruce. “The synapses on one side of the scar tissue are firing, but they’re coming up against the damage and just stopping. We’ve been assuming that the entire area is damaged, but what if the long term memory centers aren’t damaged or scrambled or, whatever, what if it’s just the scar tissue acting as a firewall, keeping the data hemmed off from the rest of the brain?”

“That’s,” Bruce paused, giving the image a considering look. “That’s way out of my league,” he admitted finally.

“What would happen if we removed the scar tissue?” Tony asked, his eyes lighting with excitement.

“He’d have a big hole in his brain?” Darcy offered up with a frown, moving to peer over his shoulder.

“Well, apart from that,” Tony said with a huff, waving her off. “Maybe if we could data bridge over the damage, like a fresh connection.”

“You’re talking about what amounts to hacking in at the cellular level,” Bruce observed.

“I need a bio hacker,” Tony declared. “Do they make those?”

“Sure,” Bruce answered blandly. “I’ll get my lightning rod.”
“You’re not helping,” Tony scolded, scowling.

“Have you any idea at all what time it is?” Tony froze, turning ever so slowly toward the doorway where Pepper stood, her elegant arms folded over her chest and her eyes narrowed.

“Oh no, it’s the Missus,” Darcy stage whispered dramatically. Bruce fought back a cringe as Jane slowly pushed her face off the lab bench once more.

“Love of my life,” Tony flashed her a smile that bore a striking resemblance to a grimace. “When did you get here?”

“Ten hours ago,” Pepper replied. Tony made a face.

“Busted,” Darcy observed sliding off of her chair and grasping hold of Jane’s arm. “Science orgy’s over kids, mom’s home.” She hauled Jane to her feet before grasping hold of Bruce’s sleeve.

“I wish you wouldn’t call it that,” Jane half mumbled as Darcy herded her out the door, dragging Bruce behind them.

“In all fairness,” Bruce began, pausing in the doorway.

“Goodnight, Bruce,” Pepper stated firmly, the faintest smile twitching at the corner of her mouth.

“Say goodnight, Gracie,” Darcy prompted, tugging his sleeve hard enough to unbalance him before pulling him out into the hall.

“Goodnight, Gracie,” Bruce said half heartedly. Pepper closed her eyes, shaking her head as she tried not to smile.

“You’re angry,” Tony observed, winding up for one of his better negotiation speeches.
“Yes I’m angry,” Pepper confirmed calmly, stepping into the lab. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Oh,” Tony fumbled for a moment, looking anxious.

“Just before Ms. Potts left on Tuesday morning, sir,” JARVIS supplied. Tony gave her a triumphant smile.

“It’s Thursday morning,” Pepper observed. Tony’s face fell. “Have you been down here in the lab the whole time I’ve been gone?”

“No!” he replied defensively. He took a deep breath, his shoulders sagging. “No, I blew up part of South Dakota and paced around the kitchen fretting like a helicopter mom, then I came here.” Pepper let out a huff of a breath, some of the tension leaving her shoulders.

“How is he?” she asked finally, worry leeching from the edges of her guarded expression.

“He’s,” Tony paused as if for once carefully considering his words. “He’s nervous and awkward and you can’t have a conversation with him because he won’t make eye contact. He jumps every time you say his name and I swear, Pep if I didn’t know any better, that he fully expected Captain America to hit him in the middle of the kitchen this morning.”

“Maybe he did,” Pepper said in her most neutral tone. Tony flinched, sinking back down on his rolling chair as she slowly approached, the palms of her hands sliding over his shoulders as he stared up at the three dimensional rendering of Clint’s brain.

“We all know he grew up rough, Tony,” she reminded gently. “It’s not like he ever made any effort to hide it.”

“It’s one thing to know one of your best friends got the hell kicked out of him as a kid and another to actually see what that kind of thing does.” Tony confessed, slumping further into the chair.

“He came out of it all right,” Pepper stated with a fond smile. “In a lot of ways he’s the most well
adjusted person around here.”

“Besides you,” Tony amended.

“Besides me,” she agreed in faint amusement.

“Except he’s not any more,” Tony’s expression was pinched and he rubbed at his eyes with his fingertips. “That guy upstairs, that terrified kid, I don’t know him.”

“You’re not going to fix it burning yourself out,” Pepper reminded.

“If I can fix it at all,” He said, his voice wavering only slightly. “If I should even try at all.”

“Tony,” Pepper sighed, her long fingers stroking the back of his neck as he hung his head.

“If that ever happens to me,” he began, taking a deep breath.

“Whatever you’re thinking just stop,” she interrupted, her tone firm. “I’ve worked too hard at you, Mr. Stark, to walk away over something as trivial as an injury.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tony said with a tight nod, reaching out to take hold if her other hand and lightly brushing his lips over her fingers. “Damned if I know why, but I know you’d never leave, and I’m grateful. You have no idea how grateful. But if that ever happens to me, if I forget… this.” He waved a hand across the lab, his gaze settling on the row of retired Iron Man suits in their neatly appointed cases.

“Just let me forget,” he insisted. “If I can ever forget the last six years.”

“Tony,” Pepper soothed, stroking his hair as he clung to her other hand with both of his own, pressing his forehead to her wrist.
“Let me forget,” he repeated. “God, I am such a hypocrite. Barton’s got to have skeletons in his closet that’d make mine seem like a day trip to Disneyland. What kind of friend am I to make him relive all that?”

“The kind of friend that knows who he his now,” Pepper replied. “That knows how proud he is of the good he does. I don’t think Clint would want to forget any of this.”

“I want my friend back,” Tony admitted, his breath hitching. “I’d do some damn questionable things to get him back. I can’t help but think how selfish that is. I should get him a good therapist and, find him a job teaching archery to twelve year olds. Get him out of this alive.”

“You won’t.” Pepper reminded, brushing a kiss on his hair.

“No,” he agreed, wincing. “No, I won’t.”

Phil rubbed his eyes with a sigh, his steps shuffling as he made his way toward the kitchen. He hadn’t actually meant to be up this late, but worry had made him unable to relax and work was at least a problem he could fix, as opposed to the ones involving superheroes and memory loss.

The hallway held that strange stillness that settled over Avengers tower in those rare moments when everyone had retreated from the warm chatter of the common spaces, most often to lick their wounds. There was more than a fair bit of collateral damage at the moment Phil mused. He’d always appreciated peace and quiet. In his life before the Avengers he’d relished those moments of silent tranquility. Now it was less welcome, the soundless serenity nothing more than a grim reminder that all was not as it should be. Phil paused on the threshold of the kitchen on reflex. In another moment JARVIS would begin to slowly raise the lights so as not to strain his eyes. His steps had stilled for barely a moment when a shuffling met his ears and he stiffened, turning to look out into the rec room.

He could just make out the head and shoulders of someone curled on the long sectional sofa, a small hunched figure tucked into the corner, the light from the city outside the window barely illuminating them. He cut through the kitchen with swift steps before the lights could come up, the cotton of his track pants barely rustling as he moved.

“Clint?” Phil murmured in surprise. Clint all but jumped, half scrambling to put his bare feet down on the floor and sit up straight. He turned wide, hazel eyes on Phil, his fingers curling into the edge
of the couch cushion.

“Hi,” he said, his tone breathy. Phil’s steps stilled at the end of the sofa, a frown creasing his brow. Clint looked nervous, his body strung with tension. The light from the windows caught his face and Phil thought he could see red rimmed eyes. Clint looked away quickly, rubbing his nose on the sleeve of his hoodie.

“What are you doing down here in the dark?” Phil asked gently, easing down on the sofa a good arm’s length away. “Couldn’t sleep?” Clint shrugged, his shoulders curling up around his ears again as he hunched over his knees.

“Did you have a nightmare?” Phil pressed. Something both shamed and hopeful curled in his belly. He didn’t want to see Clint in such obvious pain but nightmares could easily be a sign his memory was returning.

“No!” Clint answered quickly, casting a defensive scowl in Phil’s direction. Phil bit his lip to hide his smile. It was so much more vulnerable than he could remember seeing his friend in a very long time.

“It’s perfectly normal, you know,” Phil said when he could make his tone more diplomatic. “Particularly for people in our line of work.” Clint looked up at his coaxing tone.

“You have nightmares?” Clint asked warily.

“Sometimes” Phil nodded, letting out a sigh. “Its nothing to be ashamed of.” Clint bit his lip, his fingers once more curling into the sofa cushion.

“I’ve had this dream since I was a little kid,” he admitted finally. “Where it’s dark and cold and black and I can’t breathe.” Phil tamped down a wince of disappointment. Clearly it wasn’t a more recent memory like he’d hoped.

“You’re safe here,” Phil said instead. “The tower’s secure. You don’t have to worry.” Clint opened his mouth to speak but hesitated a moment.

“I never had,” Clint took a deep breath, fidgeting uncomfortably. “Barney and me shared a room
when we were kids. And there were half a dozen kids to a room in the group home. And in the circus, we mostly bunked in the big trailer with the other roustabouts, even when I was a center ring act. Carson said he wasn’t going to have no kid on his lot with no one keeping an eye on them. Said I couldn’t have my own trailer until I was twenty.”

“Your apartment here is too empty,” Phil gave him a knowing look and he nodded.

“Yeah,” Clint agreed, choking back a snuffle. “There’s no noise clear up here, either. It’s so quiet.”

“That’s not normal,” Phil admitted with a chuckle, slumping back into the sofa as he stretched out his shoulders. “I think everyone’s tired. Usually there’s someone milling around down here, even at this time of night. You’re not the only one to have trouble sleeping.”

“Is that why you’re up?” Clint asked shyly.

“I suppose so,” Phil nodded, a soft smile curling his lips. “We’re not always the healthiest people; most of us work too late.” He glanced over at Clint who was trying to hide a jaw-cracking yawn and doing a rather poor job of it, his eyes bleary as he rubbed at them.

“Come here, lie down,” Phil coaxed, grabbing one of the throw pillows and carefully reaching out to give Clint’s arm a gentle tug.

“I’m not tired,” Clint protested, struggling to stifle another yawn. Phil shook his head, pushing himself off the sofa.

“Maybe not,” he conceded, grabbing Natasha’s discarded afghan and shaking it out before maneuvering Clint onto his side. “But you’re still recovering from your injuries and you really should lie down. I’ll stay with you.” Clint let out a resigned sigh, his limbs going lose as he settled into the plush cushions.

“You don’t have to, I’m okay on my own,” Clint insisted though he sounded anything but. Phil draped the afghan over him, smoothing it down as he settled back into the sofa, Clint’s pillow pressed against his thigh.

“I got caught in a collapsing building once and I hurt my head,” Phil said in his most matter of fact
tone. “You dug me out and carried me to the safe house, and then you stayed up with me until the extraction team arrived.”

Clint’s eyes were already slipping closed but he let out a hum of surprise. The whole thing had been far more bloody than that, but that reminder wouldn’t make sleep any easier.

“How long?” Clint mumbled.

“All night,” Phil answered softly, reaching out on reflex to brush the hair out of Clint’s eyes. Phil caught himself, his motion stuttering, but Clint only let out a sigh, turning his head toward the contact. “You saved my life. So I don’t mind sitting up while you rest. I’m happy to do it.” He let the tips of his fingers trail through Clint’s hair as the archer’s breathing evened out.

“How old am I?” Clint murmured. Phil smiled, he’d been almost certain Clint was asleep.

“You’re thirty-one,” he said. “You don’t remember any of your birthdays?”

“Birthdays were never really a thing,” Clint confessed groggily with no sign of discomfort. “I don’t remember a lot of birthdays.” Phil tilted his head to hide his frown.

“SHIELD recruited you when you were eighteen,” Phil stated, returning his fingers to their gentle caress of Clint’s hair. “You turned twenty-one the same week you made level two. Nick, Melinda, and I took you out to celebrate. You had two pina coladas and we had to pour you into the taxi to get you back to base.” Clint let out a giggle, snuggling into his pillow.

“I didn’t think I’d drink,” he said with a thoughtful frown.

“You don’t,” Phil chuckled in amusement. “You’ll have one fancy craft beer if everyone else is drinking, and you have this weird obsession with strawberry daiquiris.”

“With the umbrella in it?” Clint murmured.

“Always with the umbrella,” Phil nodded in confirmation.
“Glad you’re here,” Clint breathed out the admission so softly Phil had to strain to hear him.

“Me too,” Phil nodded, settling further into the sofa.
Thor let out a yawn, stretching as he loped down the staircase into the rec room. On any other day he might expect to find the rest of his team in the kitchen, breaking their fast, or even, perhaps, piled on the sofa pursuing some game of skill and chance. Today the tower was quite, despite his having risen later than he’d meant to. No doubt his had not been the only restless night.

He rounded the back of the sofa and paused, a small smile pulling at his lips. Coulson slept, his head tucked into the corner of the arm, his hand resting on Hawkeye’s hair. The archer was curled around one of the throw cushions, his head pillowed on Coulson’s thigh. Thor doubled back, coming around the other side of the sofa, and grasped up Natasha’s afghan from where it had tumbled to the floor in the night. He gave it a twitch before spreading it over them both, his hand barley brushing Coulson’s arm though it was was enough to stir him from slumber.

“He should take his rest as well.” Thor murmured softly as Phil squinted up at him blearily. “Hawkeye still sleeps, you should take your rest as well.”

“What time is it?” Phil whispered the question, rubbing at his eyes as if trying to force the sleep from them.

“Not yet nine in the morning,” Thor replied, crouching at his side. “Do you have need of anything?”

“No,” Phil gave his head a tiny shake, glancing down at Clint. He gave a sad smile, brushing the hair from the archer’s face. “I’ll wait for him to wake up. He needs the sleep, he’s had a rough night.”

“As have we all,” Thor nodded in agreement. “I shall check on you again shortly.” Phil only nodded, leaning back into the corner of the sofa as Thor rolled gracefully to his feet, moving toward the soft sound of voices in the kitchen.

“Well, just make her an offer she can’t refuse,” Tony suggested dismissively, waving one hand in Pepper’s direction as the other mashed buttons on the front of the k-cup machine. He was slouching more than what was usual for him, an exhausted roll to his sloping shoulders as he leaned into the counter. The kitchen’s only other occupant was James, who was sitting on the counter beside the microwave, his legs folded in front of him and a napkin tucked into the front of his thread bare t-shirt as he demolished his way though a box of breakfast burritos.
“I am not the Godfather,” Pepper answered drily, leaning back in her chair at the breakfast bar as she nursed her cup of coffee. “And you do understand that not every problem can be solved by throwing money at it?”

“The privatization of world peace through a collection of multimillion dollar robot suits,” Tony replied, pointing at himself. Pepper shook her head, trying not to roll her eyes as he let out a yawn.

“You have had this conversation with him many times,” Thor observed, heading for the pantry. “And to my eye he has never heeded you.”

“He doesn’t heed me when you’re not eying him either,” Pepper answered, hiding her smile in her coffee cup.

“Calumnies and falsehoods,” Tony objected.

“Have you been picking up your vocabulary from Thor again?” Bucky asked curiously, licking salsa from his fingers.

“It’s a valid source,” Tony insisted, raising one finger in the air. Bucky only shook his head, stuffing another burrito into the microwave and jamming the button as he polished off the last bite of the one he was eating.

“You don’t actually look very good,” Bucky observed, eying him thoughtfully for a moment.

“Thank you for that assessment, Steve Austin,” Tony half snarled back at him. Bucky mouthed the words ‘Steve Austin?’ at Thor who had just emerged from the pantry, but the Asgardian only shrugged, loading pop-tarts into the toaster.

“You know, if you’d sleep instead of obsessing and making unreasonable demands,” Pepper suggested.

“It’s not unreasonable to want to pay someone brilliant 25% more than what they’re making now,” Tony protested.
“Tony, dealing with you on a regular basis is worth more than 25%,” Pepper corrected gently. He seemed to consider this a moment before letting out a huff and stealing the burrito out of the microwave before Bucky could grab it.

“Don’t have an answer for that, do you?” Bucky demanded smugly, reloading the microwave.

“Shut up,” Tony grumbled around a mouthful of burrito as Bucky chuckled. Thor only shook his head, and retrieved his mug from the k-cup machine before turning to Pepper.

“I wonder if I might impose upon you,” he asked with his most contrite expression as he leaned into the counter across from her.


“I am sure my mother would have disagreed,” he observed with a soft smile.

“I’m sure she would,” Pepper nodded, returning his fond expression. Thor moved in a way that felt like slight of hand, producing a carefully folded piece of delicate parchment paper. He placed it on the counter in front of her, his fingertips brushing lightly over the red ribbon that secured it.

“Are you giving my girl presents?” Tony asked his eyebrows raised as he moved to lean over Pepper’s shoulder curiously. She gently tugged the bow free and unfolded the parchment, her eyes going wide in surprise.

“Are you giving my girl a ring?” Tony demanded, looking as if he were uncertain if he should be affronted.

“Don’t be silly,” Pepper chided, holding up the delicately wrought band so that the light played across its jeweled surface. “The letter’s addressed to Jane.”

“Nice rock,” Bucky observed with a faint nod of approval, glancing up from his burrito.
“It was a gift to my mother from her father in her youth,” Thor stated with a serious frown as Pepper turned her attention to the letter. “I have spent much time consulting the prescribed traditions of Midgard betrothals, there seems to be no end to opinions on the topic.”

“It’s unnecessarily complicated,” Bucky said with a snort, shifting back so that Thor could retrieve his pop tarts from the toaster. “In my day if you wanted to get married the guy bought a ring and the girl bought a dress and you got married.”

“In your day the average life expectancy was like, fifty-five,” Tony pointed out. Bucky only shrugged.

“I am made to understand that a token in the form of a ring is to be presented, but beyond that I could find little else in the way of firm guidance.” Thor admitted. “With so little expectation in regards to tradition, I believed it best to seek council.”

“We could totally skywrite it if you’re game,” Tony suggested. “I can modify the suit; two, three hours tops.” Pepper looked up from the letter long enough to glare him into silence.

“I thought in this case I might have leave to fall back upon the traditions of my own people,” Thor said apologetically. “As Pepper is among the wisest women I have known, it seemed prudent to bow to her best judgement.”

“Can’t fault you there,” Tony agreed reluctantly.

“So you write a letter to your girl when you want to get hitched?” Bucky asked curiously. Thor nodded, starting in on his second pop tart.

“Such a letter is often a cherished heirloom, a reminder of what is most valuable in life,” Thor explained. “The letter is meant for not just the intended but their sword brothers and closest compatriots as well, so that they may counsel as to the wisdom of the match.”

“Well if Jane asks, you’ll get my vote,” Bucky assured giving him a thumbs up with one hand and cramming the last bite of his burrito into his mouth with the other. Thor gave him a grateful smile in return.
“I think it’s lovely,” Pepper stated, a soft smile curling her lips. She carefully folded the ring back into the letter before sliding it across the counter to Thor. “And if you need anything we’ll be happy to help, of course.”

“I knew she was going to say that,” Bucky muttered. Tony only sighed, shaking his head in resignation.

“Then you believe she will answer favorably?” Thor asked hopefully.

“Absolutely,” Pepper nodded with conviction as Thor carefully retied the bow. “When are you going to give it to her?”

“As soon as I may,” Thor replied. “I had intended to give it to her the morning after she arrived, but we were called out, and then.” he shrugged, glancing out toward the rec room.

“That’ll put a crimp in your plans,” Bucky agreed as Pepper slipped out of her seat, rounding the breakfast bar and heading for the k-cup machine.

“Unless, of course, you feel that now is not an appropriate time,” Thor added, his expression cautious as he glanced at her over his shoulder.

“No, no,” Pepper insisted, setting down her mug and placing both her hands on his broad back, shoving him gently toward the door. “Go. Do it now. We’ve been standing here talking about it for ten whole minutes, it’s a wonder someone hasn’t spoiled the surprise already.”

“That’s good advice,” Tony agreed, clapping Thor on the shoulder encouragingly as he passed. “Any second now some loud mouth is going to come down here and in five minutes all of Manhattan is going to know about it.”

“You’re already here,” Bucky reminded. Tony seemed to consider that a moment before taking a gulp of his coffee with a lazy shrug. He gave half a glance over his shoulder as Steve ambled though the doorway, slipping past Thor and sidestepping around Tony on his way to the k-cup machine.

“I’m just saying,” Sam huffed irritably as he trailed after Steve, winded and running a towel over
his head. “If you’re going to ask a guy to go running with you the very least you can do is wait for him to show up.”

“I waited,” Steve insisted, glancing over his shoulder with a half smirk. “I wasn’t going to let a nice morning in central park go to waste.”

“Do you two idiots really run all the way to central park?” Tony asked, ignoring Pepper as she swatted his arm on her way out of the kitchen.

“Hell no,” Sam shook his head. “I don’t have a death wish. I take the subway. That idiot runs all the way to central park.” He pointed at Steve with a disgusted frown.

“And back,” Bucky added, shoving his last burrito into the microwave and crumpling up the box before pitching it into the bin.

“And back,” Sam agreed, nodding. “You could at least have waited.”

“How much faster than the subway are you?” Tony asked curiously. Steve only gave him a smarmy smile in reply.

“Normal people,” Sam observed. “People who are not assholes and who were not raised in a barn, meet their friends at a predetermined place and actually stay there until they show up.”

“Did you run all the way around the park before he could get there?” Tony demanded. Steve said nothing but his smug look seemed to speak for itself.

“You’re going to freak out some poor taxi driver and cause a five car pileup,” Bucky said with a huff, taking a bite from his burrito. Steve looked from Bucky to the empty box in the bin and frowned.

“You ate all the burritos again?” Steve asked with a hurt look. Bucky took another bite of his burrito before grinning back.
“This place is like sixth grade,” Sam sighed.

“Why are Phil and Clint sleeping on the couch?” Bruce questioned cautiously, appearing in the doorway from the Rec Room, his hair mussed and one eye still half closed.

“Jay?” Tony prompted.

“Agent Barton emerged from his room approximately an hour after retiring, his heart rate and respiration roughly 30% above normal,” JARVIS replied. Steve made a face.

“Nightmares,” he said with a frown.

“This is not your fault,” Sam reminded sharply, retrieving a mug from the cabinet.

“Yeah, whose fault is it?” Steve huffed in reply.

“Do I need to get a therapist in?” Tony suggested. “Because I’m head hunting the world’s finest medical professionals anyway.”

“Do you really think there’s enough therapy in the world to help this lot?” Bruce asked incredulously.

“It’d be fun to watch though,” Tony replied.

“I think you have some misconceptions about how therapy’s supposed to work,” Sam observed.

“What is it with you and the guilt thing?” Bucky demanded. “The fact that there are bad guys in the world that shoot people is not your fault, Steve.”

“Yeah,” Steve gave a tight nod, reaching over and flicking Bucky’s metal arm so that it let out a sharp ping. Bucky rolled his eyes.
“This again?” Tony pulled a face before downing half his cup of coffee.

“Responsibility is completely irrelevant,” Sam reminded, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a sigh. “It doesn’t do anything to help the situation.”

“Yeah, well, neither does staying up half the night staring at readings,” Bruce observed, spooning loose leaf tea into a strainer.

“Nobody made you stay up,” Tony huffed.

“If you make one more misplaced guilty statement about the damn arm I swear I’m going to hit you with it,” Bucky declared with half a growl.

“Do you want to canvas what happens when we leave you in the lab alone again?” Bruce asked drily. He looked down at the strainer with a frown before scooping tea out of it and returning it to the tin.

You’re all assholes,” Tony sulked.

“I wasn’t an asshole before I started hanging around here,” Sam insisted.

“If I had,” Steve began.

“No, shut up, Steve, really,” Bucky insisted. “Because if you don’t, I really am going to hurt you. You’re the only one around here with any delusions about who’s to blame.” There was the sound of awkward shuffling in the doorway and a clearing throat and nearly instantly they all fell silent.

“Too late for breakfast?” Phil asked impassively, Clint peering over his shoulder with a fretful expression. No one said anything.

“Hey Locksley,” Tony broke the silence with a forced brightness that didn’t reach his eyes. He
crossed the kitchen in three strides, grasping Clint’s arm and steering him onto one of the bar stools. “Have a seat, I need to check you.” He pulled a small metal disk from his pocket, pressing it to the back of Clint’s neck.

“Is that my head?” Clint asked in wonder, poking at the projection that flickered to life midair in front of him.

“Yeah, just ignore that,” Tony said, grasping hold of the image and crushing it into a ball before pressing it into the surface of his tablet. “Jay, give me the numbers.”

“Swelling’s down,” Bruce observed, leaning over his shoulder. Tony nodded in agreement.

“No change in synaptic activity,” Tony remarked distractedly.

“Jog his memory,” Bruce suggested with a shrug, moving away to tend to his tea cup.

“Um,” Tony frowned for a moment. “Aspen, we went to Aspen, you remember that at all?” Clint considered the question before slowly shaking his head.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony deflected quickly. “It was a crappy trip anyway.”

“Is that where I got hurt?” Clint asked warily. Tony’s head snapped up and Clint’s expression wavered. “In Aspen, is that where I got hurt?”

“Um, no,” Tony replied, returning his attention to his tablet. “Aspen was last winter. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“He’s only saying that because he lost control on the bunny slope and plowed into a tree,” Bucky stated with his most evil grin. Steve elbowed him gently in the ribs.

“Okay, good enough,” Tony declared, nodding. He reached out to pop the sensor off of Clint’s neck. “You can turn the gain back up on your hearing aid now.”
“My what?” Clint turned wide eyes on him.

“Your,” Tony’s voice trailed off, his expression growing blank. He gave one long blink. “Son of a bitch, did no one tell you?” He turned immediately on Coulson, his eyes narrowing menacingly.

“This is my fault?” Phil demanded in surprise.

“What do you mean my hearing aid?” Clint asked, rubbing at both his ears with a horrified expression.

“Clint, it’s okay,” Phil answered soothingly, crossing the kitchen with rapid steps, both his hands settling on Clint’s arms in a placating gesture. “We had some problems on a mission and there was an explosion. No one got hurt, but the shock wave damaged your ears.”

“I’m not wearing hearing aids!” Clint fairly shouted in panic.

“Easy,” Tony said, resting his hand on the back of Clint’s neck “It’s cool. They’re amazing and tiny and no one can see them, and the controls are right here.” He pressed his thumb lightly over the sub dermal control, his hand gripping just firmly enough to be steadying.

“Better, right?” Tony asked, letting his hand slip down to the middle of Clint’s back. The archer nodded even though his breaths were coming in uneven gasps. “We have to turn them down by about 25% around the medical scanners or it throws the readings off, that’s all. You should be good to go now.”

“Clint, it’s all right,” Phil insisted, his hands lightly rubbing at Clint’s arms. “You can still hear, just not perfectly. The implants Tony made for you work so well that you told me you forget you have them most of the time.” Clint looked up at him with eyes like saucers.

“Do I do anything around here besides get hurt?” Clint asked letting out a stuttering breath. Phil gaped back at him, unsure how to answer.

“Why the hell didn’t someone brief him about his hearing aids?” Steve asked in exasperation, his
expression pained as he gave Tony a condemning look.

“Stevie, it’s been a little chaotic around here,” Bucky reminded, nudging him with his shoulder.

“Here, have a cup of tea,” Bruce offered, settling the mug into Clint’s trembling hands. “Actually, I’m kind of concerned that you didn’t notice your hearing was diminished.”

“I noticed,” Clint admitted, his tone soft as he ducked his head, staring into his mug.

“But you didn’t say anything,” Sam observed, keeping his tone as unthreatening as possible. Clint only shrugged. “We kind of need you to tell us when something isn’t right.”

“Didn’t seem like a big deal,” Clint paused for a moment eying him warily. “I fell down, down some stairs, when I was a kid. I didn’t hear that great after that.” Tony’s expression darkened almost instantly.

“Right,” he declared with just a hint of sharpness in his tone. Clint flinched.

Phil’s eyes narrowed, at the moment he wasn’t sure who he was the most angry with. He glanced at Steve who was staring at Clint with sad eyes and then at Bucky who was leaning over Steve’s shoulder with a murderous expression. He drew in a breath; he needed to defuse this before things got any worse.

“Dear god, Barton.”

Phil hid his wince at the all too familiar voice, turning slowly to find Nick Fury standing in the kitchen doorway, Commander Hill at his side. Nick’s face was screwed up in a sour expression, his one eye narrowed in derision.

“Did you forget how to lie effectively, too?” Fury directed at Clint who pulled a face, looking uneasy.

“Sir?” he asked in a small voice. Fury’s menacing scowl slid off his face, replaced by an
“How ya doing, Barton?” Fury asked, his tone a fraction softer. Clint shrugged, ducking his head and Fury let the faintest hint of a worried frown show through his carefully guarded mask.

“JARVIS,” Tony interrupted with a hint of irritation. “Who let the Pirate King in here?”

“Ms. Potts has forbidden me from locking Commander Hill out of the tower, sir.” JARVIS answered.

“Oh,” Tony said, glancing at Hill before eyeing Fury suspiciously.

“I wanted to stop in and tell you how much I appreciated the in depth reports of what the actual hell’s been going on around here,” Fury stated, folding his arms over his chest. “Nothing, absolutely nothing, puts my mind at ease like knowing that earth’s mightiest heroes are in capable hands.”

“Sir, I was,” Phil began but Fury cut him off with a glower.

“And that’s why I don’t officially work here,” Sam announced cheerfully. He grabbed two bananas from the fruit bowl on the counter and lifted the box of pastries Bruce had just pulled from the refrigerator before draping his free arm around Barton’s shoulder “Come on, Clint, let these guys deal with their emotional constipation. You can watch Bugs Bunny with me.”

“Count me in!” Bucky nodded, hopping down from the counter. “Jay, queue it up, none of that modern crap!”

“Traitor,” Steve hissed after him.

“Might I recommend 1955 as a particularly good year for Looney Tunes?” JARVIS answered drolly As Clint half turned, glancing over his shoulder nervously as Sam muscled him from the room.
“That’s the ticket,” Bucky agreed, following Sam and Clint out into the rec room, thumping Sam lightly on the back as he passed them. “Come on, it’s Wabbit Season.” Steve’s mouth curled down in an irritated frown, momentarily distracted by the strains of the familiar opening theme.

“Now that the kids are occupied,” Fury stated, bracing his fists on his hips. “Which one of you assholes want to brief me on the status of one of my few actual friends?”
“A moderate head trauma?” Nick fury demanded, waving his coffee mug in the direction of the rec room. “That’s what you call moderate, Coulson?”

“In my defense,” Phil sighed, shaking his head. “When I reported in, the medical staff had classified the injury itself as moderate.”

“Moderate head trauma,” Fury scoffed. “I’d hate to see what you had to say about life threatening battle wounds.”

“Mostly dead?” Tony suggested drily, giving Fury a glare as he patted Phil on the back over the scar from Loki’s spear. Fury’s eye narrowed as Phil shot a scowl over his shoulder.

“Guys,” Steve gave a warning frown, shaking his head.

“He seems off,” Maria Hill remarked, nodding her thanks as Steve handed her a mug. “Does he seem off to anyone else?”

“It’s complicated,” Bruce admitted, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes.

“He remembers people but not how he met them,” Natasha replied, settling against the counter beside Nick. She’d appeared as if summoned only moments after they arrived. No one was brave enough to comment on it. “In some ways it’s like he doesn’t actually know some of us, not the way he used to.” Hill winced, attempting to hide her reaction in her mug.

“Do you remember what he was like when I recruited him?” Phil asked, glancing at Nick with a strained expression.

“I remember a scrawny little shit who used to mount RC-modded nerf guns to the top of the robotic vacuums at HQ and then use them to shoot a room full of senior agents in the middle of classified debriefs.” Fury declared with a disgusted frown. Hill covered her mouth with her hand to hide her
smile as Steve and Natasha struggled not to laugh.

“No,” Phil shook his head. “Before that.” Fury stared back at him a long moment.

“Fuck,” he hissed out between clenched teeth.

“Why, what was he like?” Steve asked, glancing at Natasha.

“Don’t look at me,” she shrugged. “Clint had been with SHIELD for what, four years, when he recruited me?” Phil gave a clipped nod.

“So one of the sharpest guys I’ve ever known and one of the best Agents in SHIELD history has just lost over a decade of finely honed skill and experience.” Fury remarked with a huff “What were you planning on doing with this?”

“Hire the best people I could find and pay them until they fix him,” Tony replied with a frown as if that were obvious. Maria opened her mouth to reply but Steve cut her off.

“We’re not willing to entertain the idea that he won’t be getting better,” Steve insisted firmly. Maria’s mouth snapped shut.

“That’s real nice,” Nick observed with a nod. “Must be comforting living in a world where everything is fixable.”

“You’re not helping, sir,” Phil said frowning as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You want to talk about helping, SHIELD must have done some research into,” Bruce began but Tony interrupted.

“Memory messer-uppering?” he suggested.
“That,” Bruce nodded, pointing at him.

“That,” Bruce nodded, pointing at him.

“Nothing I’d classify as successful,” Phil stated, shooting a look at Nick.

“Practically everything we had went public when we took out Hydra,” Fury said turning his own grim look on Steve.

“What about what didn’t go public?” Steve asked, his eyes narrowed in displeasure.

“I can give you what research we have,” Fury shrugged. “I’d like a little quid pro quo if you actually get anywhere with it.”

“As long as it’s nothing that can be weaponized,” Steve nodded in agreement before Tony could protest.

“In the meantime Is there a way to test and see what he does actually remember?” Fury asked.

“We could probably rig something up,” Bruce said, glancing at Tony who nodded in grudging agreement.

“We’ve been a little hesitant to push,” Steve admitted. “Helen said the best thing for him was to let him heal and see if he could regain his memory on his own.”

“How’s that worked out for you?” Maria questioned.

“About as well as you’d think,” Natasha replied, folding her arms over her chest. She glanced out into the rec room where Clint was sandwiched on the sofa between Sam and Bucky, his arms wrapped around his knees as all three of them watched a singing, dancing cartoon frog.

“What about his aim, anyone checked that?” Fury asked. “Even when he was a raw kid he was still the best marksman I’ve ever seen.”
“Eager to get him back out in the field, Nick?” Tony asked scathingly.

“Yes, Stark, call me crazy but I am keenly interested in whether or not the man who’s helped save the planet dozens of times is in any condition to do it again.”

“He’s not,” Steve said with a sigh, dragging his fingers through his hair. “We pulled him off the roster.”

“For how long?” Hill asked with a cringe.

“Until he says otherwise,” Steve insisted firmly.

“Fury has a point,” Bruce allowed, carefully neutral. “A lot of memory is anchored in the senses. He could get a bow in his hands and it could help him regain access to at least those related memories.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Natasha agreed.

“Hey, I’d take him on a world tour of every place he’d ever been on a mission if I thought it would help,” Tony said with a scowl. “But whatever’s going on in his cranium it’s not dissociative.”

“It’s genuine physical inability to access parts of his memory,” Bruce agreed. “But really what have we got to lose by trying?” Tony shrugged looking put upon.

“Well this is just great, Captain,” Fury said, shooting a half glare at Steve. “Your team is down its defensive lynchpin and from what I can see you don’t have any real plans on what to do about it. What’s the planet supposed to do in the meantime?”

“I think you’re forgetting that the Avengers one, don’t work for you,” Tony stated with a scowl. “And two, are all here out of the kindness of our hearts to begin with.”

“That is a scary thought,” Bruce observed, glancing between Tony and Natasha who was wearing her most disaffected expression.
“Director Fury, we appreciate all the help SHIELD has provided us over the years,” Steve began diplomatically.

“We do?” Tony asked incredulously. Bruce elbowed him in the ribs.

“But this is an internal matter,” Steve soldiered on. “We understand Hawkeye is your friend and that he’s chosen to remain a part of SHIELD so we’ll gladly keep you apprised of his condition.”

“If I have to,” Tony snarled under his breath.

“But we’re going to make the decisions we feel are in his best interests,” Steve concluded, pretending he hadn’t heard. “The Avengers want to continue working with SHIELD, I hope you won’t take any of this personally but we have to do what we think is best for the team.”

“If I feel like he isn’t getting the care he deserves,” Fury began warningly.

“Nick, do you really think that’s going to be an issue?” Phil demanded.

“No,” Fury allowed. “But I’m covering my bases.”

“I got new people coming in this week,” Tony insisted. “One of them will have some ideas.”

“If there’s anything we can do,” Maria added, standing and setting her mug aside.

“We’ll keep you in the loop,” Steve nodded in agreement.

“Come on, Doctor,” Maria inclined her head at Bruce. “I’ll set you up with secure access to our data.”

“I’m hurt that you’d pick him and not me,” Tony admitted, trailing after them as they headed for
the door. “You used to work for me.”

“Why do you think I picked him?” She asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“Fair enough,” Tony admitted as Bruce stifled a chuckle.

“Explain to me again why I continue to be so invested in that asshole,” Fury demanded, turning to Natasha with a frown.

“You have a type,” she replied with an elegant shrug. Fury let out a huff of a reply and she pushed away from the counter. “Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

“Nick,” Steve called after them. Fury stopped, glancing back. “We’re going to do everything we can for him, but if what’s best for him is that he never goes back in the field—”

“Yeah,” Nick nodded with a resigned sigh before turning back toward the hall and boarding the lift to the lobby with Natasha. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as the doors closed.

“How you holding up?” he asked finally.

“Oh, you know me,” she replied, an almost believable lightness in her tone.

“Yeah, that’d be why I’m asking,” Fury nodded. Her expression gave a nearly imperceptible shift but she shook it off instantly. “I know there’s still a part of you that sees any kind of attachment as a vulnerability. You’re probably never going to get over that, I’m not even going to argue with you about it. But I also know that we’re the closest thing you’ve ever had to family.”

“Does that make you Dad?” she asked with a coy smile. Nick stared back at her unmoved.

“Yes,” he replied firmly.
Natasha bit into her lip, her eyes shimmering as she leaned into his side, his arm slipping around her shoulder.

“He’s alive,” Nick reminded, “and he’s screwed up. But screwed up is Barton’s default setting and mostly we all just roll with it.” Natasha let out a strangled laugh that sounded like regret.

“I’ve seen him worse,” Fury added. “He always seemed to come out of it. Not necessarily unscathed, but he makes it out. And I don’t know what’s wrong with that bastard but generally he comes out better for it.”

“I miss my best friend,” She confessed as if the admission pained her.

“Eh, you’ll get him back,” Fury said with a shrug, giving her shoulder a squeeze. “One way or another. You always do.”

Clint let out a long, low whistle, his eagle eyes tracking along the length of the shooting range at Avenger’s tower.

“Yeah I was impressed too,” Bucky nodded, clapping him roughly on the shoulder and steering him toward the weapons lockers along the back wall. Natasha trailed in their wake several yards, pausing by the control panel to set up the targeting routine.

“Do you really think this is going to work?” Phil asked skeptically, sipping his coffee as he settled into a chair in the observation room. Steve hopped up on the table beside him, his feet dangling over the floor as he looked down over the range. Their angle put them just out of sight of the equipment check area but it was likely Clint had either spotted them anyway or already worked out that they were there. He’d glanced in their direction more than once, his attention quickly turning back to Bucky with cautious unease.

“Not really,” Steve admitted. “But maybe it’ll put a smile on his face. And it won’t do Bucky any harm either.” It had taken some cajoling to get Clint to agree to a trip to the shooting range and he had finally relented when Natasha had offered to go along. Whatever relaxation he had once taken from the practice range seemed lost now as he carefully secured his arm guards by rote.
“Buck’s been a little tense,” Sam observed, situating himself beside Steve and handing him a glass coke bottle before prying the top off of his own. “Probably kind of hits close to home.” he gestured out toward the range where Bucky had just snapped his own arm guards into place and was giving Clint a careful smile.

“I didn’t think about that,” Steve admitted with a sad frown.

“Come on, lets get you armed,” Bucky insisted, keying open the weapons locker with his palm print. “What do you want to start with, Compound or Recurve?”

“I hate Compounds,” Clint wrinkled his nose, shifting to Bucky’s side. “Too much to go wrong, and you can’t draw as fast. And who needs to hit a target that hard anyway?” He stopped short in front of the open locker, blinking in shock at the more than thirty bows carefully racked on the wall and sorted by type and draw.

“Tony owns all these?” He asked breathlessly, his eyes wide as if Christmas had come early.

“No punk, they’re yours,” Bucky replied with a grin, picking up a thin, elegant recurve. “you let me borrow them, though.” He held out the bow to Clint who stared at it mutely.

“They don’t bite, you know,” Bucky added, waving the bow lightly until Clint reached out to take it. He turned back to the locker with a considering frown before selecting another recurve.

“You kind of favor that one,” he added as Clint ran his hands over the bow. “I see you practicing with it a lot.”

“It’s… the balance is perfect,” Clint whispered reverently.

“Don’t let Stark hear you,” Bucky advised with a huff. “His head’s fat enough now.”

“Did he make this?” Clint asked clutching it to his chest as if it were a priceless relic. “For me?”
“SI’s made most of you bows custom,” Bucky explained turning him away from the locker as it slid closed and gently propelling him toward the shooting line. “They’ve had specialized equipment contracts with SHIELD for years. You want to go first or should I?” Clint gazed out over the empty range, a brow furrowing his brow.

“Where’s the targets?” he asked in confusion.

“Okay,” Bucky said hesitantly. “I’ll go first then. Tasha, queue it up?” She gave him a nod and Bucky took his stance, drawing back his bow. There was the pop-hiss of a repulser starting up, the resonance higher and much softer than the iron man suit and a small red ball shot out of one of the open vents that dotted the walls of the room. Bucky released, his arrow sinking into the flying ball and it let out a tone before falling to the floor.

“Woah!” Clint exclaimed, but he had no time to say more as another target bolted from a vent in the ceiling.

“Why do you think he didn’t want to come down here?” Steve mused, watching as Clint’s grin widened in obvious excitement. “It was like pulling teeth.”

“I don’t know, man,” Sam sighed. “He didn’t want to watch cartoons either but once they got started you could tell he enjoyed it.” He hesitated a moment then seemed to think better of whatever he’d been about to say.

“What?” Steve pried, glancing back down at the range as Bucky finished his round and Clint started the next, fairly bursting with excitement.

“I, well, I’ve seen it at the VA with kids who’ve lost parents,” he admitted. “It’s like they’re afraid to enjoy anything because they think it’s just going to be taken away. He kind of reminds me of that.”

“Clint never talks about growing up,” Steve observed, glancing at Phil.

“He has his reasons,” Phil replied cryptically.
“Yeah, I think we all got that,” Sam nodded. “You have to remember, whatever they are, they might have been the distant past to him last week, but right now they’re a lot closer.”

“It’s like what Tony said about him being a sweet kid,” Steve observed, his lips twitching into a smile as Clint let out a whoop, bouncing on his feet as he hit the last target drone.

“Yes, yeah, rub it in, punk,” Bucky said with a smirk. “You only won by one shot.” The bright grin slid off of Clint’s face almost instantly, and he ducked his head, trying desperately to look less pleased with himself. Bucky stared back at him a moment before darting a glance at Natasha who shook her head.

“Hey, we can play best two out of three,” Bucky suggested, his face breaking in a genuine smile. “Or we can have Tasha set up color coded targets and take a go together. You always like that, half the challenge is not hitting my targets while you try to take out yours.” Clint frowned.

“Is that safe with a recurve?” he asked skeptically.

“Yes well we did it once but don’t tell Steve,” Bucky replied with a wry grin as he set his bow on the equipment table and unstrapped his quiver. “We usually switch to handguns for that though.”

“I don’t use guns,” Clint insisted with a disgusted frown. “Guns are for killers.”

Phil sucked in a breath, rolling to his feet as a cold awkward silence settled over the range.

“James,” Natasha warned softly.

“Shit,” Steve hissed under his breath.

“Yeah okay,” Bucky said. His tone flat. Phil was already half way out the door but it was too late, Clint was scrambling out of his gear on sheer muscle memory and making a break for the door before Steve and Sam could even get their feet under them to follow.

“Clint!” Natasha called after him but he was already gone.
“Buck?” Steve practically slid through the opposite door, hardly more than a step behind Phil whose pace never faltered.

“I’ll get him,” Phil promised, holding up his hand to Natasha before hurrying after Clint.

“Bucky?” Steve asked more cautiously this time as Sam stumbled down the last of the stairs and though the door.

“I’m fine,” he said. But it was clear he wasn’t, his hands balled into fists at his sides with a tension that ran so deep he fairly vibrated in place.

“He didn’t mean it, Buck,” Steve said softly. Bucky nodded slowly.

“He kind of did,” Bucky replied, his voice faltering. “I’m going to-” his voice broke off and he let out a breath, heading for the door with stilted steps.

“Let him go lick his wounds,” Sam cautioned, his fingers gently gripping Steve’s arm. He threw a look at Natasha and she gave him a tight nod, carefully following.

“That went well,” Steve observed, rubbing his forehead.

“Man, for around here that’s about as good as you could expect,” Sam sighed.

Chapter End Notes

If you follow me on my Tumblr you know all about Why My Update Schedule is A Mess I'm taking a moment to thank all of you for your magnificent lack of nagging. Life right now is without sleep and without a lot of mental stability and you've all been tremendously patient and encouraging. So thanks for that, truly. Nothing makes it easier to write than the genuine care of people you've made scream and cry over fictional characters. You should all be proud.
If You Give a Mouse a Cookie

Steve’s fingers curled around the edge of the table, his brow knitting as he stared in concentration, eyes narrowed and the very tip of his tongue peeping out between his lips. He gave a slight turn of his head, as if the subtle change of angle could somehow give him new clarity. Finally he let out a breath, his eyes flicking up at the ceiling.

“Is he still hiding in the garage, JARVIS?” Steve asked his expression turning fretful.

“Damnit, Rogers,” Sam let out a growl, leaning over the other side of the pool table to glare at him. “Will you just take the shot?” Steve threw him a look, pulling his cue closer to his chest, his hands wringing at it.

“Sergeant Barnes has ensconced himself in the botany labs on Fifty-three,” JARVIS replied, sounding the faintest bit exasperated. Steve mouthed wordlessly a moment until Sam rolled his eyes.

“Is that the one with the big solarium that has all the weird-ass modified plants in it?” Sam asked, resigned. Steve gave him a confused look.

“It is,” JARVIS confirmed.

“It’s cool,” Sam waved him off, yawning. “He breaks in there because he finds it soothing. Shoot.” He jabbed a finger at the table and Steve sighed, leaning forward to line up the cue.

“He finds eight foot orchids soothing?” Steve asked skeptically, drawing the cue back. He straightened before he could take the shot, looking back up at the ceiling. “Hang on, he breaks in?” Sam let out a groan.

“It’s an experimental lab,” JARVIS explained, his tone clearly vexed. “Supposedly only authorized personnel are allowed to enter.”

“How is he breaking in?” Steve asked, bewildered as Sam lightly banged his head against the side of the pool table. “Why is he breaking in?” The second question he directed at Sam.
“There’s some things I’ve learned not to question around here,” Sam replied seriously, glaring up at Steve though one narrowed eye. “One of them is scientists making giant epiphytes. The other is weird shit that relaxes traumatized ex-assassins.”

“Fair enough,” Steve conceded, lining up his shot again when Sam pointed at the table more forcefully.

“You need to lay off the whole helicopter parent thing,” Sam advised as the 10 ball barely clipped the edge of the side pocket. He considered the table a moment before walking around to the end to line up his own shot.

“I know,” Steve huffed, making a face as the 2 ball rolled neatly into the corner pocket. He propped one hip up on the corner of the table with a sigh. “I just hate to see him-”

“We talked about this,” Sam cut him off, his nose wrinkling as the 6 ball ricocheted out of the opposite corner. “Buck’s working through some serious shit and he’s going to have good days and bad days.”

“And he’s probably always going to have good days and bad days,” Steve added as if parroting back a long repeated conversation. He leaned over the side of the table to make his own shot. “I know.” He gave a satisfied smile as the 15 rolled slowly into the corner.

“All things considered, you need to be happy that there are a hell of a lot more good days than bad days,” Sam added, tilting his head skeptically as the 9 ball wobbled crookedly to a point a good five inches from the side pocket. “How does a guy with your coordination suck so bad at pool?”

“I get paranoid,” Steve admitted, the tips of his ears turning red. “One time we were playing in a bar in London and I shoved the cue three inches into the bumper.”

“You’re kidding me,” Sam gaped back at him, barely hiding the glitter of amusement in his eyes as he leaned over the table to gently tap the cueball.

“I also might have shattered the 8 ball,” Steve added looking guilty.
“Might?”

“We never found it.”

Sam bit his lip, folding his arms over his chest as his shoulders trembled ever so slightly.

“Go ahead and laugh it up,” Steve sulked.

“You’re like this giant golden retriever puppy who keeps crashing into the furniture,” Sam snickered, lining up his next shot. Steve opened his mouth to protest but Sam continued. “And then you sit in the middle of the floor with this sad face when you break the lamp.” Steve frowned at him, his expression sullen as he chalked his cue. He gave Sam a withering glare as the cue ball rolled to a stop in the middle of a cluster of balls near the corner.

“Shut up about the mental disfunction around here and play the game,” Sam said. He paused a moment as Steve considered the table. “Or we can call it a night and head to bed.”

“No, no,” Steve said hastily, leaning over the table. he let out a huff of a swear as the cue ball bounced off half a dozen other balls before rolling out into the middle of the table. “I’ll play.” Sam gave him a calculating look with just a hint of warning before moving around the table. He rested his hand on the bumper, leaning down to eye the ball as he pulled back the cue.

“What about Clint?” Steve directed at the ceiling, his worried tone returning. “Did Phil get him to come out of his room?” Sam let out another groan, rubbing his eyes.

“You know,” he declared before JARVIS could offer a reply. “I never got those Matrix movies. I mean, what do computers and humans have to fight about anyway? Now it all makes sense.” Steve sputtered back at him a moment.

“Young acknowledgement and understanding are deeply appreciated, Sergeant Wilson.” JARVIS said breezily.

“Jay, why do you put up with these losers, man?” Sam asked.
“Forbearance is one of my primary subroutines,” he replied.

“I’ll buy that,” Sam nodded.

“I just want to know that he’s all right,” Steve insisted with a wounded frown.

“Agent Barton has set his room security to blackout,” JARVIS stated. “Unless an alarm or the voice interface is triggered I am unable to access monitoring in his suite without an override code.” Steve’s shoulders sank and he glanced over at Sam like a kicked puppy.

“Don’t look at me,” Sam said warningly, waving his hands in front of him. “I’m not going to call up Tony and ask him for the code. You’re the one having a personal crisis.”

“Mr. Stark did not feel it was ethical for him to retain the code personally,” JARVIS added. “He was concerned that other members of the team might view it as a conflict of interest. He assigned the code to the individual he felt would be least likely to abuse it.”

“Who’s that?” Steve asked curiously.

“You, Captain.”

Steve blinked up at the ceiling a moment processing that bit of information. He was on the verge of smiling when all of the related implications caught up to him and his shoulders slumped again.

“Oh this is rich,” Sam mocked lightly, a teasing grin spreading over his face. “You didn’t mind asking JARVIS to futz with the security settings but you don’t want to do it yourself?”

“I didn’t actually ask JARVIS to do anything,” Steve defended. “I just asked if he could.”

“Well apparently he can’t, but you can,” Sam said smugly, laying his cue aside and rounding the bar to rifle through the mini fridge. “Watching your moral dilemmas is better than baseball, man.”
“It’s not funny,” Steve insisted with only a token protest. He let out a sigh, slumping into one of the bar stools and running his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know, do I actually have that right? I don’t think Clint would appreciate it much.”

“Clint your teammate would not appreciate it at all,” Sam agreed, setting a beer on the bar in front of him. “He might, in fact, be pissed off enough to eat all your cheerios and steal the prize in the box. But what we have right now is like Alternate 1985 Clint.”

“I don’t care if he takes the prize out of the cereal box,” Steve protested.

“You kind of do,” Sam corrected, taking a pull of his beer as Steve toyed absently with his own bottle. “Look, what if we had an honest to god teenager living in the tower, how much independence would you actually be willing to give them and where would you want the safety net?”

“Clint isn’t a kid,” Steve argued.

“Steve,” Sam gave him a look that was both grave and sympathetic. “He’s functionally eighteen years old. I’m not saying he’s not getting better, I’m saying right now he’s as stupid as you were at that age.” Steve seemed to consider that information a moment before cringing.

“JARVIS, adjust Hawkeye’s protocols,” Steve said with a sigh. “Visual only, and just enough to monitor his safety. Alert me if you see anything worrying.” There was a long pause as Steve took a pull of his beer.

“Agent Barton is currently in bed attempting to sleep, his endeavors appear to be thus far unsuccessful,” Jarvis reported.

“Let Natasha and Phil know what I’ve done in the morning,” Steve said, looking more miserable. “If either of them protest, reinstate Clint’s security settings and let me know.”

“If it is any consolation at all, Captain,” JARVIS stated. “I am much more at ease with the increased ability to monitor Agent Barton’s safety.”

“It’s the puppy and the lamp,” Sam insisted, shaking his head.

“Clint’s going to be pissed when he gets his memory back,” Steve sighed.

“When he gets his memory back, the first thing he’s going to do is ask JARVIS if we messed with his security settings,” Sam said with an amused half smile. “Because that’s exactly what he would do if it were one of us.”

“I should have stationed him up high,” Steve declared morosely. “What was I thinking putting him on the ground?”

“Clint asked to be on the ground,” Sam reminded.

“I shouldn’t have let him.”

“Man, at some point we really need to address your guilt issues,” Sam insisted, making a perturbed face. “Because they’re like 98% responsible for every stupid-ass decision you’ve ever made.”

“My guilt issues led to me volunteering as a lab rat,” Steve pointed out.

“Which both reinforces my point and,” Sam paused, letting out a huff, “kind of rebuts it at the same time.”

“If I weren’t so messed up the planet would be flattened by now,” Steve nodded with a wry smile.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Sam replied, forcing down his fond amusement. Steve gave him a weak half smile in return.

“I screwed up Bucky, and then I screwed up Clint,” Steve confessed with a frown. “Then just to make things interesting I set them up so they could screw up each other.”
“You didn’t technically do anything,” Sam protested gently. “Unless you want to count your ability to attract messed up assholes. That you definitely do.”

“You’re here,” Steve observed.

“Yeah but I keep trying to get away,” Sam reminded with a smile. “I might be messed up and an asshole but at least I’m self aware.” Steve let out a bark of a laugh. He shook his head, his expression growing melancholy.

“I keep letting people down,” Steve bit his lip, his expression growing sad. “Worst of all, the people who matter most. The people who never let me down.”

“I don’t think Buck or Clint see it what way,” Sam said. “Things happen when you’re a soldier. Bad guys happen, that’s not your fault.”

“Tell that to Peggy,” Steve gave a snort of derision, darting a glance at Sam as his face crumpled in a pained expression. “I never told her.”

“Told her what?”

“That she was the only girl I was ever going to love,” Steve confessed, his voice faltering.

“Steve,” Sam shook his head.

“I can’t imagine ever feeling for someone else even half of what I felt for her,” Steve confessed bitterly. “I never got the nerve to say it. It shouldn’t have been that hard. The thing is I know that even if the serum never worked, it wouldn’t have mattered to her. I still could have said it. And I didn’t.”

“You honestly think she didn’t know?” Sam asked, his tone gentle. “Steve, man, you wear your heart on your sleeve.”

“She deserved to hear it,” Steve insisted. “At least once. I made her listen to me crash into the
ocean and I didn’t even say it then. How selfish can you get?”

“I could be wrong, but I think it would be worse not knowing what happened to you,” Sam replied, allowing himself a small smile. “You ever pull that shit again, you sure as hell better call someone on the team and tell us.” Steve gave a shudder, shaking his head.

“Don’t even joke about that,” he insisted. He took a pull of his beer, letting his shoulders sag. “I don’t want anyone else to pay the rest of their lives for my mistakes.”

“That’s what makes you a good leader,” Sam replied, poking him gently in the arm. “It’s why I follow you. It’s why Buck and Clint follow you.”

“Look where it’s got ‘em,” Steve sighed.

“You can’t keep the bad stuff from happening, Steve,” Sam said. “Deep down you know that. All you can do is be there to pick up after it does.”

“Agent Coulson,” JARVIS’ hushed tone was barely enough to rouse Phil from what had been a fitful slumber and he let out a groan, rolling onto his side just enough to see his alarm clock on the nightstand, the softly glowing hands pointing to 3:23 AM.

“Oh god, tell me it’s not an Assemble,” he said, flinging his arm over his eyes as he sprawled out on his back.

“It is not an assemble,” JARVIS assured. He paused for only a beat but the uncharacteristic hesitation was enough for Phil to take notice. He let his arm fall away, frowning at the ceiling. “I believe you have a visitor, sir.” Phil rubbed the sleep from his eyes, slowly rolling to a sitting position.

"Lights," he muttered gruffly. A gradual glow suffused the room and Phil blinked blearily up at the doorway to find a shadowy figure hunched against the frame.
"You said if I needed anything," Clint offered hesitantly. Phil stared back at him in silence for a long moment.

“You’re in my room,” Phil observed. There was something very off about all of this and if he could just wrestle his brain down for a solid hour of sleep he was certain he could figure out exactly what. Clint’s only reply was to duck his head, shoving his hands deeper into the ratty track pants he was wearing.

“Why,” Phil began but shook his head, muttering half to himself. “No, wrong question. How are you in my room?” Clint opened his mouth as if to answer but seemed to think better of it. Phil narrowed his eyes, trying to force the jello-like mass between his ears to solidify and do its damn job. The last he remembered Clint had all but barricaded himself in his suite, refusing to come out and insisting though JARVIS that he was perfectly fine. For certain values of “perfectly fine” as they applied to the Avengers, Phil had supposed that was a fair assessment.

“Did you break into my room?” Phil asked in bewilderment. Despite the fact that he was too tried to see clearly he was more than certain that simply picking the lock to his suite wasn’t something that was even doable unless JARVIS happened to be off line. Clint blushed scarlet, hunching down further against the doorframe.

“JARVIS, did you let him break into my room?” Phil demanded, his voice pitched low so that Clint would be less likely to hear.

“Considering that the alternative of activating the security protocols would be in direct contrast to your previously stated goals of keeping agent Barton calm and relaxed, it seemed preferable at the time.” JARVIS replied. Phil tried very, very hard not to glare at the ceiling. He drew in a deep breath, letting it out slowly before turning his attention back to Clint who was still hovering in the doorway with a nervous expression.

“Clint, why did you break into my room?” he asked finally.

“It’s… my…” Clint sagged as if he were deflating, his shoulders hunching up around his ears as he toed at the carpet with one bare foot. “I couldn’t sleep. And, well you said you didn’t mind watching my back.” Phil winced, rubbing at his eyes.

“That’s not a reason to break in,” Phil pointed out, struggling to keep his sleep addled mind from
being distracted by the way Clint’s t-shirt rode up on one side, revealing a tantalizing peek at well defined abs. Phil shook his head like a dog throwing off water. “You could have knocked.”

“I didn’t want to wake you,” Clint admitted guiltily. Phil’s face screwed up in an expression that was meant to be contemplative but probably came off far more pained than he would have liked.

“And what were you planning on doing once you got in here if waking me wasn’t on the agenda?” he asked finally.

“I was going to sleep on the floor,” Clint admitted, Phil gave him a gaping look and he hastily added, “I don’t mind, honest, the carpet here is really soft.” Phil rubbed at his eyes, his own shoulders sagging.

“Get into bed,” he ordered, a touch more sharply than he intended.

“I don’t-” Clint began hesitantly.

“Barton,” Phil interrupted, twitching back the covers. “We’ve squashed together on moth-eaten cots in safe houses over half of Europe, I can certainly make room for you on a California King mattress.”

“You sure you don’t mind?” Clint asked, but he was edging speedily around the foot of the bed toward the other side as if trying to take advantage of Phil’s lack of better judgement before he could take back his offer.

“What I mind is the risk of stepping on you in the middle of the night when the Assemble goes off,” Phil replied, sighing in resignation. He waited until Clint had gingerly slipped beneath the covers before settling back into the pillows. JARVIS lowered the lights without comment and he closed his eyes, drawing in several slow, deep breaths as he tried to quiet his jumbled mind. Clint shifted on the mattress and Phil let out a huff of a breath.

Clint was in his bed. Clint Barton was in Phil’s bed, mere inches away and the temptation to watch Clint sleep, to reach out and touch, if only the barest of fingertip caresses, was nearly overwhelming. He hated the entire universe very much right now.
He winced, forcing himself to relax. He was a grown man, he reminded himself, and though having Clint in his luxuriously-appointed bed in Stark tower was a far cry from the pair of them huddling together for warmth under a culvert in New Zealand, he was perfectly capable of keeping things on a professional level. He wasn’t a child, he could control his impulses. Clint shifted and Phil drew in a steadying breath, willing himself to settle back into sleep. Perfectly capable.

“Phil?” Clint murmured softly.

Perfectly capable.

“Yes?”

“How many people have I killed?”

Phil let out a slow breath, rolling onto his side facing Clint. In the distant reflection of city lights he could just make out hazel eyes and the thin line of Clint’s lips pressed tight together in worry.

“I’m not going to answer that,” Phil said seriously. “Because you have no context.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Clint asked, a hint of irritation showing through. Phil pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“Let’s say, for example, you’re in Central Park,” Phil began. “Just walking along, minding your own business, and you spot a man and a woman with a little girl. The woman looks terrified and she’s pleading with the man who has ahold of the girl and a gun pointed to her head. What do you do?”

“I…” Clint drew in a shaky breath. “I don’t know.” he admitted finally.

“What if you had your bow?” Phil asked. Clint opened his mouth to reply but Phil cut him off before he could answer. “What if the only safe shot you had was a head shot?” Clint shuddered.

“I’d take it,” he said in a small voice.
“Of course you would,” Phil said gently. “Because the Clint Barton I know would never endanger a child, or allow one to be threatened. He’s a good man, and any number I can tell you wouldn’t show you that.”

“So I’ve saved people?” Clint questioned. Phil hummed in reply, nodding as he shut his eyes. He burrowed deeper into his pillow. It was nearly another full minute before Clint asked. “How many?”

“About seven billion.” He allowed himself a small smile at Clint’s sharp intake of breath. The room stilled, the soft wisp of the clock ticking out a steady beat as Clint’s breathing evened out, settling into a calm, deep rhythm. Phil had almost slipped back into slumber when Clint spoke again.

“I don’t think I can save anybody else,” he whispered. Phil was tempted to feign sleep but he rolled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling.

“Then you don’t have to,” he stated as firmly as he could manage. “It’s okay if you can’t anymore. If you need out, I’ll see that you’re safe. You have my word. You don’t ever have to pick up a weapon again if you don’t want to.”

“What am I going to do?” Clint asked shakily.

“Don’t worry about that,” Phil insisted, reaching out to wrap his fingers around Clint’s wrist in a firm, reassuring pressure. “It’ll be fine. Let me take care of it. Get some sleep.” Phil closed his eyes with a sigh.

A moment later he let out a huff of surprise as a hundred and eighty pounds of archer fairly crashed on top of him, Clint’s arms tangling around him like a squid.

“You’re-” Clint’s voice was watery as he clung to Phil, his nose pressed awkwardly into Phil’s collarbone. “Thank you, you’re a good friend and I don’t… just thanks.” As quickly as the charge had come, Clint retreated just as hastily, scrambling back to his own side of the bed to curl into a ball beneath the blankets as Phil stared mindlessly at the ceiling.

Well, Hell.
Perfectly capable, Phil reminded himself as he cursed the universe and several of the adjacent ones under his breath.
“What is that smell?” Tony stalled on the threshold of the kitchen, sniffing the air with the narrowed eyes of suspicious curiosity.

“Phil’s making Banana Pancakes!” Clint announced in reply, an almost fiendish grin on his face as he clutched his knife and fork. Beside him at the breakfast bar Thor was perusing a magazine, his brow furrowed as Darcy leaned over his other shoulder, meticulously emptying packets of sweetener into a soup-sized cup of coffee.

“Isn’t this the second time this week?” she asked leaning forward to look at Clint with a frown.

“I like pancakes,” Clint replied, defensive but Phil shushed him.

“Eat your breakfast,” Phil ordered, sliding a heaping plate in front of him and placing a second before Thor, then turning to Darcy. “There’s batter left.”

“Only if you haven’t put bananas in it yet,” she said wrinkling her nose. Phil shook his head, turning to Tony.

“Food’s food, I’m in,” Stark replied with a shrug before slouching across the kitchen to the k-cup machine.

“What of this?” Thor asked pensively, his fork hovering in mid air over his plate.

“No way,” Darcy shook her head, slowly stirring her coffee. “Don’t get me wrong, a mermaid would look fantastic on Jane, but you’ve never had to dance in one of those things, it’s a nightmare to shimmy.” Thor nodded thoughtfully, turning the page.

“What guidance can you offer?” he questioned, turning to her as Clint peered curiously over his shoulder, munching at his pancakes.

“Well for my money It’s A-line,” Darcy replied thoughtfully, licking off her spoon. “Though Jane could easily pull off Peplum or a traditional Ball.”
“What in god’s name are you reading?” Tony asked, blinking at them. Thor lifted the magazine to reveal the cover of “Brides”. Tony stared back at him blankly.

“That’s pretty,” Clint observed, leaning into Thor’s shoulder as he shoveled a forkful of pancake into his mouth.

“I like it as well,” Thor agreed, nodding as he returned to the perusal of his magazine.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and ask,” Tony admitted. “Isn’t it called “Brides” for a reason?”

“Shhh,” Darcy waved a disinterested hand at him. “We’re educating him.” Tony rubbed his eyes, shaking his head. Thor seemed unfazed, however, continuing to absently devour his breakfast as he leafed slowly through the magazine with a meticulous eye, pausing now and again to skim an article or study a photograph. Beside him Clint was wolfing down his pancakes as if he hadn’t been fed in a week. Tony swept his mug out of the k-cup machine, downing a huge gulp before hopping up on the counter beside the stove.

“You’re looking a little ragged,” Phil observed, keeping his tone low. “Another all nighter?”

“I didn’t plan on it,” Tony replied with a weary sigh, keeping his voice low enough not to be overheard. “But about the time I’m finally tired enough to let it go, Oh Captain My Captain and his nuclear guilt complex comes wandering into the lab.”

“He’s taking it hard,” Phil reminded.

“Who isn’t?” Tony demanded rolling his eyes. “I swear, the guy must not sleep more than about three or four hours a night.”

“Two and a half to three,” Phil replied, ladling batter onto the griddle. Tony stared at him a moment with his mug halfway to his mouth.

“Lucky bastard,” Stark declared half under his breath.
“How come there are so many flowers?” Clint asked, wrinkling his nose as he shoved a bite of pancake in his mouth.

“Does seem a bit excessive,” Darcy agreed, nodding.

“I am meant to understand that there is significant meaning in the presentation and variety of flowers,” Thor observed.

“I guess Jane said yes then?” Tony asked, his lips curling up in the faintest smirk.

“She has,” Thor confirmed with a fond smile.

“Seriously?” Darcy asked, aiming the barest derision at Tony as she grasped hold of Thor’s wrist, holding his arm up. “Who says no to these?” She jabbed a finger at Thor’s bicep, the muscles well chilled despite his obvious lax state. Thor gave her an amused smile.

“Fair enough,” Tony nodded. “So where’s the future Mrs. Prince of Asgard, ordering the cake?”

“Jane’s in the lab,” Darcy replied.

“She said she didn’t care much how the wedding turned out,” Clint added around a mouthful of pancake.

“She said she wasn’t picky as long as everything was tasteful and understated,” Darcy corrected, shaking her head as if in disapproval. “That woman does not have a bridezilla bone in her body.”

“Be grateful,” Tony snorted. “You’re the maid of honor.” Darcy only shrugged, returning her attention to Thor.

“So have you had any luck?” Phil asked softly, his eye darting toward Clint.

“If by luck you mean successful procedural models, then no,” Tony admitted in a tone that said he was taking the lack of results personally. “I’ve talked with six neurosurgeons and a host of
specialists. So far all I’ve got is a consensus that ‘the brain is still a mystery.’ How are these people the best in their field?”

“Is Bruce still looking over the SHIELD data?” Phil asked. Tony nodded.

“We’ve got a vague, almost theory” he added. “Out of both our leagues really, so I’ve got a cellular biologist coming in this week. And that cost me a pretty penny, let me tell you. I had to offer her 50% and compensate her university to replace her. She better be worth it.” Phil didn’t answer and Tony frowned, glancing back over at the breakfast bar.

“I am confused as to why a reception takes place after the ceremony rather than before,” Thor admitted, frowning at the magazine.

“Ah it’s just a name,” Darcy brushed off the protest. “You’ve told me about Asgard parties, you guys clearly know how to throw a shindig.”

“You know, I know at least six, probably more, wedding planners,” Tony interrupted. “I can hook you up with Franck, he’s brilliant. I can’t understand a word he says but his events are spectacular.”

“There are those on Midgard whose sole purpose is to plan the wedding feast?” Thor frowned.

“The whole wedding,” Tony corrected.

“I am not,” Thor paused, his frown deepening. “On Asgard it is the duty of the groom to plan a great celebration in honor of his new bride. While I am not too proud to admit that I shall require assistance, it seems disingenuous to lay the entire task at the feet of another.”

“Your funeral, Shakespeare,” Tony sighed, shaking his head.

“Just don’t go nuts,” Darcy insisted, patting his shoulder as she slipped off her bar stool. “Jane’ll freak out. I need to run some data for one of her experiments, Clint, keep him in line for me.” Clint gave her a grin and a sloppy salute, still holding his knife and Darcy let out a snort of a laugh, giving him a squeeze as she headed out the door.
“It might be me, but he doesn’t seem as tense today,” Tony observed thoughtfully. “I mean, he looks less likely to rabbit at least” He watched as Thor draped a careful arm around Clint’s shoulders. For once the archer didn’t visibly start, instead leaning into the contact.

“He seems like he’s doing a little better,” Phil allowed, flipping a pancake. “At least part of the time. Natasha hasn’t been able to get him back on the range and he goes a little squirrelly when Sam or Steve come into the room. I don’t think he’s even seen Bucky since the… incident.”

“Barnes has been keeping clear,” Tony agreed. “Can’t say as I blame him, either.” Phil nodded grudgingly and Tony returned his attention to Clint.

“He’s definitely less high strung this morning,” Tony observed, keeping his voice low enough that the pair across the kitchen wouldn’t hear. “JARVIS said he wandered into your room again last night. What is that, fourth day in a row?”

“Third,” Phil huffed out, keeping his attention on the griddle.

“Hey, I’m not judging how you get him to relax,” Tony replied, giving Phil a bit of a leer. Phil blinked slowly twice before turning his head to gape up at him. “Oh don’t do that, everyone around here knows you play for both teams!”

“Oh my god,” Phil bit out through clenched teeth, his eyes going wide. “What did you say to the others?”

“Relax,” Tony made an impatient face. “If you’re worried about Spangles, don’t. He grew up in Brooklyn not Mobile. Gays aren’t a new thing, they did have them in the 40’s.”

“Tony,” Phil hissed back angrily. “Did you, or did you not imply to Steve that I was seducing your physically injured and emotionally compromised teammate?” Stark stared at him mutely for a very long moment.

“Well when you say it like that it just sounds creepy,” he admitted finally. Phil’s eyes narrowed in bitter resentment.

“I didn’t say anything,” Tony placated quickly, cringing slightly at Phil’s contemptuous glare. “I didn’t!” Phil flipped two pancakes out of the griddle and onto a plate before shoving it into Tony’s
chest, the fork clacking loudly against the rim. Tony took a moment to stare down at the plate in his hands, watching Phil with a side-eyed frown.

“You wouldn’t poison me, would you?” he asked carefully.

“I certainly wouldn’t poison you,” Phil replied sharply, leaving a breath of a pause. “In a manner that could be attributed to me.” Tony seemed to consider this.

“Pancakes should be safe then,” he allowed, digging in. Phil made a perturbed face, plating the last of the pancakes. He let out a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“So if you didn’t...” Tony made a gesture with his hand and Phil threw him a look so scathing it made him wince. “You must have done something like... talking?”

“It was, in fact, almost exactly like talking,” Phil replied, cutting into his pancakes with more than the necessary violence.

“Well,” Tony prompted, clearly unable to take a hint.

“I told him he could retire from the field permanently,” Phil replied. Tony choked on his pancake, grasping up his coffee mug and downing it in three gulps as he sputtered. Clint glanced up from his breakfast with a worried frown and Tony waved a dismissive hand at him, trying to hide the fact that his lips were turning very slightly blue.

“Why did you tell him that?!?” Tony demanded in a horrified whisper when he could finally breathe again. Phil shot a covert look at the breakfast bar but Clint was already once more distracted by Thor who was comparing chocolate and champagne fountains.

“Because that’s what he wanted me to tell him!” Phil hissed back. his voice barely audible.

“Tell me you’re not serious!” Tony begged through clenched teeth.

“Of course I’m serious!” Phil replied in exasperation. “Look at him, does he look like he’s in any condition to return to the field?”
“Now? No, of course not!” Tony agreed, darting looks across the kitchen to be sure they hadn’t been overheard. “But he will be! He’s going to get his memory back!”

“And what if he doesn’t?”

“Then we take him back anyway!” Tony insisted, his temper barely throttled.

“If he doesn’t get his memory back he’s never going back in the field,” Phil declared, his expression pinched. “He’s horrified at the idea, I’m not going to let you push him into something he doesn’t want.”

“Fuck you,” Tony snapped. “The Clint I know, the one you know, he would never give this up. Never. He’s getting his memory back. Thanks for breakfast.” Tony dropped the nearly empty plate onto the counter with a loud clack and stormed out of the door, his footfalls heavy as he plodded down the hall.

“Is Tony okay?” Clint asked worriedly. Phil struggled to hide his wince.

“He tends to lack for social graces when he is not adequately caffeinated,” Thor remarked, his attention still focused on his magazine. He took a sip of his coffee, his forehead creasing in a frown. “Eight simple tricks that will stun your wedding guests.” He paused, seeming to consider this for a long moment before turning his attention to Phil

“I was not aware that ritual combat was a common feature in nuptial ceremonies on Midgard.” Thor declared. Phil bit back a groan, closing his eyes with a sigh.

From under the stair alcove in the rec room, Bucky slipped a hand over his mouth, stifling his chuckle. A fond smile curled his lips as Clint began a rambling dissertation about the time he and his brother snuck into a mud wrestling arena, much to the delight of Thor and the chagrin of Coulson. Bucky didn’t normally go in for weddings, but maybe Thor’s would be the exception. It certainly seemed off to a promising start.

“Steve’s worried about you,” Natasha announced, her tone soft as she appeared behind him, though if he were startled he gave no outward sign.
“Yeah, well, it serves him right,” Bucky huffed. “I spent years worrying about that idiot.”

“I know all of this has been hard for you,” Natasha said softly.

“Sam keeps reminding me I’m not going to be back to 100% overnight,” Buck shrugged her off, looking down at his feet.

“That’s not what I meant,” she replied. Bucky bit his lip, hunching further into the alcove.

“None of us have missed how you and Clint,” Natasha’s voice trailed off as if she were looking for the right words.

“Had an epic bromance going on?” Bucky asked with a touch of sarcasm, Natasha’s only answer was a disapproving frown and he let out another sigh. “It’s just,” He drew in a breath, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

“You should go in,” Natasha suggested after a moment. Bucky ducked his head, folding his arms over his chest.

“Nah, it’s okay,” he sighed, shaking his head slowly, his hair tumbling into his eyes. “He’s almost done eating, I’ll wait.”

“You can’t avoid him forever,” she pointed out, her tone soft as she slipped closer to him, her arm barely brushing his.

“I’m not planning on it,” Bucky insisted. “Just long enough for him to get his footing, stop acting like I’m…”

“Going to eat him?”

“I was going to say dismember.” he replied, trying to force an amused smile that only looked sad.

Natasha smiled slowly, glancing away as Clint slid off his bar stool, carrying his dishes to the sink.
with less than his usual casual grace. For a man prone to accidents, he’d always been fluid in his motions, confident and sure footed even when the proverbial rug happened to be sliding out from under him. The smile so slow to bloom slipped off her face at the same painful pace.

“There’s still big chunks of my memory that never came back,” Bucky said finally, watching Clint as he helped Phil clean up the breakfast dishes. “I mean, I know there’s something there, but it’s in this fog, probably from the drugs.”

“You’re probably better off without those memories,” Natasha reminded. Bucky nodded in agreement.

“Watching him grasping at what he can’t get hold of,” Bucky murmured, pausing to rub his face with his hands, drawing in a shaking breath. “God, I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, least of all him.”

“He’s going to be okay,” Natasha declared on reflex. “So are you.” Bucky didn’t answer.

“If I dig hard enough there are things I can remember,” he admitted presently. “I can remember a ballet theater, you in a black leotard with your hair in a pony tail. It was brown then.”

“That was a long time ago,” she replied.

“I remember pointing a gun at you.” he added.

“James,” she gave him a warning look but he pressed on.

“There’s a gash on your head, and I think your left arm is broken,” The words seem to pour out of him now as if he were powerless to stop them. “I can’t remember if I pulled the trigger.” Natasha drew in a shaking breath, her shoulders going rigid.

“I did, didn’t I?” he asked softly.

“You didn’t,” Natasha insisted, her voice gentle. “It wasn’t your choice.” Bucky swallowed thickly, brushing clumsily at his eyes.
“I remember Paris,” he croaked out. “And Budapest.”

“You remember Paris?” she asked breathlessly. Bucky nodded slowly, blinking back tears and she pressed up against his side, one arm tangling around his waist. “Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“What could I say?” Bucky asked miserably. “I’m sorry for ruining your life?”

“You saved my life!”

“I abandoned you,” He insisted. “I took you out of the only life you’d ever known and I left you in the French countryside with nothing!”

“You were captured!” Natasha replied, her low voice nearing the very edge of angry. “You got me out! I’d have never made it out on my own, I wouldn’t have even tried!”

“Is that why you tried so hard to get me out in Budapest?” he asked, his voice faltering. Natasha stared at him speechlessly a moment.

“Yes,” she whispered. “You gave me a chance at a life of my own. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t have done to return the favor.”

“You don’t owe me,” Bucky said, turning his head to meet her gaze. “Whatever tally you think we’re keeping, it’s good. If anything I owe you. There’s no red in your ledger next to my name.” A soft smile curled Natasha’s lips.

“Does that mean I can call in a favor?” She asked.

“It’s not a favor,” Bucky insisted. “whatever it is you need, just ask.” Natasha’s eyes twinkled in amusement and in one swift motion the hand that had been resting on his arm was fisting in the front of his shirt, pulling him down into a heated kiss.
“Totally worth calling in a favor,” she murmured against his lips as he blinked back at her, startled. A moment later she was gone, a subtle sashay in her step as she headed for the kitchen. Bucky watched her go, his breathing uneven.

“I am so very screwed,” he whispered, leaning against the wall as if it were the only thing holding him upright.
Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do You See?

Phil woke to a warmth prodding his side and a weight pinning his left arm to the bed. He winced slightly, raising his free hand to rub at his eyes before sluggishly turning his head. Clint was curled up, his knees pressing into Phil’s ribs and his face buried in Phil’s bicep. Phil took in a long deep breath and let it out slowly.

Phil had woken in more than his share of uncomfortable places in his time, so the cold toes digging into his hip weren’t nearly as distressing as the fact that he was almost completely certain he had gone to bed alone the night before. Clint had turned up on his doorstep at a quarter to ten, asked if Phil would like to watch a movie and then promptly passed out cold on the sofa. Phil had left him there with a blanket and maybe an almost caress of the archer’s hair that had been hanging in his eyes. Now he was curled in a ball on top of Phil’s comforter, the blanket from the couch half twisted around his torso.

Phil shifted onto his side, dislodging the knees from his ribs and allowed himself a full minute to stare. While most people tended to look peaceful and less careworn in sleep, Clint’s brow was knitted, his lips turned down as if in distress. Phil didn’t find the look particularly good on him.

“Clint,” he said softly, his voice scratchy from sleep. He tried to jiggles his arm a little but all he got for his trouble was a soft snuffling sound. “Clint?” Phil stifled a yawn, reaching over to lay a gentle hand on Clint’s arm. Clint let out a whine, curling in on himself so that his knees were pressed to his chest, his toes prodding Phil’s stomach.

“Clint, wake up,” he ordered, more firmly this time. Clint unwound like a spring, rolling away with a stifled whimper and Phil reached out quickly, catching the hem of his t-shirt before he could tumble onto the floor. He flailed a moment, choking back sounds of distress before startling awake, his eyes wide and his breathing rapid.

“Sorry,” Clint gasped out, the word jagged. He took a shuddering breath, seeming to sink into the mattress as he glanced at Phil out of the corner of his eye with a shamed expression. “Sorry, I—”

“It’s alright,” Phil interrupted before he could say any more, offering his softest smile. Clint smiled back, both embarrassed and wary and Phil reached out to rub his arm. “Are you okay?” Clint gave a tight nod in reply, drawing in a shaky breath.

“I was dreaming about the last group home we were in,” Clint admitted softly. “The old man used to rough us up. Not as bad as dad used to, he was careful not to leave marks the social workers would see. But he got pretty rough. You probably heard me say this before, haven’t you?”
“You don’t talk about it often,” Phil said simply. “It wasn’t hard to work out from the information in your file, but you didn’t seem comfortable talking about it so I never asked.” Clint seemed to consider that for a moment, picking at the hem of the blanket.

“He had a temper,” Clint continued. “He was always yelling and swearing, and if you stood in the wrong place for too long he’d punch you in the ribs. Not hard, just enough to knock you back good. Or he’d grab you by the hair, he did that to me a lot because he’d say something and I didn’t hear him so I wouldn’t answer.”

“I had his certification revoked,” Phil said quietly. Clint turned to look at him in surprise. “Years ago, when you first started working at SHIELD. I had a friend in the state office in Iowa and I asked him for a favor.” Clint opened his mouth to reply but Phil interrupted him before he could speak.

“He was a hazard to other children, I wasn’t about to let that slide,” Phil added, rolling onto his back to stare at the ceiling. Clint nodded, letting it go.

“That’s how we ended up in the circus, Barney and me,” Clint continued, tucking one arm behind his head. “We made a break for it as the circus was pulling out and stowed away in one of the supply wagons and waited to come out until we stopped at the next town.”

“Rough way to grow up,” Phil observed, afraid to say too much but Clint only shrugged.

“It wasn’t so bad,” he replied. “Nellie, she was the gypsy fortune teller, she used to say Carson was a hard man but he was fair, he was too. We told him I was 18 and Barney was 19 and he looked us square in the eye and told us we were liars. And then he put us to work cleaning up after the animals. Guess he figured spoiled brats looking to scare their parents wouldn’t want to muck out animal stalls. If we were desperate enough to stay he probably figured what we were leaving behind was pretty bad.” Phil watched as Clint drew in a breath, he seemed more steady now, the adrenaline from the dream leaching off.

“It was hot and dirty and the sun burned the back of your neck,” Clint continued. “It was good most of the time though. We had full bellies and a warm place to sleep and I liked the animals, especially Lolly the elephant. She used to play with my hair when I cleaned out her wagon. I didn’t mind so much, I’d probably still be there mucking out stalls if they hadn’t put me in the ring.”

“How long did you do that before you became the Amazing Hawkeye?” Phil asked with an amused
“‘Bout six months,” Clint answered, a smile curling his own lips. “But I was Hawkeye my first week. We were putting up the big top and I noticed one of the hoist rings on the king pole had come loose. Barney told me not to say anything but I told Carson anyway. He looked at me real sharp and then sent up one of the tightrope walkers to check it.” Clint gave a shy smile.

“And you saved the day,” Phil teased. A soft blush colored Clint’s cheeks.

“It’d been okay if there wasn’t wind or anything but a lot of people could have been hurt,” Clint admitted. “I didn’t know that then, though. Carson looked at me and said; boy have you got hawk eyes or something? I was Hawkeye after that.” Clint’s smile had gone soft and he let out a sigh as Phil watched him out of the corner of his eye.

“What about you?” Clint asked after a moment. “What was your first job?”

“I started working at the library when I was sixteen,” Phil answered, offhand.

“The library?” Clint turned his head, grinning.

“Don’t laugh,” Phil half scolded. Clint instantly painted a serious expression on his face that didn’t reach his eyes. “It was the summer after my dad died.” Clint’s amused expression slipped away instantly.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked,” he said contritely.

“No, it’s fine,” Phil shook his head. “It was why I got the job. Mom was struggling to pay the bills and I’d been volunteering there, It wasn’t a large town and I think the librarians knew I needed a job so they offered me one the day I turned sixteen. I paid for my clothes and saved up for school and bought groceries. We did okay. I started at community college the following year.”

“How come you left?” Clint asked curiously.

“SHIELD picked me up at the start of the second semester of college,” Phil replied with a lazy smile.
shrug. “I’d dug into some stuff I shouldn’t have and pinged their radar.”

“I don’t remember why I left the circus,” Clint admitted. Phil opened his mouth, hesitating, unsure what was too much to say. “I can guess though. Barney kept trying to talk me into things, breaking into places at night and emptying the till, lifting wallets off of townies, I told him I wasn’t going to risk it because if Carson caught you he’d run you off fast, and I liked the ring. I didn’t want to lose that. I think Barney was jealous. That’s what we had an argument about wasn’t it?” Phil gave a hesitant nod.

“Do you know what happened or don’t I talk about that either?” Clint asked when Phil offered no reply.

“I know you ended up in a hospital outside Shreveport a couple of months after you turned seventeen,” Phil replied. “And that you snuck out before Child Services could take custody of you.” Clint seemed to consider that a moment, then nodded slowly.

“Any idea where Barney is now?” Clint asked.

“He’s on the run from the FBI,” Phil answered.

“Any idea where Barney is now?” Clint repeated, his expression turning sly.

“Ecuador,” Phil stated, his tone flat. Clint shifted, digging his shoulders into the mattress as he hummed thoughtfully.

“If I know where he is, how come I haven’t turned him in?” Clint asked curiously. “I mean, I’m not being cruel or anything but getting busted clearly did good things for me.” He gave Phil a grin that Coulson had to struggle not to return.

“You’ve never asked before,” Phil admitted. “I only keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn’t cause any more trouble.”

“Trouble for me you mean?” Clint asked shyly. Phil nodded, his lips curling up. “You’re an awesome friend, Phil.”
“We should probably get some breakfast,” Phil said with a sigh. “You have a doctor’s appointment this morning.” Clint nodded in agreement and Phil threw back the covers, swinging his legs out onto the floor with a groan.

“Hey Phil?” Phil turned to look at Clint who had pulled his knees to his chest as he sat up. “I’m really glad SHIELD picked you up out of community college.”

“So am I,” Phil nodded in agreement.

“I’m glad they picked me up too,” Clint added. “Or we’d have never met.” Phil allowed himself a fond look.

“Come on,” he said, reaching out to give Clint’s shoulder a squeeze. “We better get going.”

“Well, I’m pleased to say your injuries appear to be completely healed,” Helen Cho announced, a smile curling her lips as she glanced down at her tablet before peering into Clint’s eyes with an assessing gaze. He fidgeted on the exam table, his cheeks turning pink as he darted a look over at the door to the med bay where Steve was hovering at Phil’s side. Phil gave him a faint smile and he seemed to settle, glancing back at Helen from under his lashes.

“That’s some good news at least,” Bruce said, folding his arms protectively over his chest as Tony spun lazily in one of the rolling chairs, scooting it back and forth across the floor. Jane reached out with one hand, snagging the back of the chair and dragging him to an abrupt halt that made Darcy and Bruce cover their mouths with their hands. Helen made a valiant effort not to notice, giving Clint an measured look.

“How are you feeling?” she prompted.

“Okay, I guess,” Clint answered with a shrug.

“Headaches, dizziness, shortness of breath?” he shook his head slowly. Jane’s phone gave a soft ping and she sighed, looking down at the screen.
“Thor again?” Darcy asked.

“Flowers,” Jane replied by way of explanation.

“I liked the skinny purple ones,” Clint offered. Darcy bit her lip to keep from laughing outright.

Let’s go with that then,” Jane sighed, shooting off a text in reply as Clint grinned smugly.

“What about his head injury?” Steve questioned uneasily.

“The injury itself has completely healed,” Helen answered. “The new regeneration therapy seems to have worked even better than expected. The tissue in the area surrounding the hematoma is showing no residual scarring or damage.” Jane’s phone beeped again and Darcy leaned into her shoulder.

“I can see his point,” Darcy admitted, looking down at Jane’s phone. “Live arrangements might cost more, but we could auction them off for charity afterward.”

“Sorry,” Jane sighed, shaking her head as she turned off her phone, shoving it in her pocket. “He’s… Thor.”

“His memory hasn’t improved,” Steve pointed out. Clint shot him a guilty look before ducking his head.

“I’m not going to get my memories back, am I?” Clint asked, wincing as he glanced up at Helen again.

“We can’t really know,” she replied gently. “Now that the tissue is repaired it’s possible that your brain will be able to rebuild the pathways to the missing information, like putting in a new bridge to replace one that’s collapsed.”

“But it might not,” Tony said grimly. Helen nodded in grudging agreement.
“So where do we go from here?” Steve asked.

“We’re putting together a research team to come up with a solution,” Tony replied.

“There’s still plenty of existing data we haven’t exhausted yet,” Bruce added. “No reason to throw in the towel.” Clint’s face scrunched up in a distressed expression and Tony scooted out of Jane’s reach, rolling closer to the exam table.

“Hey don’t let the technobabble get to you,” he insisted. “No matter what we find, you’re still good. We’re going to look out for you.” Clint nodded slowly, glancing away and Jane shifted out from behind the lab bench, hopping up beside him on the exam table.

“You know, I’d be scared to death if I was missing a big chunk of my memory,” she said, draping an arm around his shoulders. “But so far you’ve been doing really well.”

“I’m kind of freaked out,” he admitted softly.

“You have a right,” she replied. “Give it some more time, we’ll work something out, okay?” Clint nodded and Darcy’s phone let out a beep. She fished it from her pocket, making an unimpressed face at the screen.

“Thor wants to know how you feel about a Disney Wedding,” Darcy stated blandly, still staring down at her phone. Jane turned to look at her with a gaping expression. “Apparently getting married in Cinderella’s Castle is a thing you can do if you have enough money.” Jane’s lips puckered up and she turned on Tony with a frown.

“Don’t look at me!” He said, waving his hands in front of him. “Pepper’s the one who put him in touch with SI’s event planning team.”

“I’ve never been to Disney World,” Clint stated with a hint of a smile. He paused, frowning. “I don’t remember ever going to Disney World.” Darcy’s phone beeped again and she looked down at it.

“If Disney is ‘too much’ for you,” she declared, raising her hands to actually make the air quotes. “Alnwick Castle is also an option.”
“Hogwarts castle?” Jane asked in disbelief.

“That’s the one,” Darcy nodded, popping her gum. “They don’t normally rent out the whole castle but apparently Avengership has its privileges.”

“I don’t believe this,” Jane sighed, rubbing her eyes.

“I’ll tell him you’re thinking,” Darcy nodded decisively. “Boy is he going to be disappointed when he finds out there aren’t actually floating candles in the great hall.”

“I could make that happen,” Tony said confidently. Jane’s head snapped up, her eyes narrowing on him with violent intent. Tony’s posture shrunk ever so slightly. “Or I could shut up and mind my own business.” he added, scooting his chair back from her.

“I think the best thing we can do from here is try to get you back on a normal routine,” Helen declared thoughtfully.

“I don’t know what that is,” Clint admitted awkwardly.

“Jay?” Tony prompted.

“Agent Barton’s normal routine consists of a late breakfast followed by a morning workout before lunch, at least two hours dedicated exclusively to SHIELD paperwork or training modules, a minimum of two hours on the range, an hour of hand to hand combat training with various team members, and a late evening half-hour range session before bed.” JARVIS replied succinctly.

“Are you sure he’s talking about me?” Clint demanded.

“You have an exemplary work ethic,” Jane teased gently.

“Well I’d suggest you hit the gym before lunch, Agent Barton,” Helen said with a smile. Clint gave an awkward shrug, glancing at Phil.
“I’ll, uh, go put a basketball game together?” Steve suggested.

“Give us half an hour,” Jane nodded, patting Clint’s knee and sliding off the exam table. “Tony and I want to run another cognitive test for comparison.”

“Come on, Locksley,” Tony prompted, scooting out of his chair and sending it rolling back to lightly bump one of the lab benches. “Let’s take a look at your noodle.” Clint made a face, glancing at Phil again. Phil let out a sigh, folding his arms over his chest as he cross the handful of steps that separated them while Tony and Jane began setting up the equipment.

“I promised you it would be fine,” he reminded softly.

“Yeah,” Clint nodded.

“Let Tony scan your brain and I’ll walk you to the gym,” he added. Clint sighed, sliding off the exam table and allowing Jane to steer him onto one of the lab stools.

“Before you see this,” Darcy declared, looking down at her phone with a frown. “I want you to know that I most definitely never introduced Thor to the concept of the theme wedding.” Jane let out a groan, her face scrunching up in a wince as Phil tried not to laugh.

“Hey Phil,” Bruce asked with a pensive frown, looking up from his table. “What do you know about a SHIELD-associated research facility called the Guest House?”

“Are you still going over Fury’s data?” he asked curiously, Bruce nodded. “SHIELD had a lot of independent research facilities. The idea was to keep the really weird stuff off the books so that it couldn’t fall into the wrong hands. I didn’t think they were logged in the primary records.”

“There’s nothing on the actual facility,” Bruce replied, tapping his stylus against his lips. “But there’s a reference here in an order to dismantle a project called M.O.O.R.E.A. Some sort of experiment involving synaptic restructuring.”

“All I know about the Guest House is that the projects were a collective failure and the project director recommended a full shutdown,” Phil stated. “The whole thing was mothballed.”
“Any idea what happened to the research?” Bruce asked curiously.

“Probably destroyed,” Phil said with a shrug. “When things like this go wrong, they usually go really wrong. The safest approach is to nuke everything.” Bruce nodded, letting out a sigh.

“Thanks, I’ll keep digging,” he said. Phil gave his shoulder a pat as he slipped past.

“Theme wedding?” he asked softly, leaning into Darcy’s shoulder. Her gum popped loudly as she turned her phone toward him. “Is that… a longboat?”

“I wasn’t going to show her the Lord of the Rings one,” Darcy admitted. Phil seemed to consider that a moment before nodding slowly in agreement.
The Giving Tree

“Come on, Barton, shake a leg!”

Clint tensed, his face contorting in a complicated, pinched expression. He chanced a glance over his shoulder at Bucky who was giving him a pointed look from the other side of the gym as he spun a basketball on the tip of one metal finger. Clint quickly turned away again, his shoulders hunching up and his expression becoming even more deformed as Steve hissed in protest, only every third or fourth word audible; Rude, and Clint, and Jerk, and Stupid.

“Clint?” Phil prompted gently as Clint darted another furtive look over his shoulder.

“Maybe this is a bad idea,” he said quickly, biting his lower lip as he rocked back and forth on his sneaker clad feet. “I’m not even any good at basketball.”

“Clint, your team has won the interoffice tournament every year for the past eight years,” Phil stated, his eyes lighting with amusement as Clint ducked his head, blushing. “You never miss.”

“I don’t think they want me to play,” Clint confessed, giving Phil a pleading look. “Can’t I just go along with you?” Phil let out a sigh, pausing a moment to rub his eyes. The darkest, most selfish part of him was ready to say yes. His more noble side drew in a deep breath, studying the archer who was still watching his teammates surreptitiously with the guarded caution of a wounded animal.

“Come on, man, don’t leave me alone with these super morons!” Sam called, grinning as Thor grasped him around the chest with one arm, lifting him off his feet. Phil waved them off, keeping his attention on Clint.

“Why would you think that?” Phil asked. Clint gave a shrug, toeing at the polished oak floor.

“They get weird,” he admitted finally. “They get tense and they, I don’t know, they’re uncomfortable around me. They’re only asking me to play because they think they have to. They don’t have to, I’m fine on my own. They don’t have to hang around me if they don’t want to.”

“Clint, I want you to listen very carefully to what I’m going to tell you,” Phil said patiently. “Because you’re not wrong.” Clint looked up at him with eyes wide in surprise.
“They are tense,” Phil continued, nodding in agreement. “And they are a bit high-strung right now and I’m sure they’re uncomfortable. You’re not wrong about any of that, you just haven’t thought of the proper reason why.”

“They’re not like that when I’m not around,” Clint snapped with a hint of defiance before biting his lip once more. Phil hid his smile. He really didn’t see any point in asking how Clint knew that particular tidbit of information.

“They’re scared,” Phil said as gently as he could, Clint’s only reply was a bitterly skeptical look but Phil pressed on. “How would you feel if one day you just woke up and Natasha or I didn’t remember you any more?” Clint opened his mouth to reply then snapped it quickly shut.

“I haven’t forgotten anyone,” Clint said defensively to the floor.

“No,” Phil agreed. “but maybe they’re a little scared that you’ve forgotten why you’re friends.” Clint seemed properly upset about that and Phil tried to hide his wince.

“Spend some time with your friends,” Phil coaxed. “Doctor Cho gave you a clean bill of health this morning. Maybe if you do some of the things you’ve always done together they won’t be so worried.” Clint nodded reluctantly.

“And you’ll be back later?” Clint asked, glancing up at him warily.

“I just need to go into SHIELD for a few hours, I’ll be home tonight, alright?” Phil promised. Clint gave an awkward nod and Phil turned him, gently propelling him toward the basketball court.

“Have fun, get dirty,” he instructed. Clint glanced back at him, sticking his tongue out.

“We’ll take good care of him, dad!” Natasha called. Phil scowled at her before turning away, walking briskly out into the hall. His steps hesitated only a fraction of a second, nearly too quick for the eye to catch, and then he turned, heading in the opposite direction of the elevator. His feet carried him swiftly down the corridor until he could duck into the door to the firing range, past the armory and into the locker room on the other side. He softened his tread on the stone tile, moving silently until he could position himself near the opposite door that led out into the main gym.
The frosted glass obscured his view but if he stayed close to the wall, away from the sliding door sensor he could just see out between the gap where the door overlapped the glass wall.

Out on the court the Avengers had broken up into teams, Natasha and Thor acquiring Clint in a bid to take on Steve, Sam, and Bucky. Thor passed to Clint who ducked down and around Sam, heading up the court and nearly straight into Bucky’s chest. He cut to the right, only barely avoiding a steal as Steve clipped Bucky’s arm. Sam scurried after him as Bucky turned on Steve with a withering look.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” And it was only years of training that prevented Phil from physically jumping at the sound of Pepper’s voice.

“The men’s locker room?” he asked dryly, turning his head to peer over his shoulder at the Stark Industries CEO as she perched elegantly on one of the changing benches, her phone clutched idly in one hand as she stared back at him. She gave the room a considering look.

“I like the view in the men’s locker room,” she decided. Phil gave her a disapproving frown before returning his attention to the basketball court.

“Tell me you don’t hide in here and ogle Captain America,” he said in exasperation.

“Phil Coulson, don’t be silly,” she said, affronted, her fingertips flicking lightly over her phone. “We have a state of the art surveillance system.”

“I shudder to think,” he replied, his eyes narrowing.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Phil,” Pepper stated, still idly browsing her phone. “Because I do so enjoy our little visits.”

“Because I’m the only other one around here who’s remotely sane?” he interrupted. Pepper gave him a fond look.

“Don’t you think that ship might have sailed?” she asked gently. “Recently, by the looks of things.”
“Fair enough,” he agreed, turning back to spy out at the basketball court though the crack in the door.

“As I was saying,” she pressed on, undeterred by his attempt at distraction. “As much as I enjoy spending time with you, and I say this out of love and real friendship; get the hell out of this locker room.”

“Did JARVIS call you down here to rumble me?” he demanded.

“JARVIS doesn’t need to,” she replied.

“You know, when I moved into this tower I was concerned over the implications of allowing Tony Stark to invade my privacy at every hour,” Phil observed.

“My, my, and you call yourself an intelligence agent,” Pepper sighed, shaking her head. She bit her lip to hide her smile and Phil glanced back at her, his eyes crinkling only slightly.

“Steve’s checked Bucky three times in the last five minutes,” Phil observed.

“They do play rough,” Pepper observed with a shrug. “Even Steve. I’m sure there weren’t a lot of referees in Brooklyn in the 30’s.”

“They’re on the same team.”

Pepper lowered her phone, considering this information for a moment.

“Natasha will only pass to Clint on a bounce, and then only if Thor isn’t open,” he added.

“What about Sam and Thor?” she asked.

“Well, you know Thor, he just stands there like a tree and flails his arms,” Phil replied. Pepper nodded in agreement. “Sam’s, I think Sam’s playing man-to-man defense, he’s stuck to Thor like glue.”
“Well, who’s on Clint?” Pepper asked curiously.

“I’m pretty sure Steve and Bucky are playing zone,” Phil replied. Pepper rolled her eyes ever so slightly.

“Out of the locker room,” she stated decisively.

“But-” Phil began as she rose to her feet, looping her arm in his and pulling him back from the door.

“I’m serious,” she said, her tone flat. “Your control freak is officially out of control, Clint’s been stuck to you for days, the rest of the Avengers appear to be cracking up and I really can’t afford to have you any more emotionally compromised than you already are.”

“I am not a control freak,” Phil protested as Pepper steered him forcefully back out across the range and into the hall.

“It alarms me that you chose that item to protest,” she replied, flapping a hand toward the elevator. “Go.” Phil glared back at her, gritting his teeth. She took in his expression for a long moment, her hand sliding down his arm to grasp hold of his.

“It’ll all work out,” she said gently. He let out a huff.

“And how’s that going to happen, exactly?” he demanded in exasperation, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“I don’t know,” Pepper shook her head. “I almost never do. Strangely enough my life isn’t in complete ruins. Yet.”

“I’m so relieved you added that caveat,” Phil said drolly. He paused, frowning. “Have you ever made a mistake, the kind you can’t just apologize for, the kind you have to fix, only you can’t? You have absolutely no idea how to make it right.”
“What happened wasn’t your fault,” Pepper chided.

“No,” he agreed. “but I can’t help thinking things might have turned out differently.”

“They might have turned out worse,” she replied.

“Thank you, Pepper Potts,” Phil stated, his eyes narrowing. “It’s nice to know I can always rely on you to be a ray of sunshine in an otherwise dreary and hopeless situation.”

“Isn’t it marvelous?” Pepper asked with a delighted grin, linking her arm with his once more. “Let’s do lunch, I think SHIELD can do without you for an hour.”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” he asked in amusement as she hauled him toward the lift.

“Definitely,” she nodded. “I need to be somewhere with really good mimosas.” Phil let out a laugh as the elevator doors closed on them.

“How’s it coming, big guy?” Tony asked, clapping Bruce lightly on the shoulder as he strode into the lab. He loosened his tie, tugging it free of his collar and tossing it over Yoo’s armature.

“Tiring, boring, tedious,” Bruce replied, never looking up from his tablet as Tony shed his jacket, draping it over the back of a chair. “Frustrating, discouraging; pick an adjective. How was the board meeting?”

“I sat in the back and played Avengers Academy,” Tony replied, flopping down on the lab stool and rolling back a few feet. “Pepper thanked me for keeping my mouth shut for a change.”

“You are disturbingly invested in your tiny teenage digital versions of us,” Bruce observed.
“I’m only days away from unlocking your alter ego,” Tony replied, giving him a thumbs up. “You still going over the SHIELD data?” Bruce hummed in reply.

“I compiled the highlights, Jane’s giving it a fresh pair of eyes,” he answered.

“I’ll take a look too,” Tony said, rolling closer to one of the lab benches and pulling one of the screens closer.

“I keep coming back to this one project,” Bruce added. “I don’t know, I can’t shake it. It’s memory modification, not restoration, which you know-”

“Never works,” Tony finished, pouring himself a cup of coffee from the ancient pot in the corner. Bruce nodded in agreement.

“The data’s incomplete, but it’s the way the process is described,” Bruce continued. Tony took a swallow, making a face into his cup as if it had betrayed him. “The surgical apparatus actually creates new synaptic pathways, overlaying them so that the brain loses track of the old memories. They’re suppressed because they’re difficult to find.”

“And you’re thinking we could use it to build a fresh highway back into Barton’s wonder years?” Tony asked. Bruce hummed again, leaning closer to his own display.

“I wish I could talk to someone who’d actually seen it, but the names have all been redacted,” he sighed.

“Fury’s not likely to divulge that particular bit of information,” Tony observed.

“If he knows,” Bruce nodded. “If it’s anyone we could talk to. Let’s face it, R&D at SHIELD was heavily Hydra, that and field ops.”

“Yeah and most of those guys are pushing up daisies now,” Tony let out a huff. “What do you think the chances are that he’d loan us the specs, let us build our own?”

“Slash and burn job,” Bruce replied in frustration. “Whatever went wrong, it scared them bad
“enough to completely erase all the data.”

“And you want to use this thing on Barton’s head?” Tony asked incredulously.

“Unless you’ve got a better idea.” Bruce shrugged, then let out a sigh, rubbing his eyes.

“I don’t,” Tony conceded, pulling up the most recent holoscans of Clint’s brain. “But I did get you a present.”

“I really don’t want my own tropical island,” Bruce said. “It’s too much maintenance.”

“You’ll like this one, I promise,” Tony protested, waving a hand at him. “You know that biologist you said did brilliant work in cellular integrity?”

“Braddock?” Bruce asked absently, his attention on his display.

“No, the other one. That friend of yours,” Tony continued, his expression brightening as if he were a child with a new toy. “What’s her name, Ross?” Bruce’s movements stilled.

"Dr. Betty Ross?” he asked carefully.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” Tony nodded, snapping his fingers. “So I hired her, she starts today. Merry Christmas, go play with your microscopes.”

“You,” Bruce drew in a deep, stuttering breath, his eyes growing wide. “You hired her? What exactly did you hire her to do?”

“What do you think I hired her to do?” Tony asked in bewilderment, flapping a hand at the holoprojections of Clint’s brain as he paused to suck down his coffee.

“She’s not working here,” Bruce insisted his hands twitching as if he were trying to pull back his panic by force of will. “Dear god, Tony, tell me you did not set her up in this building!”
“Um,” Tony stared back at him with just the faintest concern widening his eyes. Bruce stared back at him in growing horror.

“I’m sensing that you’re less pleased about this than I thought you’d be,” Tony remarked, hesitance in his tone.

“Tony, for the love of all that is holy,” Bruce declared, his voice strained. “Please, tell me she is not in this building.”

Tony blinked slowly, his movements completely frozen.

“Oh dear god, she’s on this floor,” Bruce whispered, horrified. He bolted out of his chair, darting down the hall and rounding the corner near the elevator. Tony mouthed wordlessly at his back for a moment before quickly shoving his coffee mug at Dum-E and hurrying after the other scientist.

“I’m going to base my entire defense on the fact that brains are easier to fix when you can actually touch them!” he shouted after Bruce. He tripped to a stop with his mouth half open. “You know what I mean!” he added. Bruce seemed not to hear him, instead shoving open the door to the empty biocontainment lab at the end of the hall.

“No the equipment’s all fine, Ms.Potts.” A tall, slender woman with dark hair was speaking into her phone, cataloguing the room with a critical eye, she held up one finger to Bruce without turning around but he’d already frozen in place, his mouth hanging open.

“Yes, well, Pepper then,” Doctor Ross continued. “Yes, of course, I’ll let you know if I find anything. I think my new lab partner just came in, so I should probably… yes, of course. Thank you so much, I’ll do that. Bye.” She gave the phone a charmed smile before stuffing it in her pocket.

“So, Mr. Stark, what do…” Betty Ross’s voice trailed off as she turned toward the door, her lips parted in shock as she stared at Bruce.

“Call me Tony,” Tony insisted with forced cheer, shoving his hands in his pockets as he rocked back and forth on his feet in the doorway.
“Bruce?” she declared, her voice wavering.

“I-” Bruce swallowed, his hands shaking. He drew in a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

“I have to go,” he said softly. Bruce turned on his heel, barreling past Tony with so much force he knocked him into the door jamb. Stark gaped after him for a moment.

“I,” Tony let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, “think he’s making a run for it.”

“Shouldn’t you stop him?” Ross asked, her eyes wide.

“I should totally do that,” Tony nodded, backing down the hall as he waved his hands. “Welcome to SI, emergency exits are at the side and rear, fasten your seatbelts, it’s a bumpy ride.” With that he spun around, taking off at a run back toward the elevator.

“You’re telling me,” Betty Ross said breathlessly.
Frog and Toad are Friends

“I was totally like the best friend ever,” Darcy announced, fairly bouncing through the door to Jane’s lab, a crumpled paper sack in one hand. “I got you street tacos.” She deposited the bag on the table at Jane’s elbow before flopping down on one of the lab stools and unwinding the scarf she’d wrapped around her head.

“Any chance you got me a flame thrower too?” Jane asked, never looking up from her screen as she reached out for the bag, digging out one of the tacos.

“If I had a flame thrower I’d use it to warm myself up,” Darcy replied around the glove she was tugging off with her teeth. “But I’m thinking you’ve seen the potential wedding gowns.” Jane let out a disgusted grunt peeling back the paper and taking a vicious bite of her taco.

“Why don’t you just tell him you want to wear a sundress and get married on the roof with wedding cupcakes?” Darcy asked, reaching into the bag for a taco. Jane glared at her out of the corner of her eye.

“Because relationships,” Jane said, carefully schooling her face into a calm expression. “Grown-up, actual, real relationships, are built on a foundation of equitable compromise.”

“You sound like a family planning brochure when you say that,” Darcy interrupted, pulling lettuce out of her taco.

“And we should be able to negotiate some form of compromise between what I want and what Thor wants,” Jane continued without missing a beat.

“Far as I can tell you’re the one making all the concessions in this negotiation,” Darcy observed, licking a tomato off the thumb that wasn’t still wearing a glove. Jane didn’t reply, her eyes narrowed at the screen. Darcy pulled more lettuce off her taco, eating it slowly as she studied Jane carefully “So, did you hear Tony bought Bruce his ex girlfriend?” she said finally

“Yes I did,” Jane replied, her attention never straying from her computer screen. Darcy paused for a moment, considering her taco.

“Do you know this because Bruce is hiding in your mechanical closet again?”
“It’s a distinct possibility.” Jane nodded, looking unconcerned. Darcy gave her an expectant look but Jane offered nothing more.

“I wonder what sort of life choices lead you to buying your lab buddy a girl?” Darcy mused.

“Who knows. Tony is a disaster at gifts,” Jane shook her head, tapping at her keyboard a moment before pausing to roll the paper back on her taco. “Do you remember when he tried to give you an amusement park for your birthday?”

“That was an awesome gift,” Darcy protested around her mouthful. “I still can't believe you made me give it back.”

“You throw up on rollercoasters,” Jane stated.

“I honestly have no idea why you even think that’s relevant.” Darcy made a perturbed face, crunching into her taco. There was a knock on the glass door frame and they both turned to find a slender brunette in a pencil skirt and a lab coat hovering on the threshold.

“Excuse me, I hate to intrude,” she said hesitantly, brushing back her long curtain of hair. “But I was told you could help me.”

“It’s a sign of the apocalypse,” Darcy stage whispered, making exploding motions with her hands. Jane shushed her with a scolding look.

“No trouble at all,” Jane said, tapping at her screen and making a swishing motion with a bank of statistics. “You want the data so far on Barton, right? You can have it, I’ve stared at it till my eyes hurt.”

“I was supposed to be brought up to speed by Mr. Stark,” she replied, nodding. She made a startled face as the tablet she was clutching to her chest pinged and she blinked down at it as if surprised to find the information already downloading. She shook her head, trying to regain her bearings. “But he ran off. I called his line and his assistant said I could speak with you.”

“Tony’s got an assistant?” Jane asked in confusion.
“Well, he was probably jealous of you,” Darcy answered, grinning around her taco. Jane seemed to consider that a moment before looking up at the ceiling.

“JARVIS, are you being a troll?” She demanded in disapproval.

“I have never, to my knowledge, been any mythological creature,” he replied breezily. Darcy let out a snort of amusement, nearly choking on her taco.

“JARVIS is an artificial intelligence,” Jane explained, turning sympathetic eyes on their visitor.

“Siri is an artificial intelligence, JARVIS is an artificial life form,” Darcy corrected.

“Poly-sci major,” Jane whispered loudly, jabbing a half surreptitious finger in Darcy’s direction. “JARVIS runs the place. You’ll get used to his… interesting sense of humor.”

“I’m told a unique life form is entitled to a unique interpretation of jocularity,” JARVIS said.

“Who told you that?” Darcy asked curiously.

“Agent Romanov,” he answered.

“She would know,” Darcy agreed, nodding. Their guest drew in a breath as if to speak but seemed to lose the words, her mouth clicking shut as her lips protruded in a delicate pout. She shook it off a moment later, tossing her hair back and straightening her shoulders.

“Where are my manners?” she declared, holding out her hand. “Betty Ross, PhD Cellular Biology.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jane said, wiping her own hand on her jeans before shaking Betty’s “Jane Foster, PhD Theoretical Astrophysics.” Betty smiled, turning to Darcy with a curious expression.

“Darcy Lewis, O.M.G. what am I doing here?” she said with a shrug, crunching down the remains
of her taco.

“Making lunch runs, mostly,” Jane observed holding out the bag to Betty. “Taco?” Betty gave a startled look before reaching out for the bag.

“Agent Barton’s records,” JARVIS prompted, his tone laced with just a hint of impatience.

“Yes, Sorry!” Jane replied quickly dropping the bag back on the desk and swiveling in front of her keyboard before Betty could properly react. She hunkered over the keys for a moment before a holographic rendering of Clint’s brain crystallized over their heads and Betty took two startled steps back, staring at it.

“This is your brain on Hydra,” Darcy burrowed into the brown paper bag, smiling in triumph as she produced a paper packet of mini churros. She stuffed one in her mouth. “Any questions?” Jane tossed her a disapproving look.

“Our resident archer had an encounter with hostile forces recently that resulted in head trauma,” Jane explained, reaching out to rotate the projection. “We implemented our standard medical care procedures and we didn’t have any trouble repairing the physical damage but the patient suffered severe memory loss.”

“Standard?” Betty shook her head, looking perplexed. “Memory loss?”

“He’s lost his event memory of most of the last decade,” Jane replied, nodding.

“He didn’t miss anything if you ask me, it’s been a shitty decade,” Darcy interjected. Jane’s scowl did nothing to deter her.

“We’re currently looking for ways to help him regain access,” Jane continued. “Our current working theory is that we probably need to conduct some sort of repair on the cellular level.”

“This is- I- We’re talking about a brain here,” Betty made a garbled noise staring at the holoprojection of Clint’s brain with equal parts fascination and horror. “When did all this happen?”
“Week and a half?” Jane asked with a shrug, turning to Darcy.

“Almost, yeah,” Darcy nodded, a churro protruding from the corner of her mouth like a sugar coated cigar.

“You’re telling me you have some sort of device that repairs human tissue?” Betty asked, wide eyed. “How does that work?”

“Fantastically!” Darcy exclaimed, kicking her ugg off and holding her foot up by the ankle “I used it on my toe day before yesterday and it’s totally healed! See? You can’t even tell Jane dropped a spectrum analyzer on it.”

“You used the cradle on your toe?” Jane demanded, aghast.

“You own the world’s heaviest spectrum analyzer,” Darcy huffed. She looked over at Betty who had sunk down on a rolling chair, her head in her hands. “You look tense, you should get a massage or something.”

“You do look a little off,” Jane agreed. “Do you want me to call down to PT for you?”

“This isn’t normal!” Betty declared, looking up at Jane with a horrified, pleading expression.

“Whoops,” Jane said, cringing a little. “Darcy, would you?”

“Yeah, Tasha left some vodka in the cabinet by the fridge,” she nodded, heading toward the other corner of the lab.

“This is insane!” Betty insisted, her eyes round. “I’m not naive, I mean, when the head of Stark Industries tells you you’re the top of a very short list you know you’re going to see some really weird shit but it’s not like you can brush her off or something!”

“That’s the same thing Pepper told me,” Jane agreed, patting her shoulder awkwardly.
In fairness the only other guy on that list at the time had spent the last two years writing equations in his underwear.” Darcy called over her shoulder as she rummaged through the cabinets.”

“I was not prepared for this,” Betty continued, her chest rising and falling in halting breaths. “No one, absolutely no one mentioned to me that I would be a superhero repair technician. That is not my job, I am not qualified for this!”

“No one’s actually qualified for it,” Jane assured her.

“Let me sum this up for you,” Darcy said a clear gallon jug clutch in one hand and a floral Dixie cup in the other. “Tony Stark’s superpower is his brain. The problem with brains is they only come with two hands. So when he dives into a new project he finds the best brain he can, hires it at 20% over market and uses its hands instead.” She brandished the Dixie cup under Betty's nose and she took it, throwing back the contents in one gulp.

“This is wrong,” Betty insisted, starting to wheeze as her tone verged on shrill. “It’s wrong and it doesn't make any sense and…” her voice trailed off on a pained squeak and the next breath made a gasping sound as she drew it in. A crumpled paper bag appeared in front of her as if by magic and she only barely glanced up at Bruce as he jiggled it lightly in front of her. Betty made a rasping sound, snatching for it in desperation and pressed it over her mouth, huffing into it with deep uneven breaths. Bruce merely folded his arms over his chest aiming a displeased frown in Darcy’s direction.

“What?” Darcy demanded, affronted. “You’re the one who’s always saying rip off the bandaid and get it over with! Where’d you get a paper bag anyway?”

“He keeps a whole pack of them in my mechanical closet so he can breathe into them when he hides in there,” Jane replied, looking supremely unconcerned.

“Well I’d have liked to have known that!” Darcy scowled at her. “Do you have any idea how often people hyperventilate around here?”

“Can I have another?” Betty asked weakly, holding out her slightly bent dixie cup. Darcy took it from her with a sympathetic look.

“We have a two drink limit on live-sciencing,” she advised, refilling the cup and handing it back. Betty tossed down that one as well before rising to her feet. She turned to Bruce, her eyes
narrowing with a venomous expression and he took a cautious half step back.

“Right,” Betty declared firmly, making a show of squaring her shoulders before heading toward the door, her head high.

“Where are you going?” Bruce asked.

“To my lab,” Betty replied without looking back. “To pack.” She breezed down the hall without another word.

“Well I’m guessing she isn’t going to need the blood work then,” Darcy remarked. Jane turned on her with a disbelieving gape.

“That’s that then,” Bruce nodded, brushing imagined wrinkles out of his shirt before crossing the hall to his own lab. Darcy shook her head, fishing the last churro from her paper packet.

“And you think you’ve got relationship problems,” She observed, chewing thoughtfully as Jane rubbed her forehead in silence.

“You deck me one more time, Stevie,” Bucky growled, giving his childhood friend a shove. “And I’m going to smack your damn kisser into the post.” Steve shot him a scowl, shaking him off as he moved away.

“Who even talks like that any more?” he grumbled, half under his breath.

“With my left arm, punk!” Bucky added as an afterthought.

“Guys, cool it,” Sam said with a chiding frown as Bucky stomped off after Steve who had retreated to the far side of the basketball court.
“I’m not the one with a problem for once!” Bucky protested. Sam only rolled his eyes, sprawling out on the floor between Clint and Thor who was shaking his head in disapproval.

“Don’t let ‘em bother you,” Sam panted. He flung one arm over his eyes, clearly winded from the challenge of keeping pace with four enhanced humans. Clint was gulping down breaths, his palms braced against his knees as he cast a covert look in Steve and Bucky’s direction. The pair were crowding each other, hissing in low tones, their shoulders tight with tension as they bickered. He closed his eyes, trying to slow his breathing as much as shut out the sounds of angry voices.

“It’s how they show affection,” Natasha murmured near Clint’s ear as she draped an arm over his shoulders. Clint gave her a disbelieving look that she pretended to ignore. Instead she turned her attention to Thor who had taken up poking teasingly at Sam’s foot with the toe of his Nikes. Sam peered out from under his arm with a glare, kicking at Thor who proceeded to taunt at him good-naturedly.

“Man, you are an asshole,” Sam observed, sweeping his leg out at Thor who was struggling not to laugh.

“See what I mean?” Natasha whispered, her lips brushing Clint’s ear. She grinned, letting out a huff that sounded suspiciously like ‘boys’.

“Are we going to play or what?” Bucky demanded, stalking away from Steve with an angry frown and tossing the ball at Thor. The Asgardian snagged it out of the air with one hand before lazily dribbling down the court.

“Yeah, Yeah,” Sam answered, peeling himself off the floor. “I wasn’t planning on keeping my cardiovascular system for anything.”

“You good?” Natasha asked. Clint gave a tight nod, trying to hide his apprehension. He drew in a few deep breaths before straightening.

The game started up again, tempers apparently no less frayed for the reprieve. Clint managed to slip out of the way as Steve and Bucky crashed into each other a handful of times but the unevenness of the defense was putting him off, making him tense. He made his shots, but only just, the increased tension after each basket only making it harder to keep his head in the game.

Clint knew it was coming one split second too late. Clint passed to Thor as Bucky crowded him.
Steve shouldered Bucky back, Bucky let out a growl as he overcompensated to keep his footing, stumbling into Thor’s side just as the Asgardian made a jump shot. Thor lost his trajectory, landing full against Clint’s chest and sending him sprawling across the court.

He hit the floor hard, the air rushing out of his lungs in a woosh that left him light headed. He struggled to get a breath, gasping and coughing as his eyes watered.

“Clint!” The color drained from Steve’s face and he scrambled past Bucky who was making a grab for him. Natasha was only a step behind him, her hands over her mouth as Steve slid to his knees at Clint’s side.

“Oh god, are you alright?” Steve demanded as Clint pushed himself upright. Steve made a grab for him, his hands on Clint’s arm, his neck, moving over his hair as if searching for damage and Clint winced, trying to shrug him off.

“Fine,” he gasped out, still winded as he batted at Steve’s hands “I’m fine.”

“Stevie, ease up,” Bucky declared softly, grasping Steve’s shoulder.

“Did you hit your head?” Steve demanded, ignoring him. Before Clint could breathe deep enough to offer an answer Steve turned his eyes toward the ceiling. “JARVIS did he hurt his head?”

“I’m fine!” Clint rasped out, trying to pull away. “I landed on my back.”

“I’m detecting no sign of serious injury, Captain,” JARVIS offered.

“Steve,” Sam gave him a warning look.

“Call Helen,” Steve ordered, gathering his feet under him and grabbing hold of Clint’s arm. “Tell her I’m bringing Clint down.”

“Okay that’s fucking enough!” Bucky snapped, rolling his eyes in exasperation. He grasped Steve by the arm with his metal hand, hauling him to his feet and prying Clint free from his grasp. “I’m telling you right now, back off!”
“You know if you’d-” Steve started, gearing up for a fight but Bucky reached out, his hand resting on top of Steve’s head. Steve stared back at him in surprise, the logistics of it all almost comical as Bucky had to reach up to keep his hold. Steve stared around Bucky’s arm, blinking as if he’d been slapped.

“No,” Bucky stated firmly. Steve opened his mouth to protest and Bucky’s eyes narrowed. “No.” he repeated. All at once the fight seemed to go out of Steve and his shoulders sagged. Bucky gave his hair a gentle ruffle before grasping the scruff of Steve’s t-shirt and wheeling him around.

“Go towel off or something,” Bucky ordered shoving Steve in the middle of the back to propel him on his way. “I didn’t let you get away with this crap when we were ten, I’m sure as hell not putting up with it now.” Steve threw him a bitter look over his shoulder but if he thought to protest he was derailed by Sam edging him away. Bucky glanced at Thor who gave him a nod before draping an arm around Natasha, leading her off after them. Bucky watched them go a moment before turning back to look down at Clint, who was staring up at him wide eyed.

“Look, I’m sorry about that,” Bucky said, blowing out a breath as he crouched down on the floor.

“It’s okay,” Clint answered, his voice breathy and just a touch frightened.

“No, it’s not.” Bucky ran his hand through his hair before sinking the rest of the way down to the floor and crossing his legs in front of him. “Steve and I, it’s not about you. Well, it’s sort of about you, but it’s not your fault. Do you know what I’m saying?” Clint gave a tiny nod but his expression was still terrified and Bucky’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re just nodding so that I’ll go away, aren’t you?” he demanded. Clint winced, his face contorting in a worried expression that made Bucky groan, rubbing at his eyes.

“God, this is like some kind of nightmare,” he snarled in frustration through gritted teeth. Bucky froze, slowly opening his eyes to find Clint staring at him with a look of pure terror. Bucky swore under his breath, his shoulders sagging.

“I did not mean that the way it sounded,” Bucky insisted, his voice barely more than a whisper. He let out an exasperated huff, rubbing his eyes again. “Look, I know I’m an asshole sometimes. I don’t mean to be, I’m just not... I have problems, okay? I kind of got used to you telling me when I was being a bastard because I can’t always tell. So whatever I’m doing that’s freaking you out or making you uncomfortable, or whatever. I need you to tell me what it is, because I honestly don’t
know. I just don’t want you mad at me.” His desperate declaration was met with silence and he opened his eyes hesitantly to find Clint blinking back at him, stunned.

“Aw, shit, what did I do now?” Bucky sighed resignedly, looking at Clint with a pinched expression.

“You didn’t,” Clint shook his head, drawing in an unsteady breath. “I thought you were probably mad at me.”

“Mad at you?” Bucky stared at him in disbelief. “Why would I be mad at you?”

“No one will talk about my accident,” Clint replied. He cast a glance over his shoulder at the others, who were milling in a tight, nervous group across the court “I ask and everyone changes the subject, even Phil. And Steve completely freaks out when anyone mentions it. And since the only thing I remember is being scared, I thought—”

“Stop,” Bucky said so quickly that Clint flinched, biting off the rest of the sentence. Bucky pulled a face, reaching out carefully, slowly until his hand was resting on Clint’s arm. “Just, stop. What happened, that was not your fault.” Bucky glanced over at the other side of the court before shifting closer, his shoulder brushing Clint’s.

“I’m not supposed to say anything,” he said softly. “Because we were supposed to let you remember on your own, so you can’t tell anyone, okay?” Clint gave a tight nod and Bucky shot a careful look over his shoulder to be sure no one was eyeing them.

“You guys were in a fight,” Bucky explained. “Steve got in trouble. You, well, you took a shot to save him, and that’s how you got hurt.” Clint blinked at him in disbelief.

“He’s my best friend,” Bucky stated. “He’s more than that, he’s my brother and you saved his life. I don’t think I ever get to be mad at you again now.”

“I just thought...” Clint began helplessly, his voice cracking.

“Steve’s not good at seeing people he cares about get hurt,” Bucky explained. “He always thinks it’s his fault. Even when there wasn’t anything he could have done. It makes him a good leader but it also makes him a pain in the ass. What you’ve got to know is that you didn’t do anything wrong.
What you did, I owe you for that.”

“You don’t owe me,” Clint blushed, ducking his head. Bucky let out a chuckle.

“That’s not what you usually tell me,” he teased. Clint turned to him with a startled expression and Bucky smiled. He opened his mouth to answer but paused, drawing in a shaky breath instead.

“Some stuff happened to me,” he began awkwardly. “Some bad guys kidnapped me and messed with my head until I didn’t remember who I was. I didn’t remember Steve. I lost everything.”

“I’m scared that I’m going to forget more,” Clint declared, his voice barely more than a whisper. “Forget… people.” Bucky nodded knowingly.

“Yeah,” he said. “The Avengers got me out, they brought me here. But when I got here I didn’t know how to be around people. Normal people.”

“It’s not that normal here,” Clint observed.

“That’s literally one of the first things you ever said to me,” Bucky replied, grinning as Clint struggled to hide his smile. “It was hard at first. I said things I shouldn’t, got on people’s nerves. But then you started telling me when I was being a jackass.” Clint pulled a face that made Bucky laugh outright.

“No, it was good, it helped,” Bucky insisted. “I was scared, worried everything was going to fall apart. Steve was too worried about me to tell me when I was messing up. He was, he was kind of careful with me.”

“The way he is with me now?” Clint asked resignedly and Bucky nodded.

“And the others, well, I think most of them were afraid of me,” Bucky continued. “Some of the things I did… they had a right, you know? But you…” Bucky’s voice trailed off and he nudged Clint’s shoulder playfully with his own. “You weren’t afraid of me. And you hadn’t known me my whole life, like Steve, so you didn’t expect me to be a certain way. To you I was just Steve’s kind of messed up friend, Bucky. I hadn’t been that in a really long time and it felt so good. I’d missed it.”
“I miss Barney,” Clint admitted. “And the circus. I know it’s been a long time, but it hasn’t to me.”

“I know what you mean,” Bucky nodded. “I lost a lot of time too while they had me. I miss Steve, the short stupid kid I used to look after. I miss that, it doesn’t seem like so long ago, but I know it is.”

“I think maybe he still needs you to look out for him,” Clint said, glancing over his shoulder covertly. Bucky carefully followed his gaze, watching for a moment as Steve tucked himself into a corner of the gym, his arms folded defensively over his chest. Bucky couldn’t help the smile that curled his lips.

“Tell you what,” Bucky offered. “You looked after me when I was a mess. I know I’m no Barney, but what about I look after you for a while, just until you get things sorted out?” Clint looked up at him with relief on his face.

“I don’t know what to do most of the time,” Clint admitted.

“That’s okay. You don’t have to be anything but be Clint,” Bucky said, his arm draping around Clint’s shoulders. “Who you are right now, however you feel? That’s fine. You don’t have to be anything else. You gave that to me, so now I’m going to give it back.” Clint let out a relieved sigh, leaning into Bucky’s side.

“What say we make a break for it, run down to the garage, steal one of Tony’s cars and joy ride out to Brooklyn for pizza?” Bucky suggested with a fiendish smile.

“We can do that?” Clint asked, wide eyed.

“We can if they don’t catch us,” Bucky replied. Clint gave a wary look before glancing up at Bucky.

“How do we do it?”

“You head for the locker room real casual and slip out the back,” Bucky suggested conspiratorially. “I’ll dust ‘em off and meet you in the garage.” Clint gave a frantic nod and Bucky
prodded him up with a grin. He watched Clint’s retreat, counting to ten before heaving himself off the floor.

If he was going to get back into action there was no time like the present to test his extraction readiness.
“What...” Tony’s voice trailed off as he looked up from the dissection of what had probably once been a medical device of some kind to find Pepper on the threshold of his lab, her shoulders tense. “I’m trying to figure out how to ask you why you’re here without sounding like an asshole,” he finally admitted.

“You don’t really think that’s going to put me off at this point, do you?” she asked with a sigh, rubbing her forehead.

“Well, I figure at some point the aggregate is going to be too much,” Tony confessed, watching as she crossed the lab to sink down in one of the desk chairs. “I thought you were in a meeting this afternoon.”

“That’s a funny story, actually,” she replied as he rounded the lab bench, reaching out to slowly rub her shoulders. “I was in the middle of long term fiscal management when Captain America bursts into the conference room, distraught because the new doctor is leaving and she hasn’t even looked at Clint yet.” Tony paused in his impromptu massage.

“Well, shit,” he observed. Pepper nodded in agreement.

“There’s just nowhere to go from there,” she declared, stifling a groan as he resumed rubbing.

“I’m sorry about that,” Tony said with a sigh, shaking his head. “I tried to tell him that she’d already made up her mind but. Steve.”

“Steve,” Pepper agreed with a soft smile. “Did you talk to her?”

“She wasn’t a fan of anything I had to say,” Tony replied, cringing. Pepper seemed to consider her words carefully a moment.

“Betty and I just had a long and informative chat,” Pepper admitted finally. Tony tried to hide his look of amusement but Pepper seemed to sense it anyway, her eyes narrowing. “He made that… face.” Tony shuddered visibly, his massage turning into long slow strokes over her shoulder blades and arms.
“There should be a law,” he declared vehemently. Pepper gave a huff of assent.

“Betty said she could handle inadvisable scientific advancement or working in an environment where her presence was unwanted by one of her colleagues, but both was asking too much.”

“I don’t get it!” Tony said with a sulking scowl. “I thought they were pals, that was the impression he gave me! Am I really that bad at the whole people thing?”

“I think they were,” Pepper stated, hesitating a moment, “before Bruce’s accident.” Tony let out a curse under his breath.

“I do not believe this,” he said, pulling away to sink into one of the rolling chairs, gliding a few feet across the floor.

“She’s been trying to contact him since New York,” Pepper continued over Tony’s loud groan of disgust. “He didn’t answer.”

“Is there some gene that makes you both super powered and stupid?” Tony demanded. He turned narrowed eyes on Pepper. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking you’re not super powered,” she said, her lips struggling not to curl up as Tony’s glare intensified.

“I can understand wanting to keep your distance when you’re a wanted man, that makes sense!” He grabbed a screwdriver, chucking it at the tool chest in the corner. “But for god sake why didn’t he say something when he moved in here? He could have fucking told me a year ago and I’d have marched down to Virginia myself with an engraved invitation and roses!”

“He’s afraid,” Pepper sighed picking absently at a few wires trailing out of the top of the dismantled medical equipment.

“He’s not dangerous,” Tony snapped angrily.
“In the right circumstances he could be,” she reminded gently. “In the right circumstances you can all be. Even you, Mr. Stark, or have you forgotten about=’”

“Nope!” Tony said forcefully, kicking up out of his chair and stalking toward the coffee machine in the corner. “No, no, no.” Pepper bit back a smile. Tony poured the last of the cold sludge in the bottom of the pot into a mug and downed it in two gulps, making a disgusted face. The silence stretched out over the lab, thick but not oppressive. Pepper eyed the dissected medical device suspiciously a moment, pulling aside a piece of casing to reveal a faded Hydra logo underneath. She gently set it back in place before rolling her chair back a safe distance without comment.

Tony dug his fingers into his scalp, ruffling his messy hair before leaning into the counter on his palms with a defeated expression.

“What do we go from here?” Pepper asked, her tone serious and professional. Tony looked up at her, his eyes pained.

“I am never going to be able to tell you how much I love you,” he said softly. Pepper didn’t reply, the solid set of her shoulders never wavering. Tony drew in a shaking breath, rubbing his eyes. His voice was steadier when he let it out. “Square one, we go back to square one.”

“I’ll start the paperwork,” she replied with a decisive nod. Tony opened his mouth to say something but she cut him off. “He’s my friend too.”

“He’s,” Tony choked on the next word, his expression pinched. “They’re my family. And they wouldn’t even be yours to deal with if it wasn’t for me.”

“Then I’m lucky,” Pepper observed firmly. “Lucky to know them, lucky that I can be there to help the people that have saved all of us.” Tony gave a tight nod and she stood to her feet, heading toward the door.

“Lucky that you’re going to take me to a very, very nice dinner tonight, Mr. Stark,” she added as an afterthought, giving him a coy smile over her shoulder.

“That I am, Ms. Potts,” he nodded in agreement. The door closed behind her and he huffed out a breath. “Just as soon as I figure out where I left the tritium battery.” He made a face, glancing around the lab.
“Yeah, better find that now.”

“So I think everything’s fine,” Bucky declared, his voice tinged with amusement as he and Clint half tumbled out of the elevator. “And I head home. Few hours later after midnight sometime I hear this scuffling downstairs.” Clint’s eyes grew wide with alarm, his hands curling more tightly around the pizza box clutched to his chest.

“So I get up to go check on Stevie and I barely have my pants on when I hear, in this squeaky asthmatic little voice; Get the hell out of here!” Bucky continued as they made their way toward the rec room.

“They found you,” Clint breathed, horrified.

“I’m out the window,” Bucky said, grinning with glee. “Practically roll down the rickety old fire escape. I jump the last five feet to Stevie’s bedroom window and what do I see?” Clint shook his head slowly and Bucky’s grin widened.

“Stevie’s standing in the middle of his bed sneezing, barely holding on to our ‘dead’ stolen chicken and the noisy little bastard is squawking and screaming and beating his wings as hard as he can, feathers everywhere!” Clint broke out in a laugh that Bucky joined in.

“The damn thing had apparently woke up and got lose and Stevie had been chasing it around the flat,” Bucky explained. “He looks up at me with this bitter, angry expression, chicken feathers stuck in his hair. He sneezes and says;”

“You and your bright ideas,” Steve declared, his tone dry just as the same words came out of Bucky’s mouth. Bucky froze on the threshold of the rec room with a cautious eye. Steve was leaning against the back of the sofa, his arms folded over his chest. Behind him Phil was ensconced at the bar, pecking idly at his laptop.

“Hey Stevie, got you a pizza from Brooklyn,” Bucky said, nudging Clint who held out the box in his hands with a hopeful smile. “Pepperoni, double cheese, just like you like.” Steve didn’t move, his expression still distressingly neutral.
“Oh come on,” Bucky rolled his eyes. “I took good care of him, he ate his vegetables and looked both ways before crossing the street.”

“We jaywalked,” Clint murmured in reminder. Bucky elbowed him lightly in the ribs. Steve seemed unmoved, his eyes still narrowed in the same stony expression of disapproval.

“Don’t be a shit about it,” Bucky huffed. “It was pizza, not bank robbery or international espionage, or, you know, that T-shirt you’re wearing.” Clint made a pained sound and Bucky turned to look at him.

“You’re kind of being a jerk,” Clint said hesitantly.

“Really?” Bucky asked curiously.

“Kind of.” Clint nodded, cringing slightly.

“Good, let me know when I work my way up to jackass,” he said, patting Clint on the back. Clint shifted the box in his hands enough to offer a thumbs up as Bucky turned back to Steve, mirroring him as he folded his arms over his chest. The silent face off lasted only a handful of seconds.

“What?” Bucky demanded. Steve’s only reply was to nod in the direction of the kitchen door and Bucky turned, his face contorting in an alarmed expression.

Natasha was leaning against the doorway, one hand resting on her hip, staring back at Bucky with eyes cold like ice boring into him, no hint of emotion even slightly evident.

“I think you’re in trouble,” Clint observed cautiously. Bucky nodded slowly in resignation as Clint leaned around him to give Natasha a shy smile.

“Do me a favor, buddy,” Bucky requested, gripping Clint’s shoulder gently. “Come visit me in the hospital.” Clint nodded, his eyes wide and Bucky squared his shoulders, keeping one eye on Natasha as he passed her, disappearing into the kitchen as she followed him.
Steve heaved himself off the back of the sofa, rolling into a full body stretch before reaching out to take the pizza box with one hand and patting Clint on the back with the other.

“Oh, Pino’s,” he said happily as he flipped the box open, pulling a slice free and stuffing it in his mouth as he followed after Natasha into the kitchen. Clint teetered awkwardly a moment, glancing over his shoulder at Phil and then back to the kitchen door.

“Am I in trouble?” Clint asked finally. Phil closed his laptop, a small smile curling his lips.

“No, of course not,” he answered his tone gentle. “In the future I think we’d all feel better if you took your phone with you, though.” Clint’s brow knitted and he felt the pockets of his jeans.

“JARVIS?” he asked finally, his tone anxious.

“In the gym changing room laundry,” JARVIS replied. Clint made a face, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“I don’t remember having a phone,” he confessed, toeing awkwardly at the carpet. He drew in a deep breath, shifting side to side on his feet. “I mean, I remember how to use one, I know how all the apps and things work and the camera and stuff, I can do it on reflex. But I don’t remember having enough money for a phone. I…” He choked on the sentence, letting out a pained sound and Phil slid off the bar stool, crossing the room. Clint flinched the slightest bit but he stood his ground and Phil hesitated before letting his hand rest gently on Clint’s shoulder.

“No one’s angry,” Phil murmured softly, giving his arm a light squeeze. “We were just worried about you. That’s all, I promise.”

“Bucky?”

“Bucky’s fine,” Phil said in amusement settling onto the arm of the sofa as Clint gave him a worried look.

“My old man drank,” he said hesitantly. “And mom smoked. And if he’d been drinking and she’d been smoking they’d light into each other. Didn’t want to be around for that, so I’d take off. Can’t get caught in the crossfire when you’re scarce. No one ever asked where I went, or paid any attention when I came home. ’S long as my work was done in the circus no one asked then either.”
“You have people who care about you now,” Phil said carefully.

“I know,” Clint nodded. “Just kind of not sure how that works exactly.” Phil nodded, giving him a fond look.

“You’ll figure it out,” he said confidently. “Give it some time. Until you do, try to keep your phone with you, all right?” Clint nodded, drawing in a breath before tackling Phil in a bear hug that nearly sent him sprawling onto the sofa.

“You’re really not mad?” Clint murmured against his shoulder.

“No,” Phil replied, rubbing his back.

“We’re still friends, right?”

“Always,” Phil promised.

“You can make me popcorn,” Natasha shot over her shoulder as she emerged from the kitchen. There was a clattering of pans, barely masking the sound of Bucky swearing. “The good stuff, with actual butter.” She grabbed Clint by the back of the collar, prying him off of Phil.

“Come on. You can make up for the ulcer you gave me by spending quality time,” she said, tugging him after her. “JARVIS put on Antiques Roadshow.”

“What’s Antiques Roadshow?” Clint asked in confusion as she herded him toward the TV on the other side of the room.

“Strawberry margaritas too, Barnes!” She called over her shoulder before turning back to Clint and pushing him down on the sofa. “You’re going to love it, just wait,” she promised.

“Make him rub your feet,” Steve suggested, strolling out of the kitchen as he gnawed at a pizza crust, heading toward the elevator. In the kitchen Bucky let out another curse over the sound of
popping corn.

“I was going to make a bid for brownies but I like the way you think,” she nodded in agreement. She swung her feet up on the sofa and leaned into Clint, squirming until she was comfortably tucked against his chest.

“If I’m not in trouble how come Bucky is?” he asked warily, looking down at her.

“It’s complicated,” Natasha replied.

“So it involves sex,” Clint muttered under his breath.

“If he does a good job on the margaritas and the foot rubs his chances will definitely be better,” Natasha nodded, as JARVIS turned on the TV.
Sam shuffled off the elevator with a groan, rubbing at his shoulder as he trudged down the hall toward the kitchen in the dim light. Not for the first time he wondered why he felt it was a good idea to repeatedly play sports with super powered people and what that said about his sanity. Normally he tried not to overthink it, but a certain level of muscle pain could definitely make anyone question their life choices.

The kitchen was dark and quiet, half illuminated by the dimmed under-cabinet lights and the soft glow coming from the rec room. He made a face, squinting at the wide windows that overlooked New York as if they might have some practical advice for him. He let out a breath, slumping toward the sink and fishing the first aid kit out from under it, thumping it down on the counter. He struggled a moment one handed, still rubbing at his sore shoulder before he seemed to think better of that approach and finally used both hands to pry it open, rummaging though it messily until he found the bottle of Tylenol. It took him a moment more to wrestle the safety cap off and he dry swallowed two of them, making a face and then leaning over the sink to drink down a mouthful of water directly from the spigot. He snapped off the tap with a groan, leaning against the sink edge, his eyes closed.

He definitely needed new friends.

He stayed there a moment, at first not hearing the humming, soft and low, that was coming from the rec room. When the sound finally permeated his exhausted brain he frowned, blinking blearily down at his wrist watch. It was just after midnight.

He rubbed at his shoulder again, looking around the empty kitchen, a situation that seemed a bit unusual for a place where hardly anyone ever seemed to sleep. He let out a yawn, considering going back to bed but something unsettling was tugging at his senses and without even realizing it his feet took him out into the rec room.

The TV was on, the volume down so that it was hard to make out but Sam thought he heard a few bars of Star Spangled Man. A grin pulled at his lips; Steve hated that damn song. Apart from the TV, the room was dark and in the reflected light of the screen Sam could just make out Clint, hunched in the middle of the leather sofa, his sock clad feet propped up on the coffee table. Natasha was curled beside him, nearly buried under a fleece blanket, her head pillowed on Clint’s stomach and her knees tucked against the back of the couch. Clint’s hand was resting on her shoulder, his fingers twisting gently at a lock of her hair as he stared blankly at the TV, his eyes just a little too wide.

“Barton, what the hell are you watching, man?” Sam asked, rubbing one eye as he stared at the TV. Steve was on the screen, his lip slightly bloodied and his uniform crusted with dirt as he carried a
small girl on his hip, the child’s face wearing that blank look of shock as Steve handed her off to a SHIELD rescue worker. “I thought you were watching Norm Abrams building cabinets!”

“I, we, um,” Clint seemed to startle a moment, his eyes never properly leaving the screen as he darted glances in Sam’s direction. “This was on after.”

*Known for years within the Intelligence community only by his code name, Hawkeye, Agent Clint Barton’s flawless aim and daring acrobatics have made him a favorite of live news editors around the world.*

“Did I just jump off a building?” Clint asked, his eyes growing to twice their normal size as he stared at the footage from the Battle of New York.

“Aw, man,” Sam groaned. “JARVIS, did we not talk about the parental controls?”

“The broadcast was rated appropriate for audiences over…”

“Oh for chrissake! JARVIS, pause!”

“Why would I jump off a perfectly good building?” Clint demanded, horrified.

“Dude, we’ve all been asking that for ages,” Sam said, shaking his head in resignation. He gave Clint a penetrating look as if demanding an explanation but Clint’s only reply as to sink further back into the sofa, staring resolutely at the screen.

“This,” Sam pointed at the frozen image of Hawkeye in mid draw with a disapproving frown. “Is not a *This Old House* marathon.” Clint frowned back at him defensively.

“JARVIS, play,” Clint said finally. Sam opened his mouth to comment and Clint threw him a defiant look. “I’m old enough to pick out my own TV shows.” Sam made a face, swallowing down an angry grumble before climbing over Clint’s legs to flop onto the couch on his other side. Clint gave him a suspicious, sidelong glare.
“Brains are muscles, man,” Sam declared, dragging one hand over his face and scratching at his chin. “And you don’t work out without a spotter.” Clint let out a huff, turning his attention back to the screen.

An Iowa farm boy recruited by SHIELD while still in his teens, Clint Barton is the second most highly decorated Avenger, awarded dozens of civilian honors for combat service including the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal.

“I don’t remember that,” Clint murmured softly, his cheeks turning pink as he watched the medal ceremony with a bemused frown.

“Eh, if it helps at all, Steve says there was enough alcohol at the after party that it’s a wonder anyone remembers anything,” Sam replied with a shrug.

“What in the world would the president give someone like me a medal for?” Clint demanded with a huff.

“Saving the world?” Sam suggested. Clint gave him a withering look and Sam shrugged. “Just saying, Thwarted Alien Invasion looks damn good on a résumé.”

In the wake of the Battle of New York Hawkeye was actively involved in children’s charities, assisting in fundraising efforts for adoption services for the youngest victims. But perhaps his most public and vocal support has been more controversial.

“I think we need to acknowledge that wars aren’t the neat, tidy, statistical things we like to portray them as,” the Clint on the screen said, his brow furrowed as he stared down the congressional committee he was facing with severity. “Sometimes the boots on the ground don’t want to be there, they were coerced, or lied to, or, in this day and age of technological marvels, even worse than that. Their agency was completely removed. I’ve seen it happen in the field before, I’ve experienced it myself. And I can tell you that the technology exists to strip someone of their free will.”
“Are you saying, Agent Barton, that you support amnesty for former Hydra operatives?”

“Senator, I’m saying that before we condemn anyone, anyone at all, we need to make damn sure they had a choice. Otherwise we’re no better than the bad guys.”

“You okay?” Sam asked, eying him warily. Clint’s breathing had shallowed, his entire body coiled in tension, the hand that had been playing with Natasha’s hair closed in a tight fist around a single curl.

“That was kind of worse than the jumping off the building bit,” Clint admitted hoarsely.

“Yeah, Tony calls it your ‘Resting Murder Face’,” Sam observed. “Any time shit hits the fan you’re the one Captain America hides behind. It’s kind of funny, especially when there’s like fifty reporters screaming at him and then you glare at them and they kind of go really quiet and terrified.”

“I just meant,—” Clint paused waffling wordlessly a moment before sinking back into the couch cushions with a miserable expression, running his hands over his face. “It was a dumb thing to do, mouthing off to a bunch of politicians. I’m lucky they didn’t throw the book at me.”

“That was never going to happen,” Sam insisted, shaking his head. “For one thing you’re an Avenger, a really popular Avenger. Like, according to USA Today you’re the Avenger all the soccer moms are hot for.” Clint made a horrified face, his shoulders rolling up around his ears.

“And for another,” Sam continued, hardly missing a beat. “Tony Stark has a whole gaggle of lawyers and his personal income taxes fund half the US Earmarks budget.”

“Well, at least that makes sense then,” Clint stated, flapping his hand at the TV screen where the documentary host was narrating over Tony’s appearance at the Senate Armed Forces Committee hearing.

“Trust me, Barton,” Sam let out a sigh, shaking his head as Tony’s parting shot was ruthlessly beeped out. “Nothing about Stark makes sense.” Clint gave a grudging nod of agreement. The documentary moved on to footage of Natasha, her lithe form moving effortlessly through the take-down of a pack of Hydra operatives.
“Bucky said some things earlier,” Clint declared finally, glancing at Sam uneasily out of the corner of his eye. “About being captured and having his head messed with. Was it Hydra?”

“Yeah,” Sam nodded, careful to keep his eyes on the TV.

“Is that why I said all that?”

“No, man, I mean, it helped Bucky’s case. But that,” Sam shook his head, his smile growing fond as he waved a hand at the TV where Clint and Natasha were fighting in tandem during the Chitauri invasion. “That was before we even found him. Hydra made a mess of things for SHIELD and there were some guys in the military who wanted to pin the blame on the rank and file. Little guys, low security clearance. You stood up for them.”

“Barney always said I was shit at staying out of trouble.” Clint huffed sourly.

“Yeah it’s definitely not your strongest skill,” Sam admitted grudgingly.

“He always used to tell me; keep your head down and your mouth shut,” Clint said, poking idly at the edge of the coffee table with one sock clad toe. “I tried, I really did. That’s why he left, isn’t it? I couldn’t mind my own business.”

“You don’t talk about your brother much,” Sam admitted, his tone careful. “And I’m not saying that’s not good advice when you’re a kid, when you’re too small to stand up for yourself. But it’s like Steve says, the problem with the world is that there’s not enough big guys standing up for the little guys.”

“You sound like Phil,” Clint rolled his eyes, but a smile was tugging at his lips.

“Aw, come on, don’t pretend like you weren’t a Cap fan as a kid,” Sam teased, punching him lightly in the arm. “I know you better than that.”

“It’s a good thing one of us knows me.” Clint startled as if surprised he’d said the words out loud and he cast a nervous look at Sam who was watching him with a careful expression.
“You’re the same guy you’ve always been,” Sam assured gently. Clint looked away, his gaze settling on the TV.

“I don’t even know how I did that,” he confessed, nodding toward the screen where Hawkeye was jumping off the side of a ferry boat. He let loose a grappling arrow and, swinging out, skimmed mere inches over the water to snag a small child whose arms were flailing in panic. He swooped back up, tumbling over the rail of the ferry and curling around the child as the pair of them rolled across the deck until they stopped in a sprawling heap. Clint made a face, looking uncomfortable as the girl’s hysterical mother swept her up and the Hawkeye on the screen flopped onto his back, wheezing for air.

“That makes two of us,” Sam replied.

“I don’t remember any of this,” Clint admitted, looking pained. “I don’t remember even thinking of how to do something like that. I had trick arrows in the circus, I made most of ‘em myself, but not like that. Did I come up with that? What even happened that I thought it was a good idea in the first place? What happened that Phil let me have one?”

“You jump off a lot of buildings, man,” Sam said, resigned.

“I don’t,” Clint snapped, waving a hand at the TV. “That moron jumps off of buildings and shoots aliens and. What the hell is that?”

“Terrorist attack on Sidney,” Sam shrugged, studying the screen. “I missed that one.”

“I’m not him,” Clint said with a hint of anger. “I’ve never done anything that brave or stupid in my life. I’m not a hero, I’m a guy with a bow and arrows.”

“You’re a lot more than that,” Sam replied, nudging his shoulder gently. “You are one of the bravest guys I know.”

“I’m not, though,” Clint said, his tone verging on bitter as he nodded toward the TV. “That guy is.” Sam let out a defeated sigh, watching a moment as the documentary continued on, showing more footage of desperate battles and terrifying death defying maneuvers.
“Before this,—” Sam paused, waving a hand around to indicate the entire room. “Tower of sci-fi madcap, before that I was Para-rescue in Afghanistan. Two tours.”

“You were in the Army?” Clint asked curiously.

“Oh them’s fighting words!” Sam answered with a snort of amusement. Clint’s cheeks turned pink and Sam gave him a gentle nudge in the ribs. “Air Force.” The smile slid slowly off of Sam’s face and he settled back into the couch with a sigh.

“I believed I was doing the right thing,” Sam continued after a moment. “I still believe that, that I was saving lives, protecting people. Not just Americans, people. Innocent people, people who couldn’t protect themselves. Got a whole shoe box full of medals that say that’s what I was there doing.”

“But you’re not doing that any more,” Clint said. Sam shook his head.

“Something happened,” Sam replied. “A buddy of mine got killed. And it’s not that I stopped believing in what I was doing, it’s just that I didn’t have it in me to keep doing it. And that happens sometimes, you have to move on from where you are and be who you’re going to be next. If you’d have told me when I was Para-Rescue that one day I’d be hanging with Captain America and saving the world I’d have laughed at you. There’s lots of things in life you never see coming.” Clint stared in silence at the TV, his fingers still absently playing with Natasha’s hair. She let out a soft mumble and he glanced down at her with shining eyes.

“You were a hero before you were a superhero, though,” he finally said, his voice faltering.

“Clint.”

“I don’t know how to be that.” Clint shook his head, brushing at his eyes. “I don’t know how I got there or why. I don’t even know if I was doing it because I believed in it. I wish I did. Wish I knew why the guy on TV with my face doesn’t look like he’s scared of anything.”

“It’s okay,” Sam said, leaning into Clint a little. Clint curled closer to him, rubbing his nose on the sleeve of his hoodie as Natasha let out a mumbled protest, tucking herself deeper into the couch. “Right now you’re still healing, and that’s okay, that’s good, that’s exactly what you’re supposed to be doing. Nobody’s going to ask you to jump off any buildings, Steve and Phil’ll probably be glad you’re not doing it.” Clint let out a watery laugh and Sam shifted, wrapping an arm around
“Clint’s shoulders.

“Right now all you have to worry about is getting better,” Sam assured. “That’s it, the rest of it we’ll deal with when we need to.”

“I wish Barney was here,” Clint said softly. “Wish I could tell him I was sorry for whatever happened, you know?” Sam winced, giving Clint’s shoulder a squeeze.

“Yeah, I get it,” he said neutrally.

They were both silent for a while and Sam had just started to wonder if Clint had nodded off when he shifted, brushing Natasha’s hair away from her face.

“What kind of super spy sleeps on a living room couch where everyone can just sneak up on her?” he asked. Sam choked down a laugh.

“I don’t know, she only does that around you,” Sam admitted, stifling a chuckle. Clint’s eyes widened.

“Oh damn, she doesn’t think I’m going to protect her, does she?” he asked, horrified. Sam covered his mouth to silence his involuntary snort of amusement.

“And why does she like Martha Stewart so much?” Clint demanded as an afterthought as Sam’s shoulders shook. “I mean, I get why I like it, I always did like watching a Barker spool out a first rate hustle and she’s good enough she could work the sideshows.” Sam fell over into the couch, covering his head with a throw pillow as he cackled into the sofa cushions.

Neither one of them noticed the shadow shifting in the doorway of the kitchen or heard the sound of shuffling feet over Sam’s laughter and the exploding Triskelion on TV.

“JARVIS, maybe you should wake Phil,” Bruce suggested softly, his expression pinched as he slipped back farther into the shadows near the breakfast table. “Tell him that Sam probably has everything under control but maybe he should check on them, maybe help him steer Clint off to bed.” There was a silent pause and Bruce fidgeted with the mug in his hands, watching the rec room with obvious unease.
“Agent Coulson sends his gratitude,” JARVIS replied finally. “He’ll be down shortly.”

“Thanks,” Bruce said, taking a sip from his mug and discovering it empty, he set it on the corner of the counter, rubbing at his face with his hands.

“Was there anything else, Doctor?” JARVIS asked when Bruce hadn’t moved from the doorway.

“No,” Bruce shook his head slowly, watching as Sam sat up, giving Clint a playful jab, the documentary nearly forgotten. “No, I’m just going to make myself a cup of tea and head back down to the lab.” He folded his arms over his chest, his brow furrowing in a pensive worried frown.

The elevator dinged and Bruce jumped, stepping further back into the kitchen as Phil appeared on the threshold of the rec room in his pajamas. Clint turned on the sofa, a genuine smile lighting his eyes as he spotted Phil and Bruce noted the expression of relief on Sam’s face before retreating out the opposite kitchen door, his empty mug forgotten on the counter.
Bruce stepped off the elevator, pausing in the intersection of the lab halls, rocking back and forth on his feet with hesitance. On his left Tony’s lab was vacant, the early morning light creeping up over the New York skyline to bathe the workshop in a golden glow. Warm light reflected off the scattered remains of one of the suits, breaking apart like a prism and casting bits of rainbow onto the smartglass wall.

Most of the bio-containment lab on his right was open to the light, its immaculate surfaces undisturbed, sterile, tidy in a way that only the brand new and unused can be. He crept forward, slipping in through the lab’s door, his brow furrowing as he scanned the empty room.

He thought he heard something, and he tilted his head, moving with cautious steps toward the open, frosted doors of the decontamination suite. The room was barely more than a box, separating the main bio lab from the secure area. The door on the other side was open as well and he edged forward, following the sound of muted conversation.

“No, all my stuff is in storage,” Betty was saying as she meticulously packed up her laptop, her fingers pausing as she secured the charger. “I mean, we talked about how this could potentially go. I wanted to be ready for that.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” the female voice on the speakerphone replied with an amused note. “No idea where I’d put your shoes.” Betty smiled, her laugh soft.

“Thank you,” Betty said, relief clear in her tone. “Really, you have no idea. I know I could go back to Culver, there’s no way they replaced me already, but I was only staying there for one reason and that reason’s gone now. It’s time I moved on.”

“I’m not sure Knoxville’s a place to relaunch your life from,” her friend answered teasingly. “But sure, I’m always happy to shovel the legos out of the spare room so you can visit.” Betty zipped up the laptop case, slumping down onto one of the lab stools with a sigh.

“Seriously though,” Betty said, sounding both grateful and abashed. “I’m sorry I’m putting you out like this. I just want to get out of New York as fast as I can and regroup, it shouldn’t be more than a month or two at most.”

“It’s okay if it’s longer, you know that,” the woman replied. “SI’s not going to burn you over this,
“Potts was a gem, actually,” Betty replied, a fondness creeping into her expression. “She offered me severance and a free flight anywhere in the world. It’s the nicest job I’ve ever ragequit in my life.”

“Well that sucks,” her friend said with a huff. “Maybe you could get her to transfer you to another facility? I mean, it’s worth asking right?”

“I’m not sure my pride will let me,” Betty admitted ruefully.

“Hey, I thought we were swallowing pride on principle when you took this job!” she teased. Betty let out a laugh as she turned away from the lab bench. Her gaze settled on Bruce just beyond the door and she flinched, her brow wrinkling up in tension as she reached up to rub at her temples.

“I… need to go,” Betty said finally.

“You have me on speakerphone, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do,” Betty admitted, watching Bruce with a blank expression.

“Well, this has been delightfully awkward,” her friend declared with far too much amusement. “I’m going to go pry my foot out of my mouth and disinfect the guest bath so it’s adult-appropriate. Let me know when you’ll get here.”

“I’ll text you,” Betty agreed as the call disconnected. Bruce shuffled on the threshold a moment before edging cautiously through the door from the decontamination suite, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“How’s Courtney?” he asked finally.
“She’s good,” Betty replied, nodding slightly. “She just made tenure at UT.” Bruce made an approving noise.

“How’s her kid, um?”

“Nathan starts kindergarten in the fall,” Betty replied.

“He’s five already?”

“He’s four.” Bruce seemed to consider this only a moment before nodding.

“Tom still in manufacturing?”

“Bruce.” Betty’s eyes narrowed warningly and he bit his lip.

“I’m sorry,” he said, taking another hesitant step closer.

“That’s lovely,” Betty replied, nodding. “Do you have any idea what you’re sorry for?” Bruce seemed to give the question due consideration.

“Alphabetical or Substantive?” he asked finally. Betty drew in a deep breath, letting it out in a huff but she didn’t reply.

“I didn’t want to do any more damage to your life than I already had,” Bruce insisted. “I burned enough of your bridges for you, it never occurred to me you’d leave Culver, much less come here. I never meant to put you-.”

“Are you deranged?” Betty demanded, flabbergasted as she stared back at him. “You didn’t answer your calls, you didn’t answer your voice mails. You didn’t answer your SI corporate email, which let me tell you by the way, was not easy to get my hands on!”

“Did you… buy my email address?” he asked, stunned. Her only reply was a derisive look. Bruce took a deep breath, his movements arrested for only a moment. “I wondered about that.”
“If you’d have given me some indication that you were all right, that you were safe,” she snapped angrily. “Anything at all. A text message, a Christmas card! Something to tell me you weren’t in danger!”

“Danger?” Bruce blinked at her in surprise. “I’m not in danger, I cause danger, I have the CNN coverage to prove it.”

“You, not your alter ego!” Betty growled. “I haven’t seen you in one Avengers press conference, not one. And then Stark calls me to work on a top secret cellular bio project in New York and I figured who else could it be? Of course I said yes, I wasn’t going to get another chance to get that close to wherever they were keeping you!”

“Keeping me?”

“It was the most logical conclusion!” Bruce stared at her, his mouth hanging open slightly as she glared back at him.

“Let me get this straight,” he said finally, rubbing at his eyes with a pinched expression. “You accepted a job offer so that you could infiltrate a company because you thought Captain America had me locked up in a dungeon somewhere and you were going to what, break me out?”

“If I had to,” Betty snapped, her eyes fiery with anger.

“That’s crazy,” Bruce pointed out. “Why would you even think that?”

“What else was I supposed to think?” Betty demanded. Bruce opened his mouth to reply then snapped it shut. “I could slap you!”

“I really wouldn’t recommend it,” Bruce replied, flinching.

“I’m about this close to taking my chances,” she ground out, holding her thumb and finger a hair’s breadth apart. Bruce rubbed his face, seeming to stutter for a reply.
“You honestly thought the Avengers had captured me and were letting the other guy off the chain when the crisis got big enough?” he asked hesitantly.

“I couldn’t reach you,” Betty reminded again, her lips pressing in a thin line. “After what happened with the General, well, you’ll forgive me if I’m not the most trusting when it comes to powerful people.” Bruce didn’t reply and Betty turned back to her laptop case.

“I’m sorry,” Bruce said finally. “I’m sorry I worried you, I’m sorry I didn’t let you know I was safe, it was foolish and unfeeling and I won’t justify it even to ask for forgiveness.” Betty kept her face turned away from him but her shoulders stiffened.

“What do you want, Bruce?” she asked finally.

“I let you down,” he said. “More than once.”

“Bruce,” she snapped.

“And I’m about to do the same to someone else I care about,” Bruce rushed on. Betty turned angry eyes on him that burned with unshed tears. “My friend’s in trouble and you could help him. You would help him if it weren’t for me.”

“I-” Betty drew in a shaky breath, a single tear spilling over to trickle down her cheek. “I don’t think I can.”

“I think you have more chance than anyone,” Bruce insisted.

“What is it you think I could possibly do?” she demanded, her voice cracking. “This isn’t science, it’s science fiction. I’m not qualified.”

“You are the best bio-tech theorist I have ever worked with,” Bruce insisted vehemently. “I know that if there’s a way to fix this you can figure it out.”

“Bruce.”
“Stay,” Bruce said, his voice small. “Just long enough to look at Clint, to go over what we have so far. Just, anything. I won’t ask for more, I know I don’t have the right to ask for even that much, but he’s my friend and he needs your help. I won’t make it difficult, I swear.”

“If you avoid me, if you-”

“I won’t.”

“I can’t promise,” she added haltingly, shaking her head. “Even if I had years there’s no guarantee.”

“Elisabeth Ross, you are brilliant,” Bruce insisted. “I know that if there’s a way to fix this, you’re the one who can find it.”

“And what happens if I can’t?”

“Then Tony will put you in any lab you want in the world,” Bruce promised. “Even if it’s not SI, wherever you want to go, anything you want. This one project and he’ll set you up for whatever research you want, funded for life.”

“Is that even a promise you can make?” she demanded with a derisive snort.

“It is not,” JARVIS interrupted. “It is, however, one I am at liberty to extend, Doctor Ross.”

“See, our robot overlord has you back,” Bruce said, half waving a hand at the ceiling.

“I want it in writing,” Betty declared, pressing her lips in a thin line.

“I shall have the appropriate paperwork processed within the hour,” JARVIS answered breezily.

“JARVIS, could you give us a moment?” Bruce asked, pinching the bridge of his nose. There was
a soft click and then silence.

“This is a funny farm,” Betty observed.

“Imagine what it’s like on a bad day,” Bruce sighed, nodding in agreement.

“Well, if you expect us to work together,” Betty said, standing to her feet and dusting off her hands. “Then prove it, get me up to speed on this nut house.”

“Your peanut gallery awaits,” Bruce declared, motioning at the door. Betty forced back a hint of a smile, marching past him into the main lab. Bruce closed his eyes, drawing in a shaky breath before following.

“I’m just saying,” Tony declared, sparing half a glance over his shoulder as he loped down the stairs into the rec room. “It’s a thing, a thing we can do.”

“Yeah, man, I hear ya,” Sam replied, treading down the steps after him with a skeptical roll of his eyes.

“A thing I will totally disavow any knowledge of because I like you,” Tony added, pausing as he passed behind the back of the sofa to clap a hand on Thor’s shoulder before heading toward the bar. “Alfredo and Parmigiana, come on, shake a leg. Food’s hot. JARVIS, assemble the stragglers.”

“I think you’ll disavow it for reasons that have nothing to do with me,” Sam replied, a smile twisting his lips as he grabbed a plate from the end of the bar, handing it to Pepper before claiming one for himself. “I thought we were having sushi tonight.” Tony gave him a blank, unimpressed look in reply. Sam shrugged it off, grabbing the spoon poking out of the nearest chafing dish. He let out a yelp of surprise as Natasha crept up behind him, poking him lightly in the ribs and using the distraction to snag his plate with a smarmy smile.

“Butterflies?” Jane demanded, her expression distinctly unamused as she rolled off the sofa to head for the buffet line. She side stepped around Clint without even looking at him, the archer hovering back as if uncertain.
“They arrive in small boxes,” Thor enthused, trailing in her wake. “The breeder assured me that they are ethically raised in a sustainable holistic environment.”

“Super,” Darcy said appearing in the line in front of Jane as if she had magically teleported there. She took an extra large scoop of lasagna before turning an evil grin on Thor. “They’re totally going to love that central park smog.” Jane threw her a withering look that she blithely ignored.

“Hey, what’s the movie tonight?” Steve asked as he and Bucky ambled down the hall from the elevator, both of them shower-damp from the gym.

“Barnes’ night to pick,” Tony replied, taking a plate and holding it out “Barton, get over here, eat something.” Clint was still hesitating and Bucky settled a hand in the middle of his back, gently propelling him toward the bar. Clint clutched at the plate Tony smacked into his chest as Bucky forcefully shuffled him forward toward the bar.

“I thought we were getting sushi,” Darcy said, a chunk of garlic bread dangling from between her teeth.

“Shut up and eat your veal, Lewis,” Tony advised, his tone dry as he poured a glass of wine for Jane, holding it out to her by the stem.

“So what are we watching?” Steve asked Bucky curiously, Bucky’s only reply was a sharp grin that Steve regarded with worry suspicion.

“X-Men is ready at your leisure,” JARVIS replied instead. Natasha made a face and Bucky’s grin widened.

“There’s an X-Men movie?” Clint asked, his eyes wide. “I used to love those comics!” Natasha gave a derisive snort, stabbing the lasagna with unnecessary force that made Clint turning toward her with a hint of alarm.

“It’s ridiculous and the combat choreography is laughably unrealistic,” Natasha said contemptuously.

“They’re comic books,” Clint pointed out as if that explained everything. Natasha narrowed her eyes at him before moving down the other side of the bar.
“She has Mystique envy,” Bucky said in a low voice near Clint’s ear. Clint turned to look at him with a frown as Natasha turned away, collecting her wine glass from Tony before heading back toward the sofa.

“Did you pick a movie just because she hates it?” he asked in a low voice. Steve only shook his head, biting his lip to keep from laughing as Bucky’s grin widened. “There’s a reason you keep striking out. I really don’t think I should be the one explaining it to you, but there’s definitely a reason.” The statement did nothing to change Bucky’s glee-filled expression.

“As long as it’s not another stupid Captain America movie,” Steve insisted, looking resigned as he heaped Alfredo on his plate.

“Next time I’m picking a Captain America movie,” Bucky declared to Clint just loud enough so that Steve could hear. He kept his eyes trained on the dish of ziti but Clint didn’t miss the glee in his eyes as Steve shuddered.

“How do you have friends?” Clint asked in wonder.

“The cabbage butterfly and Colorado Hairstreak will coordinate spectacularly with the chosen ceremony colors,” Thor declared as he settled onto the sofa, looking all too delighted by the prospect. “Unless, of course, you would prefer them to all be white?”

“We have colors?” Jane asked, looking confused.

“You let Clint pick them,” Darcy murmured in her ear. Jane’s face twitched before giving her a thumbs up. Tony shook his head, adding a second splash of bourbon to his glass before glancing down the bar at Clint who was staring down into the pan of Alfredo, his expression both bemused and curious.

“It’s like macaroni and cheese,” Bucky said, jostling Clint’s shoulder as he added a heaping scoop to his own plate. “Only classy.” Stark let out an inarticulate sound of protest.

“Barnes, you uncultured Philistine, why do I let you live here?” Tony demanded, raising his glass to his lips. He let out a huff of surprise as Pepper slipped past him, plucking the glass from his fingers and throwing back a generous swallow.
“I don’t know,” Bucky shrugged, reaching over Clint for the breadsticks. “Your superhero crush on Captain America? Did you have the little dolls when you were a kid?”

“Everyone had the action figures,” Tony replied, half distracted by Pepper and his stolen drink. “Everyone.”

“I had one too,” Clint nodded in agreement, giving himself a cautious helping of Alfredo. “Got it for Christmas one year, I think it came from the firemen’s toy drive.” Barnes let out a snort of laughter before turning back to Stark.

“Bet you had the whole set,” he said with a teasing grin. “Did you have the Bucky Barnes doll?”

“Shut up,” Tony said without any real heat in the words. “Action figures.”

“What now?” Bruce asked, his brow furrowed as he came out of the kitchen with a stack of microwave containers.

“Captain America toys,” Pepper prompted as she made her way toward the sofa. Bruce nodded sagely.

“I got the limited edition Cap Cycle play set for my eighth birthday,” he said.

“See, everyone had them,” Tony huffed, waving a dismissive hand at Barns.

“Did you have the tank that shot the little foam pellets?” Clint asked, his eyes brightening. “I wanted one of those so bad.” Tony stared at him as if unsure how to respond.

“Fanboy,” Bucky said to Clint in a low voice as he fished sodas out of the cooler.

“Phil still has his,” Tony declared, pointing at the agent who had just arrived and was heading toward the kitchen.
“Do I want to be a part of this conversation?” Phil asked his tone reluctant.

“Captain America toys,” Bruce stated, holding out one of the tupperware containers. “We were talking about with ones we had as kids. I got you a container, Phil.”

“Oh, I had the whole set,” Phil said with a shrug, backtracking to Bruce’s side. “Thanks, another all-nighter in the lab?”

“I’m still getting Dr. Ross up to speed, there’s a lot to cover,” Bruce replied, sparing a glance at Clint as Phil nodded, considering the offerings.

“Aren’t you staying?” Clint asked, blinking at Phil as he loitered near the end of the bar.

“Phil never stays for movie night,” Bucky said, tucking a breadstick in the corner of his mouth and taking his plate toward the sofa. “He has this gaggle of immature assholes he’s responsible for, they generate too much paperwork.”

“You’re one to talk, you adolescent man-child,” Tony huffed, glaring at the back of Bucky’s head.

“Can’t the pair of you get though one movie night without bickering like toddlers?” Steve asked in exasperation.

“They really can’t,” Bruce replied, the corners of his mouth ticking up. “Tony’s still bitter that Barnes unseated him as senior immature asshole.”

“I’m going to reclaim my title,” Tony insisted with conviction.

“We’re watching X-Men,” Clint said, ignoring them in favor of turning his pleading expression on Phil. “You love comics.”

“Bucky wasn’t pulling your leg,” Steve said, his tone gentle. “We do keep Phil really busy.”

“Oh, well, yeah.” Clint nodded, looking chagrinned. “That’s important.” Phil stared at him for a
long moment, frozen in place.

“No, you’re right,” Phil declared finally, setting the plastic container aside and reaching for one of the plates. “I could probably use a break anyway.” Clint’s face lit up in a grin.

“I’ll save you a seat,” he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he headed toward the sofa. Phil watched him go, a fondness in his expression. When he turned back to the buffet it was to find Tony, Bruce and Steve staring at him as if rooted to the floor.

“What?”

“Who are you and what have you done with Phil Coulson?” Tony asked, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response.” Phil replied. “By the way, good call on the pasta. I think it took me three years to get Clint to try sushi.” Steve and Bruce both turned to eye Tony who was pretending he hadn’t heard as he grabbed a plate.

“You should invite Doctor Ross to the next movie night,” Steve said, breaking the increasingly awkward silence.

“I’m not sure she’ll be here long enough,” Bruce replied, making a face. “She only promised a consult.”

“At least let her know how grateful we are,” Steve nodded, picking at his pasta. “To you too. Whatever you said to her to make her stay-”

“I didn’t make her stay,” Bruce corrected. “I just apologized for making her want to leave.”

“Which I am grateful for, by the way,” Tony admitted, “because I was running out of people to bribe into coming to work on this.”

“I’m sure it isn’t that bad,” Bruce rebuked gently.
“I called Huntington,” Tony admitted. Phil’s eyebrows raised in amusement and he shook his head.

“He’s a physicist,” Bruce pointed out. Tony gave him his most deriding eye roll in answer.

“I bet that went over well,” Steve said with a hint of amusement. “what did he say?”

“Nothing,” Tony replied with a huff. “He’s a cagy reclusive bastard on a good day. But now he’s not even answering my emails. That’s just rude.”

“You bring out the rude in people,” Phil declared, patting Tony’s arm with a smirk as he headed toward the couch. “It’s your super power.” Bruce let out a snort of a laugh, closing the lids on the containers and grabbing up the stack as he headed for the elevator.

“Hey, I’ll use whatever I can to keep my enemies off balance!” Tony insisted.

“And your friends, too,” Steve added. Tony turned to look at him with suspicion to find Steve watching him with a soft, unreadable expression.

“If Wilson claims I offered to drive him to Central Park in the Tesla for your jogging date it’s a lie,” Tony declared, his expression shifty.

“No,” Steve said, shaking his head, his smile chagrined. “Just, it was nice of you to think about Clint and the food. You do a lot for us and mostly we don’t notice because you dis… wait, what about the Tesla now?”

“X-Men!” Tony said with undue enthusiasm, turning toward the sofa. “JARVIS, roll film!” Steve closed his eyes, shaking his head slowly before letting out a sigh and following.
“I think,” Betty nodded slowly, her eyes narrowing slightly as she carefully studied the live 3D rendering of Clint’s brain. “Yeah.”

“That’s what I thought,” Bruce nodded in agreement.

“Because it’s not,” Betty added.

“No,” Bruce replied. “And it isn’t.”

“No.”

“So what’s left?”

“Exactly,” she said, her expression decisive.

“That is so, so creepy,” Darcy declared with conviction, her brow furrowed as she watched the pair from the other side of the bio lab. She spared a glance down the lab bench at Tony and Phil before turning a judgmental look on Jane who had just let out a suspiciously romantic sigh.

“It’s not creepy,” Jane protested, her chin resting on the heel of one hand. “I think it’s sweet.”

On the other side of the lab Bruce let out a huff and Betty nodded in agreement, neither of them sparing much notice of Clint whose attention was bouncing back and forth between them like a spectator at a tennis match. A pair of transmitters were stuck to either side of his temples, their wires hooked into one of the databanks. A myriad of other wireless sensors trailed down his neck and shoulders, small sparks of neurons crackling over the surface of the 3D projection as his head swiveled back and forth.

“Creepy,” Darcy repeated sternly. “That is not English.”
“Definitely not English,” Tony agreed with a pensive frown, watching the pair with calculated fascination.

“I think it’s a code,” Phil observed. “I’ve honestly never seen anything like it.”

“What’er you thinking?” Tony asked curiously. “Like Quaternary¹?”

“I’ve counted at least a dozen variables,” Phil shook his head. “I’d say more old school, like the World War Code Talkers.” Tony nodded sagely.

“They could use a noun and a verb in the same sentence now and again,” Darcy offered in mild protest. “An adjective that actually modifies something. Just saying.”

“I think it’s charming,” Jane insisted, letting out another breath of a sigh.

“You don’t get a vote, you agreed to live butterflies at your wedding,” Darcy said with a huff. “You hate entomology.” Jane shot her half an irritated look.

“Did anyone think to try?” Betty asked.

“First thing,” Bruce nodded, waving one hand at the projection.

“And of course,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Well,” Betty made a put upon face, folding her arms over her chest.

“Why we called you,” Bruce declared.
“Are they making progress at least?” Darcy asked.

“What?” Tony frowned, sparing a confused glance in her direction. “No idea, I stopped trying to follow ten minutes ago and started trying to parse the vernacular.”

“You’re never going to figure it out without a lexicon,” Phil said.

“I hacked the KGB when I was eleven,” Tony replied, looking affronted.

“You had a lexicon for that,” Phil reminded. “Besides, I know for a fact you were twelve.”

“Not when I started the hack I wasn’t,” Tony insisted, most of his attention still on Betty and Bruce. “It was my birthday present to myself.”

“This is what happens when you listen to your public school guidance counselor about your career path options,” Darcy stated with no small amount of venom.

“Do we have?” Betty made a calculating face and Bruce nodded, tapping at his Starkpad and then handing it to her. Betty stared at it a long moment, her brow furrowed.

“Can I get a baseline?” she asked. Bruce nodded with a hum, turning toward Clint. He opened his mouth as if to say something but it was as if he’d completely lost his train of thought, his jaw working silently as Clint stared up at him.

“Captain America toys,” he said finally. “You mentioned you had some.”

“Just the Cap doll,” Clint replied. A pulse like a lightning bolt arced over the 3D projection and he turned his head, staring at it with fascination.

“Action figures!” Tony protested loud enough to carry. Phil gave him a gentle jab with his elbow.

“What about the comic books?” Bruce asked, picking up another Starkpad and tapping at it thoughtfully.
“Barney and me would find them in the Goodwill sometimes,” Clint replied. Another arc of light zinged across his synapses and he watched it distractedly. “One summer the Fisher's Big Wheel had a bunch of the old ones in a bargain bin and we spent all our pocket change.” Bruce turned to look at Betty and she hummed softly.

“Um, you said you got the first issue of the newest run,” Bruce prompted. “Do you remember that?” The synapses sparked to life again but this time they died out almost as quickly as they’d began. Clint slowly shook his head but Bruce seemed too distracted by whatever he was seeing on his Starkpad to notice.

“That’s unsettling,” Phil remarked, his expression forcibly neutral as Bruce plied Clint with more questions.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Every test we run is like that.”

“It’s like poof and it’s gone,” Darcy observed, waving her hands.

“Very scientific, thank you,” Jane said, nodding slowly. Darcy rolled her eyes.

“We don’t know why,” Tony huffed out a breath, looking frustrated.

“And if you don’t know why, all of the technology we have is useless,” Phil finished for him, nodding slowly. Across the lab Betty made a sound in the back of her throat before lifting the Starkpad over her head and tilting it slightly so it was inside the 3D projection.

“Oh,” Bruce said, his lips puckering in a small circle as he shuffled around the lab bench to peer over her shoulder.

“Yeah,” Betty nodded.

“Wow. How?”
“I have no idea,” she admitted. “However-”

“Yeah,” Bruce nodded, his shoulders straightening. “definitely.”

“So have we decided something?” Tony asked, sitting up.

“Um, yes?” Bruce offered, looking surprised to find them all still in the lab.

“Agent Barton,” Betty said, nodding as she turned to him. “You’ll be happy to know there’s nothing wrong with you.”

“This is my unimpressed face,” Tony stated, pointing at his head as he shuffled across the lab toward them. “That diagnosis is not what I’m paying you an obscene amount of money for.”

“No amount of money is worth being here,” Betty replied drily. “And your disapproval of my diagnosis doesn’t actually make it less accurate.” Tony gave her a grudging shrug of assent.

“Oh, I’ll bite,” Darcy shrugged, hopping up on one of the lab stools beside Clint and looking up at the 3D projection with fresh curiosity. “If there’s nothing wrong with him, why can’t he remember that he owes me $20 for spotting him on poker night three weeks ago?”

“I owe you $20?” Clint asked looking worried.

“You owe her $10,” Jane replied, stretching out her back as she rounded the lab bench. “She’s messing with you.”

“Well,” Betty began, taking a deep breath as she reached out to manipulate the image of Clint’s brain. “The original theory was damage to the memory centers that stored that particular block of long term memory, which wasn’t the case. We did a comparison of Agent Barton’s current scan and the ones on file from before the injury.”

“You’ve got photos of my brain on your computer?” Clint asked Bruce with a worried frown.
“You fall on your head a lot,” Tony said with a hint of impatience. “Jump off of things less and I’ll promise to take fewer pictures of your head.” Clint only made a face in reply.

“We did a comparison,” Betty repeated, trying not to look flustered. “The brain is made up of specialized cells called neurons and, as far as we can tell, apart from some minor inflammation, the cells are all perfectly intact.”

“So there isn’t any lasting physical damage,” Phil said with a frown. “Why aren’t the neurons doing their job?”

“That’s the really curious question!” Betty replied. “We couldn’t figure it out either at first. If you’ll look here, this grouping of cells looks completely healthy but when you compare it to previous scans.” She held up the Starkpad until the images were overlapping.

“The cells look… different.” Jane observed.

“They are,” Betty replied. “Like I said, neurons come in different configurations, for whatever reason in this tiny little region of the brain the neurons are markedly different from their former configuration.”

“So the synaptic pathways are what, disrupted?” Jane asked with a frown. “Like a car coming to a bridge that’s out and not having anywhere to go.”

“Damnit,” Phil let out a frustrated huff. “That rules out the theta-wave machine.”

“And Binary Augmented Retro Framing,” Tony gave a nod.

“Should I know what that is?” Betty asked, turning to look at Bruce.

“We have some developmental technology at our disposal,” Tony replied, folding his arms over his chest. “We can aid memory recall and suppressed information by stimulating the synaptic pathways.”

“So far It’s been pretty effective,” Bruce added. “Phil’s used it, so has Bucky but it’s-”
“Not without risks,” Phil finished for him, looking grim. “Particularly Theta-Wave.”

“Well, there isn’t much for it to stimulate I’m afraid,” Betty nodded in agreement. “The up side is, based on my readings, there’s no reason to believe you wouldn’t be able to recover your memories naturally.”

“You mean I’ll just get better on my own?” Clint asked hopefully.

“The brain is capable of constructing new synaptic pathways as long as the tissue isn’t damaged.” Betty replied, nodding. “With cognitive therapy and retraining you could probably access forty to sixty percent of your lost memories.”

“But not all of it,” Tony said, his lips turning down in a frown.

“Well, it’s unlikely,” Betty agreed. “But it’s not impossible. The memories should all still be there. Memory tends to be porous for most people. The memories he doesn’t recover probably won’t be significant life events anyway.”

“So let’s say we do nothing, send Katniss here to therapy and wait it out,” Tony said, his shoulders strung tight. “How long?”

“Two or three years maybe?” Betty offered hesitantly, flinching as Tony’s scowl deepened.

“That’s not going to work,” Tony replied, his tone sharp. Betty’s eyes narrowed, her expression growing calculating and cold.

“Could I talk to you a moment please, in private?” Bruce interrupted, giving Tony a pointed look. Stark stared back at him a moment, tight lipped before turning on his heel and stalking out of the lab. Bruce watched him cross the hall, turning the corner and storming through the door of his own lab before drawing in a deep breath, his expression apologetic as he turned back to Betty

“If you could just, give me a minute,” he said, pointing over his shoulder at Tony’s lab. Betty gave a nod, drawing in a steadying breath herself.
“I realize he’s under a lot of strain” she stated as if it were an acknowledgment and not an excuse. “I’ll put my findings together before I go.”

“It’s been,” Bruce paused, a faint smile pulling at his lips, “a pleasure working with you again, Dr. Ross, thank you for your help.”

“Likewise, Dr. Banner,” she replied, offering him a soft smile in return. “Good luck.” Bruce nodded, squaring his shoulders before heading out of the lab. Betty turned to Clint, giving him a genuine smile.

“I’m sorry I didn’t have better news for you, Agent Barton,” she said.

“Oh, it’s okay,” he said, his cheeks turning pink. “And you can call me Clint.” Darcy let out a snort of amusement, chancing a conspiratorial look at Phil who had covered his mouth with his hand to hide his smile.

“Here, let’s get these off,” Darcy suggested, pulling at one of the sensor patches on his forehead.

“Before I forget,” Jane said, turning to Betty. “Pepper asked me to let you know that there’s an opening at the research facility in LA, if you’re interested. Same salary and benefits.”

“That’s terribly nice of her,” Betty began hesitantly. “But I-”

“Any time you want it. She was really,” Jane paused as if considering her words carefully. “Motivated? Anyway, she asked me to say something because she didn’t think it was fair to pressure you. The offer’s there, though, any time.” Betty’s expression softened, a smile curling her lips.

“If I’d known where I was actually going to end up I think I would have held out for more,” she admitted.

“It’s cool,” Darcy said, picking at one of the sensor patches on Clint’s shoulder. “Say that exact thing to Pepper the next time one of the labs explode. I got Jane another 20k a year that way.”
“The second time the labs exploded she got us seats on Space X,” Jane nodded in agreement. Betty made a disbelieving face as Phil let out a chuckle.

“I’m on a rocket, motherfucker, take a look at me!” Darcy gave her a double thumbs up and Betty let out a startled laugh.

“Okay,” she nodded. “I still have to document everything, I’ll think about it and let her know before I leave.”

“For what it’s worth I’m really sorry you’re not staying,” Jane admitted. “I could use someone level headed to help me keep the mad scientist twins in line.”

“I think you’re forgetting that I was on the team responsible for Bruce’s current-” Betty made a face.

“Issues?” Phil suggested, starting to work on the sensors on Clint’s other shoulder. Betty gave him a nod.

“See, you’re fitting in already,” Darcy said brightly. “Hey, JARVIS, did you loop Helen in?”

“Doctor Cho asked me to forward any findings or change in status regarding Agent Barton,” the AI answered.

“Helen Cho?” Betty asked, her eyebrows raised. “You do keep some prestigious company around here.”

“We got all the celebrities,” Darcy said with a grin, pulling her phone from her pocket. “Can you take over for me, Phil?” Coulson nodded in reply, unhooking the lead wires from Clint’s temple.

“I’m sensing a fan,” Jane said with a teasing grin. “You want to meet her?”

“Oh, I-” Betty’s cheeks flushed bright pink but before she could properly answer Darcy interrupted
“She’s pretty keen on meeting you!” Darcy grinned, holding out her phone to show a series of increasingly excited emojis. Betty only stared back at her with a startled expression.

“They have this Animal Crossing, bromance thing going on,” Jane explained with a shrug as Darcy returned her attention to her phone. “Honestly, I try not to question it.”

“I got her on Skype on my laptop,” Darcy said. “Come on down to Jane’s lab and you guys can geek out together.”

“I,” Betty stammered nervously as Jane linked arms with her.

“You’re going to love Helen,” Jane insisted, tugging Betty along. “She’s like Tony’s smart mouth with Phil’s ability to know when to use it.”

“I shall take that in the spirit it was intended.” Phil said, hiding his amusement.

“See that you do,” Darcy replied, patting him on the back before following after Jane and a still flustered Betty. “You got this?”

“We’re fine,” Phil nodded, waving her off. “Go on.” Darcy gave him a thumbs up before half skipping out of the door after Betty and Jane. Phil rolled up the second lead wire, tucking it away before glancing up to find Clint watching him with a nervous expression.

“I’m sorry Dr. Ross didn’t have have better answers,” Phil said carefully, returning his attention to removing the sensors. “But at least now we know what we’re dealing with, and in time you’ll probably get better on your own, that’s good news.”

“That’s not-” Clint drew in a shaky breath, glancing out through the glass walls toward Tony’s lab where Stark was barely visible tinkering with part of the Iron Man suit as Bruce frowned at him. “Tony is kind of-” His voice trailed off helplessly and he turned back to Phil with a pinched expression.
“Don’t tell him I said this,” Phil ducked his head, hiding the small smile that curled his lips. “Tony doesn’t deal well with situations when he can’t help.”

“It’s not his fault,” Clint said.

“No it’s not, but gifted people tend to have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility,” Phil nodded in agreement, turning a faintly amused look on Clint “You would know about that, wouldn’t you.” Clint opened his mouth to protest, as a faint pink colored his cheeks but his jaw quickly snapped shut as he ducked his head. Phil watched him a moment, unease rolling his stomach.

“Clint, you do know that you’re exceptional.” It wasn’t a question but Clint shifted uncomfortably, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck. His finger tips caught on one of the sensors and he frowned, tugging it free.

“Almost?” he said finally, peeling the sensor off of his fingers. “I mean, I’m a good shot. And I’m not completely stupid.” Phil let out a snort of a laugh.

“You’re far from stupid,” he interjected.

“Just…not,” Clint shrugged helplessly. Phil’s fingertips stuttered at the edge of the last sensor, the movement almost a caress. He drew in a steadying breath.

“Is that why you were too shy to flirt with Dr. Ross?” Phil asked, his tone teasing. Clint’s cheeks flushed bright red.

“She’s way out of my league,” Clint said, holding back a laugh that was nearly giddy.

“She’s really not,” Phil shook his head in amusement as he tossed out the last sensor. “And that never would have stopped you before.”

“She’s really smart and really pretty,” Clint stated, ducking his head with a shy grin. Phil gave him a look that was equal parts fond and sad.

“You do have a type,” he declared. Clint frowned, his brow knitting in worry.
“Phil, do I-” he began hesitantly, clearing his throat. “Do I have somebody and I’ve forgotten them?” Phil met his frightened gaze with a reassuring smile.

“Not like that,” Phil replied, handing him his shirt. “Not recently. Being an Avenger keeps you busy. But you are very charming, and you do like to flirt.” Clint let out a sigh of relief, tugging his t-shirt over his head and glancing out into the hall.

“Did Bruce think I was flirting with Dr. Ross?” he asked, wincing. Phil followed his gaze toward Tony’s lab where Bruce was absently rubbing at his forehead.

“I don’t think it’s actually Bruce’s business any more,” Phil remarked.

“I think he’s still in love with her,” Clint said, turning back to Phil.

“I think you’re probably right,” Phil agreed. “But when you love someone, you’re supposed to do what’s best for them instead of what’s best for you. And right now Bruce thinks Betty would be better off without him.”

“I don’t remember ever being in love,” Clint admitted, looking back across the hall at Bruce. “But I kind of think having someone who cared about you that much watching your back every day would be better for you than anything.” Phil startled, staring at him breathlessly a moment.

“Come on,” he said, clearing his throat. “We’ll get some lunch. I’ve had enough of the labs for one day.”

“Leave the science to the professionals,” Clint said with a grin. Phil made a complicated face, shaking his head as Clint hopped off the exam table.

Chapter End Notes

1. Quaternary refers to a (currently) theoretical computer language based in 4 bits instead of 2 like Binary that utilizes 1 and 0 as its variables. A Quaternary language would be faster and more complex. JARVIS is likely not a Binary construct due to his near biological complexity. It's also a throw away pop culture reference to Star Trek:TNG 1x15: 11001001. The Crew hires a race called the Bynars to work on the
ships computers. The Bynars can communicate with each other in binary for faster problem solving.

2. Fischer's Big Wheel was a discount retail chain common to small midwest towns in the 70's and 80's. I am not 100% sure of the exact locations of Fischer's Big Wheel in Iowa at the time Clint was a kid but because I have such fond memories of it, I'm asking you to roll with it.
“Was that necessary?” Bruce asked, his tone chiding and cautious as he hovered just inside the threshold of Tony’s lab. Stark let out a huff, leaning into his palms as he braced them against one of the workbenches, his shoulders up around his ears. He cast a glance first at Bruce and then out through the glass wall toward Betty’s lab where Darcy was peeling a sensor off Clint’s forehead.

“No, it really wasn’t,” he admitted, licking his lips as he ducked his head again. “I’ll fix it, I’ll send her a bouquet… or lab equipment or something.”

“I’d suggest a bouquet of lab equipment but you’d probably actually do it,” Bruce declared drily, stepping into the lab and settling on a stool, his fingers toying absently with a discarded screwdriver as he waited out the silence.

“We should maybe think about calling Strange,” Tony said finally, not looking up. Bruce stared back at him with a blank expression, his eyes closing and opening in one slow blink.

“Shut up,” Tony snapped, shooting him a dirty look.

“Damn it,” Bruce let out a huff, slumping further into the lab stool. “I owe Darcy twenty bucks now.”

“Excuse me?”

“I bet her that no words to that effect would ever willingly leave your mouth,” Bruce admitted. There was a long uncomfortable silence as Tony stared back at him, unmoving.

“I’m extremely disappointed in you that you would think I have no experience with that level of desperation,” Tony said disparagingly. Bruce seemed to consider it a moment before giving a resigned shrug.

“The guy is a neurosurgeon,” Tony stated as if he were trying to convince himself as much as Bruce. “Or he was. I mean, he’s batshit crazy but probably not to an extent where he’d turn a brain to jello.” Bruce made a face as if he’d bitten into something sour.
“The mind boggles that the two of you never get along,” he declared with a note of sarcasm. “You have so much in common.” Tony glared at him in sullen silence, the soft hum of the machinery the only sound in the room.

“It was the batshit crazy statement, wasn’t it?” he asked finally.

“I’d suggest the two of you start a club for obnoxious geniuses,” Bruce said with a nod. “but I’m not sure the world’s ready for that. You gave me your word you’d be civil to the man the next time we needed to work with him.”

“No, I said I’d make an effort to be less offensive,” Tony reminded. “I never promised I’d actually succeed.” Bruce let out a sigh, rubbing his forehead, ignoring Tony’s demanding look for a moment. Stark’s eyes narrowed and he drew in a breath.

“Jane called him a few days ago,” Bruce announced cutting Tony off before he could work up momentum again. Stark paused with his mouth half open before turning back to Bruce with his most disdainful expression. “Of the three of us she’s the one least likely to be rude about it.” Tony closed his mouth, seeming to consider that for a moment.

“She does roll with the fifth dimension crazy better,” He finally admitted but Bruce offered no reply.

“Are you planning on telling me what Strange said at any point?” Tony asked.

“You’re not going to like it,” Bruce replied, holding back another sigh. Tony pushed off his lab bench, stalking angrily across the lab, sweeping up an Ironman gauntlet and slapping it down on another bench.

“We have prior experience, we know how these sorts of things turn out,” Bruce reminded, his tone gentle as Tony grabbed a screwdriver, prying into the gauntlet with unnecessary violence. “The magical solution is always the most costly one, even Strange admits that. We’re talking about Clint’s life, is that a risk we’d really be willing to take?”

“Well it’s not like it matters any more,” Tony declared sarcastically, prying off a piece of plating and pitching it onto the lab bench with a flick of his fingers. “Because it looks like the Wizarding World of Stephen Potter hasn’t got any forthcoming solutions.”
“If you want, I can put in a call to Saint Mungo’s.” Bruce suggested. Tony cast a withering look at him in reply.

“We have to fix this,” Tony said sharply.

“He’s healing,” Bruce reminded, frustration creeping into his tone. “According to Betty, cognitive therapy is a viable, safe solution.”

“So Barton can just put his life on hold for the next three years?” Tony demanded, slumping down on one of the lab chairs and driving the screwdriver into the wrist joint so that it was sticking upright in the gauntlet. Bruce stared at him in silence for a long moment.

“Alright,” Bruce said slowly, his lips turning down in a frown. “What aren’t you telling me?” Tony’s eyes narrowed, his glare cold.

“You only destroy the suit when you’re angry at yourself,” Bruce stated. “It’s your version of self flagellation.” Tony pried the screwdriver free gently setting it aside before leaning back in his chair.

“I know why Barton lost his memories,” He said, rubbing his face with his hands. Bruce stilled, his eyes flicking out into the hall a moment as Clint and Phil left the lab, heading for the lift. Tony drew in a shaky breath as the elevator doors closed on them.

“The cradle, it uses a bio synthetic to reconstruct temporary replacement cells,” Tony began.

“I’m aware of how it works,” Bruce reminded. “I helped you and Helen design it.”

“Neither of you helped with the programing,” Tony said, wincing. “The device builds the replacement cells by scanning the adjacent tissue and reproducing it as identically as possible.” Bruce drew in a breath to reply, his shoulders tensing.

“Neurons come in different configurations,” Tony repeated Betty’s words.

“The cradle copied the wrong cells,” Bruce stated.
“I didn’t think it all the way though,” Tony said, a hint of desperation in his tone. “I was thinking femurs and fingers. Perfect reconstruction isn’t necessary, you just have to stick everything back together and it’ll heal on its own!”

“Tony.”

“I should have, I don’t know, run some simulations on brain tissue,” Stark continued as if he hadn’t heard.

“Tony,” Bruce’s tone was sharp and Tony looked up at him, wide eyed. “It wasn’t your fault. He was dying, we would have lost him without the cradle.”

“Didn’t we though?” Tony demanded, a wildness in his expression as he turned to stare Bruce down. “We lost ten years of his life, how is that,"

“Tony stop,” Bruce insisted.

“I have to fix this,” he insisted, his entire body tensing up, curling in on itself only slightly before he seemed to consciously relax each muscle through force of will. He drew in a thin, thready breath, turning to his friend with pleading eyes. “You have to help me.” Bruce swallowed thickly, nodding slowly.

“I’ll talk to Hill,” He replied, slowly heaving himself out of his chair with a look of exhaustion. “See if there’s anything she remembers about some of SHIELD’s mothball projects that might give us a direction to go in.”

“I’ll get in touch with Morris,” Tony agreed, nodding. “She had her ear to the ground on seven continents.”

“You really think Clint’s ex girlfriend is going to help us?” Bruce asked skeptically.

“Last I heard she’s not his ex friend,” Tony shrugged. “I’ll owe her a favor if I have to.”
“You owe Bobbi Morris a favor and the payoff is probably going to come equipped with space canons.” Bruce pointed out, heading for the door.

“Totally worth it,” Tony replied, not looking up. Bruce paused in the doorway.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said, his tone gentle. “Tony,”

“Yeah,” Stark nodded slowly. “Forward the data summary on to Ross, see if she’ll take a look at it before she packs up.” Bruce gave a nod in reply, his steps heading toward his own lab.

“Bruce,” Tony called out and Bruce took a step back into the doorway. “Let’s, keep this inside the lab, just until we have something to tell the rest of the team.” Bruce’s eyes narrowed sharply, his disapproval evident but he gave a curt nod before disappearing down the corridor as Tony let out a huff of a breath.

“JARVIS, throw up all the notes, research, related projects, medical scans, help me track a pattern,” Tony said as he sunk further into the chair, leaning back to look up at the holo-displays that flickered to life overhead.

“How thorough would you like me to be, sir?” The AI asked.


“———

“What about Lydia?” Natasha suggested, glancing back at Steve over her shoulder as he trailed behind her toward the kitchen.

“Lydia who runs the SHIELD employee day care?” Steve asked skeptically.

“Yeah,” Natasha replied, hopping up on the counter and plucking a fresh plum from the fruit dish. “She’s curvy; you do like them curvy.”
“How do you have any idea what I like?” Steve asked, his steps arrested in the doorway as Sam and Bucky skirted around him.

“You do like them curvy,” Bucky observed, pausing to give him a considering frown. Steve shot him a betrayed look.

“She’s right, you do,” Sam agreed as he hustled across the kitchen to throw open the fridge. Natasha turned her smug, satisfied smile on Steve.

“It doesn’t take supervision to notice which ladies you’re checking out,” Natasha replied, taking a decisive bite of her plum.

“A myopic hermit could pick up on that,” Sam said, nodding as he tossed packages of lunchmeat onto the counter.

“Lydia’s gay,” Steve observed a bit derisively as Bucky emerged from the pantry, juggling an armload of bread and condiments.

“She’s bi-curious,” Natasha stated with a shrug. “She put you at the top of her Exceptions List.”

“Her what now?” Steve blinked back at her blankly.

“It’s a list of celebrities you’re attracted to,” Bucky said, smearing mustard on four slices of bread, “and if you’d ever get a chance at them your significant other gives you a freebie.”

“What kind of a freebie?” Steve demanded, his appalled expression leaving no doubt as to exactly what sort of freebie they were discussing. He turned a penetrating look on Natasha.

“It came up at at Agent Magel’s baby shower last month,” Natasha said unbothered by his disapproving glare.

“Oh yeah?” Sam asked with a curious grin, leaning into the counter beside Bucky. “Who’s on
“Emma Watson,” Bucky stated. The silence that settled over the kitchen was decidedly more uncomfortable than normal, even for dysfunctional superheroes.

“What?” Bucky asked, leaning away from them with a wary look.

“Emma Watson?” Steve demanded with a frown.

“She was in that movie about the wizards,” Bucky replied, layering ham on all four slices of bread.

“I know who she is.” Steve’s lips curled in a sour pucker. Natasha leaned back into the cabinets with a pensive frown, taking a bite of the plum.

“The UN speech,” she said finally.

“Exactly!” Bucky nodded in agreement turning toward her. “She’s hot, right?”

“Oh yeah,” Natasha agreed, her expression serious. “I’d tap that.”

“I can’t believe I’m friends with any of you,” Sam sighed, taking down a stack of plates from the cupboard.

“How do you even know what an Exceptions List is?” Steve demanded, turning to Bucky with a frown.

“Clint,” Bucky admitted hesitantly, piling half a pound of cheese onto the sandwiches.

“Hey, that’s a working theory on why it’s been less cray-cray around here lately,” Sam observed, Bucky seemed to consider that a moment before nodding in agreement as he carefully cut the last sandwich in half. “Thanks, man.”
“These are mine,” Bucky replied, sliding all four sandwiches off of the cutting board and onto a plate. “Make your own, Wilson, your arms aren’t broken.” Sam narrowed his eyes at him as Steve bit his lip to keep from laughing.

“I’m starting to get why my kid sister used to get all mad at me when we’d play baseball and I’d eat three candy bars afterward and she’d have a diet soda,” Sam admitted with a sigh, laying out the bread for his sandwich as Bucky hunkered down at the bar over his heaping plate.

“Lydia’s definitely into you,” Natasha continued undeterred by the interruption, giving Steve a suggestive smirk.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he declared drily, slumping down at the breakfast bar beside Bucky.

“You know,” Sam said with a smug curl to his lips. “There is an obvious solution to your problem here, Natasha.”

“I wasn’t aware I had a problem,” she replied, her sidelong glance coy as she popped the last bite of plum into her mouth and grabbed an orange from the bowl.

“You appear to be highly invested in the idea of someone climbing the flagpole here,” he said nodding in Steve’s direction.

“Really?” Steve gave him an affronted look.

“You could just hoist the colors yourself,” Sam continued breezily without missing a beat.

“Damn, so much for the crazy dialing down around here,” Bucky said with a pained sigh, rubbing his eyes and letting his forehead fall onto his arm beside his plate.

“I did try that first,” Natasha remarked, peeling the skin off the orange and tossing it into the bin across the room. Sam froze, his eyes growing wide as Bucky slowly lifted his head from his arm to stare at her with a horrified expression.

“I said no,” Steve interrupted defensively.
“I’m ashamed to say I know you right now,” Sam admitted pinning Steve with his most disapproving frown. He viciously chopped his sandwich in half, sweeping it up to take a bite as he glowered in Steve’s direction.

“Steve’s a relationship kind of guy,” Natasha scolded lightly. “He’s allowed to turn down a casual offer if he’s not interested.”

“Normally I would totally agree with you,” Sam nodded. “Except that you’re you.”

“Since Steve isn’t remotely my type-”

“Thank God,” Bucky muttered half under his breath, scrubbing his hands over his face as Steve’s blush deepened.

“I thought I’d do us all a favor and find him someone who is,” She finished, popping a slice of orange in her mouth with a private, satisfied smile.

“For the record,” Sam said, leaning into the counter. “I am completely comfortable with the idea of a casual offer.”

“I’ll bet you are,” Natasha narrowed her eyes at him in thinly veiled amusement. She grabbed a banana before hopping off the counter.

“Completely comfortable,” Sam repeated, scooping up his plate and trailing after her as she sashayed out into the rec room. Natasha let out a laugh. Steve watched them go, shaking his head slowly before turning back. He paused a moment, the hair on the back of his neck prickling and he glanced out of the corner of his eye.

“What?” he asked Bucky who was glaring at him with a look of contempt.

“I honestly don’t know if I should hit you for turning her down or for making a pass at her in the first place.”
“I didn’t make a pass!” Steve declared, defensive. “It was all her.”

“And that’s almost worse!” Bucky replied, waving one hand out toward the rec room. “Look at her!”

“You’re confusing me!” Steve said his brow knitting. “Why are you even mad?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky replied in frustration. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Oh, good grief!” Steve pushed himself off of the bar stool, stalking around the bar to the pile of sandwich fixings Sam had left strewn across the counter. “I’d just met her! I’d just woken up in a new century and at the time I thought you were still, you know.” He waved a helpless hand in Bucky’s direction.

Bucky shook his head, letting out a groan as he let his forehead fall back to the counter with a sharp thunk. Steve let out a huff, tossing half a dozen slices of bread across the cutting board.

“Why don’t you just, do something about it?” he finally asked.

“I am doing something,” Bucky replied, raising his head to glare back.

“I know you’re going to make some comment about how I don’t know anything about women,” Steve began diplomatically, pausing in his application of onion jam to wave the knife in Bucky’s direction. “But I am completely certain that stalking a woman is not actually the same as courting her.”

“I am not stalking her,” Bucky protested, rolling his eyes. “And when have I ever told you that you don’t know anything about women? You don’t, but I’ve never told you that.”

“You told me that just now,” Steve pointed out. Bucky opened his mouth to protest but his jaw clicked shut a moment later with a frown. He scooped up one of his sandwich halves, biting into it and pointedly ignoring Steve as if the conversation were over. Steve let the silence linger as he piled most of the turkey on his loaf of bread. Finally he looked up, letting out a fond sigh.
“Buck, you’re screwing this up,” he said with no real heat in the words.

“I am not,” Bucky protested with a frown. “What do you know?”

“I know that I spent most of my life watching you chase girls all over Brooklyn and this is not how you got results,” Steve replied, cutting through his finished sandwiches. “At this point I’m pretty sure buying her flowers would actually be more effective than what you’re doing.”

“Please,” Bucky scoffed. “I did way better than flowers.”

“Oh god,” Steve groaned half under his breath.

“I got her knives,” he said with a pleased, smug expression.

“Knives.”

“Yeah, I snuck into her room and left them on her bed.”

Steve blinked slowly for a moment, a soft, long-suffering sigh escaping him as he took a bite of his sandwich.

“She's going to kill you,” Steve said flatly with the same tone he might have used to warn of rain in the afternoon.

“Maybe I should have had them delivered?” Bucky suggested uneasily. Steve let out a snort, sliding the entire cutting board down the counter to the breakfast bar.

“Use a plate, heathen,” Bucky said disapprovingly.

“It’s like Judy O’Shea all over again,” Steve said, ignoring him. “Only this time she’s not going to slap you for pulling her hair, she’s going to shoot your hand off.”
“Eh, Stark made it bullet proof,” Bucky said with an easy shrug, pausing to wiggle the fingers of his metal hand as he continued to work his way through his stack of sandwiches with the other. Out in the rec room Natasha and Sam’s voices could be heard over the low hum of the TV. Bucky shifted in his seat, staring at the back of her head with a smile just this side of besotted. His eyes narrowed and he turned back to his childhood friend with an accusing frown. “Stevie, are you warning me off your sister?”

“No,” Steve answered too quickly. “Well, sort of. I mean, I’m not warning you off, just warning you. I figure if I don’t do it, Pepper will.” They both shuddered. Bucky made a face, eyeing him with suspicion.

“I know you care about her,” Steve said with a shrug. “A lot more than any of those other girls you were sweet on.”

“You sound like an old man,” Bucky interrupted with a derisive snort.

“I’m not willing to look at it too closely.” Steve continued over him, undaunted, “because it’s not really my business. But it seems like she likes you too and, well, you’ve had enough disappointment. I’d hate to see you land in another one because you messed it up for yourself.” Bucky’s face contorted in a complicated expression as if he were experiencing emotions he found distasteful.

“You don’t mind?” he asked finally, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth.

“If she steps out with you maybe she’ll stop trying to fix me up,” Steve replied, hiding his smile in his sandwich. The barely bright expression slowly slid off of Bucky’s face.

“Stevie-”

“I’m not ready,” Steve said quickly before he could go any further. “I know I should be. I know I should at least be bothered by it. I’m just-” His voice trailed off in a shaky breath.

“It’s okay,” Bucky replied with a nod. “The girls are still going to be there later.”

“What happened to that line of yours about getting there before all the good ones were gone?”
“That was when you weighed ninety pounds,” Bucky gave him a wolfish grin. “You don’t have to worry about that any more, you can date their granddaughters. Or their great-granddaughters, or—” Steve let out a groan, cutting him off.

“Oh, I hate you,” He grumbled as Bucky choked down his laughter.
“It’s all rather fascinating,” the brunette enthused with a grin as she leaned into Clint’s face to peer into his eye with her scope, her Devonshire accent lilting excitedly. “Normally we have to wait months for medical recovery before we can assess cognitive status post-injury.” Clint tried to look up at her through the eye she wasn’t studying but it didn’t seem to be going well for him, his face contorting in an odd cringe that made Sam cover his mouth with his hand.

“Out of the way, Jemma.” The Highland brogue was sharp and intense as the young man reached out, grasping the back of Clint’s bar stool and spinning him out from under Jemma’s keen inspection.

“Fitz, I wanted a baseline,” Jemma Simmons complained.

“There are scans,” Fitz replied, giving her a droll look as he stuck a single sensor to Clint’s forehead. “Lots and lots of very detailed scans, look at them.”

“There’s no substitute for hands-on analysis,” Jemma replied as Fitz muttered along under his breath. Sam rubbed at his face with his hands to hide the grin that threatened to break out as he leaned into the card table in the corner of the rec room. The table that was normally covered in board games or poker chips was now piled high with an array of equipment that looked like it might have been pieced together from garage sale finds. Fitz reached out to flip a switch and Sam reared back as it fizzled and sparked.

“If I asked how this thing worked,” Sam said, his brow furrowed as he poked at a controller that looked like someone had Frankensteined a star globe to a PlayStation. “Would I get an answer in English?”

“American English or Real English?” Fitz asked, sweeping up the controller and placing it in Clint’s hands.

“Definitely not,” Jemma replied, giving Sam’s shoulder a pat as Clint’s eyes darted back and forth between the pair in apparent increasing anxiety.

“Your brain is a muscle,” Fitz stated, focusing his attention on Clint. “The best way to get it
“Like calisthenics,” Jemma interjected, reaching out to fit Clint with an odd-looking pair of goggles. “Only less sweaty.” Fitz threw her a piqued frown.

“This is just so we can track your eye movement,” he explained, tapping a finger on the sensor in the middle of Clint’s forehead. “We’re not reading your thoughts or anything, so be sure to say something if you feel like you’re remembering something important.”

“How do I know if it’s important?” Clint asked bobbing his head back and forth as if he were trying to see though the blacked-out goggles.

“If you’re remembering it now, it’s probably important,” Fitz replied with a peevish air, reaching out to flip the goggles open so that Clint could see.

On the other side of the rec room at the bar Phil let his attention drift from his laptop, watching as Sam tried to follow an explanation that wasn’t being delivered in any sort of English at all. Clint had already clearly given up, instead playing with the spinning globe in the middle of the controller, glancing now and again up at the staircase above them. From his angle Clint shouldn’t have been able to see anything. Even from his much better vantage point, Phil himself could barely make out Bucky’s profile where he’d stationed himself behind the steel and frosted glass sculpture that adorned the corner of the mezzanine. No doubt Natasha was monitoring things as well, but Phil wasn’t conceited enough to believe that he had the skills to suss out her location. He leaned back in his barstool, rubbing at tired eyes as muted voices filtered in from the kitchen to add another layer of distraction. Phil let out a sigh, pushing it all aside and forcing his focus back to his laptop.

“Your bedside manner is positively awful,” Jemma observed with no real surprise or condemnation.

“My bedside manner is nonexistent,” Fitz said turning back to Clint as Jemma gave a shrug of assent. “Jemma and I developed this program specifically for cognitive recalibration, post cranial trauma. It’s nearly twice as effective as traditional therapy.”

“You can’t say that,” Jemma protested as Sam gave him a disbelieving look. “He’s only the second patient. That’s not nearly enough data to pool results.”
“How did the first patient turn out?” Clint asked skeptically. Fitz looked up from his tablet, giving Clint a little wave with the tips of his fingers. Clint visibly balked, turning alarmed eyes on Sam.

“In fairness, he’s now almost exactly like he was before his injury,” Jemma admitted.

“Almost?” Fitz demanded, looking affronted.

“You’re slightly more empathetic now,” she replied. Clint made a face behind their backs, darting a horrified look in Phil’s direction when it was obvious Sam was too busy trying not to laugh to rescue him. Phil bit back his own smile, giving Clint an encouraging nod. Clint’s brow furrowed in obvious unease and he darted glances at Phil out of the corner of his eye as Phil resolutely turned back to his laptop.

“For reasons we’re not too clear on, it seems to work better if the subject is in a familiar environment,” Fitz explained, drawing Clint’s gaze back to him. “Which is why we’re here and not in the lab.”

“When we were running it on Fitz, we did most of the sessions in the Bus Cargo Bay,” Jemma added, nodding in agreement. Sam shook his head, rubbing his eyes and Fitz reached over him, mashing a series of buttons.

Phil gave them one more covert inspection before trying to focus on his screen, Fitz’s prattling droning into background noise. Phil stared at the letter he’d been writing, biting his lip as he weighed the next sentence, the next paragraph. Not for the first time he questioned his options and he let out a soft huff of a breath, tuning out of the muttered conversation across the room and tuning in to the mumbled voices from the kitchen where he could just make out Jane insisting that chocolate was chocolate and six different kinds of cake all tasted the same. It was a testament to how distracted he was that he hadn’t realized he was no longer alone at the bar.

“That is not a good look,” Phil observed, eyeing Pepper cautiously as she lounged two chairs down from him, both thumbs tapping viciously at her phone.

“No, it definitely isn’t,” Pepper agreed with a prim nod. Phil glanced over his shoulder at the kitchen.

“Call me crazy, but gold leaf doesn’t actually sound that appetizing,” Jane’s voice drifted out to them.
“I thought you were helping,” Phil pointed surreptitiously at the kitchen as if he were unwilling to say more.

“I was,” Pepper replied, her mouth pressed in a thin line as she set down her phone on the bar to crack her knuckles. She swept it back up, resuming her typing tirade. “Now I’m texting Tony to tell him he owes me an obscenely overpriced dinner with flowers.” Phil drew in a breath to reply.

“Lots and lots of flowers,” she added.

“Not to be unfeeling,” Phil said with his most diplomatic tone. “But what could he possibly have said to make the wedding any more ridiculously complicated?”

“Two words: Food Sculptures.”

“Skip the roses,” Phil nodded slowly, looking back across the room to where Clint seemed to be struggling with the mechanics of the therapy interface. “Demand jewelry and shoes.” Pepper looked up from her phone, the both of them watching in reproving silence as Clint balked, his head whipping around so quickly that it nearly sent him tumbling off his barstool and crashing into Fitz. Sam reached out and caught him, hauling him back upright.

“I see your project is going about as well,” Pepper observed. Phil gave a hum of resigned assent. Whatever might be going on in the virtual environment of the cognitive therapy machine, Clint clearly found it unsettling because he was now flailing his arms rather than using the controller.

“This is the man that regularly beats me at Mario Party,” Pepper said drily.

“I don’t think there were a lot of video games in the circus,” Phil replied, Clint’s hand swung out and Jemma ducked skillfully out of the way before he could punch her in the side of the head. Phil let out a disdainful huff of a sigh as Pepper slowly shook her head. Neither of them acknowledged Darcy, who slumped out of the kitchen with an exhausted expression, twisted the top off her Diet Coke, and then sprawled face first across the bar between them.

“I take it you’ve found out about the bridesmaids dresses?” Phil asked, Darcy’s only reply was to give him a thumb’s up.
“I want it on record that I advised against the lavender pearl lamé,” Pepper declared seriously, resolutely turning her back on the other end of the rec room as if ignoring it could somehow erase it from her life.

“So noted,” Darcy said, pushing herself off the bar and reaching under it, drawing out a bottle of Captain Morgan. Pepper looked up from her phone in bewilderment as if she’d never seen alcohol before. Darcy unscrewed the bottle, tipping it back to take two large gulps before setting it down with a thump and throwing back half the bottle of Diet Coke.

“What are you doing?” Phil asked as she paused to wipe her mouth on her sleeve.

“Rum and Coke,” Darcy replied, inspecting the label on the bottle as if there were some question as to its authenticity. She set the bottle down on the bar and then eyed the Coke bottle just to be certain.

“I’m not entirely sure that’s how it works,” Pepper observed.

“It’s rum and it’s Coke,” Darcy replied, holding up both bottles. “And I can assure you from prior experience that it works A-Okay.” She took another slug from the bottle of rum for good measure before finishing off her Coke.

“Yes, I think the cockatoos are a little excessive,” Jane stated, a hint of exasperation in her tone. Phil’s eyes narrowed and he turned his head to glance over his shoulder.

“Did she just?”

“Yep,” Darcy replied before he could finish. Pepper seemed to be pretending she couldn’t hear.

“What happened to the butterflies?” Phil asked.

“Oh they’re still taking resplendent wing during the escape run at the end of the reception,” Darcy answered, rubbing her temples. “The cockatoos are for the end of the ceremony. I now pronounce you and 50 snow-white parrots fly up from the altar amid a chorus of ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ sung live by the Dropkick Murphys.” Phil’s shoulders stiffened as Pepper let out a low, quiet sound that suspiciously resembled a growl.
“I feel like the situation has finally spiraled out of control,” he said seriously.

“Well, it’s not on me,” Darcy declared, glaring at her empty coke bottle. “I have a bubble machine I tried to talk him into instead.”

"Why do you have a bubble machine?” Pepper asked looking up from her phone with a wariness in her eyes.

“Reasons,” Darcy replied quickly, her own expression taking on a cautious quality. "Very good, very PG-rated reasons.”

“What happens at comic con stays at comic con,” Phil nodded in solemn agreement. Darcy flapped a hand in his direction as if that were explanation enough.

“It’s not that I have anything against him,” Jane’s voice drifted through the kitchen doorway. “I just don’t feel that Gene Simmons creates the right atmosphere as a wedding singer.”

“Clint can be very glad right now that he has no memory of introducing Thor to Glam Metal,” Pepper observed. Phil opened his mouth to remark that Tony was at least 50% culpable in that regard but thought better of it at the last moment. Darcy cast a narrow-eyed glare at the kitchen before tossing out her empty coke bottle. She reached out to return the rum to its shelf but seemed to change her mind at the last moment, twisting off the cap once more and downing a mouthful before stowing it away.

“That’s definitely not rum and Coke any more,” Phil stated, but she ignored him.

“Are there openings at SI?” Darcy asked curiously, turning to Pepper instead. “I’m not picky, I don’t need to stay in New York. LA is good, Guam, I hear nice things about Guam. Maybe Taiwan.”

“Jane has a rider in her contract that says I’m not allowed to hire you without her permission,” Pepper explained apologetically.

“Damn,” Darcy huffed.
“Fine, fine. Alanis Morissette. I can live with that.” There was a beat of silence, all three of them pointedly refusing to make eye contact.

“It’s a little too ironic,” Darcy finally muttered, her eyes narrowed in derision.

“I really do think,” Phil nodded in bland, emotionless agreement.

“I think I’m going to Malibu for at least the next six months,” Pepper said, giving them a withering look.

“You’re just annoyed we beat you to it,” Darcy replied, hunching down behind the bar as Jane emerged from the kitchen, a black cloud hovering over her head.

“I know you’re there, don’t pickle yourself in the cheap wells,” Jane said darkly.

“Why?” Darcy asked, popping up from behind the bar with a hopeful expression. “Are we going to get pickled in expensive alcohol instead?”

“I’m done,” Jane said with a sharp nod. “I’m going to go shower for about two hours and then you are going to get me completely wasted.”

“I can do that!” Darcy replied, pumping both fists in the air.

“Your time has come, Lewis,” Phil agreed.

“I might not be the hero the world needs but I’m the alcoholic it’s got,” Darcy nodded enthusiastically, her head bobbing a bit with intoxication.

“JARVIS,” Jane said, glancing at the ceiling. “I don’t care what he picks as a venue as long as it’s indoors. So help me god, I am not having an outdoor wedding in England.”
“Very well, Doctor,” JARVIS replied.

“No one likes rain on their wedding day,” Phil stated, barely hiding his smile as Darcy let out a snort.

“Life has a funny, funny way,” Pepper said tonelessly, her attention never straying from her phone.

“Don’t,” Jane snapped, her eyes narrowed with violent intent at Phil as Darcy splayed out, muffling her hysterical cackling in the top of the bar. “Just don’t.”

“Do you want me to talk to him?” Phil asked finally, leaning back in his chair, his limbs loose and relaxed as he gave her his most understanding look.

“And say what?” Jane asked with a defeated expression. Her shoulders sagged and she turned on her heel, heading for the stairs. “Shower, alcohol, poor life choices, in that order, Darcy.”

“I think she’s already got the last one covered,” Darcy muttered.

“Lady Pepper, excellent news” Thor declared excitedly, clutching his Stark phone as he leaned out of the kitchen. “The chef of pastries can indeed create the likeness of an Elkhound to adorn the ceremonial cake. She assures me it will be far more practical than presenting it bedecked with a live animal.”

“Glad to hear it,” Pepper said, her expression betraying no hint of emotion.

“How does anyone misunderstand the point of a cake topper that badly?” Darcy muttered half under her breath as Thor disappeared into the kitchen enthusing delightedly to the baker on the other end of the line.

“Verily,” Phil agreed.

“Also, no one tell Clint we’re not getting a dog now,” Darcy added as an afterthought. Phil pulled a face, glancing in Clint’s direction as Pepper gave a visible flinch. No one said anything for a long
"I'll schedule a publicity event at a local animal shelter," Pepper broke the silence, returning her attention to her phone.

“So, I’m going to find an outfit that says ‘direct inappropriate commentary here’,” Darcy said, waving a hand in front of her chest as she pulled her shoulders back slightly. Phil closed his eyes, biting his lip to hold back his smile as he slowly shook his head.

“How do you do that to yourself?” Pepper asked, her expression more curious than judgmental.

“When they look like this,” Darcy replied, pointing at her breasts. “There’s no minimizing their impact, so you have to learn to make them work for you. And the easiest way to weed out the idiots is to give them a spaghetti strap long enough to hang themselves with.” Pepper seemed to consider that bit of information before nodding in thoughtful agreement. Darcy gave them both a wave before sauntering off in the direction of the elevators with a lilt in her step.

“Well, that’s one problem out of the way,” Phil observed.

“If you think fondant dogs on top of a wedding cake solves anything I’m going to have to reevaluate our friendship, Phil,” Pepper replied. Her phone beeped and she paused considering it for a long moment.

“Haute cuisine and a Paris fashion week original,” she stated finally.

“Never let it be said that Tony Stark blows off his mistakes,” Phil declared in satisfaction. Pepper gave a decisive nod of agreement as she slid off her barstool, heading for the elevator. He smiled fondly after her which was probably why he didn’t notice the commotion on the other side of the rec room until Clint let out a pained yelp.

“Get it off! Get it off!” Sam yelled, grasping both of Clint’s flailing arms as Fitz made a dive for the goggles, swearing over the pained keening sound Clint was making. Phil was across the room a moment later, his arm around Clint’s chest in an attempt to keep him from toppling off the barstool and onto the floor.

“’Kay, ‘m okay,” Clint mumbled, each indrawn breath making a faint shrill sound as his shoulders
rose and fell. Phil’s hand settled between his shoulders and seemingly without thought Clint
slumped into his side.

“What happened?” Phil demanded, his brow furrowed in a reprimanding frown that he turned on
FitzSimmons.

“It happens sometimes,” Fitz stated, most of his attention on the readings on his tablet. “Cognitive
dissonance of some kind. We were never able to track it down.”

“I don’t remember it happening to you this badly,” Jemma protested. Fitz’s only reply was to give
her a condescending look. She gaped at him a moment before squaring her shoulders. “Why didn’t
you say anything?”

“It’s therapy, Jemma, it’s supposed to hurt!” he replied as if she were simply being stupid. She
opened her mouth to protest, but caught Sam’s uncomfortable look and seemed to think better of it.
Phil gritted his teeth, willfully packing away the memories of physical therapy after his wound
from Loki’s spear.

“You’re not damaged,” Fitz stated flatly, gazing directly into Clint’s face as he spoke. “That’s the
important thing. Your brain muscles cramped up because you haven’t been using them. It just
means they’re loosening up.”

“Could you possibly be a little less irritating?” Sam asked.

“Probably not,” Fitz replied before turning back to Clint. “It wasn’t bad for a first try. Take a
minute to shake it off and we’ll get back to work.” Clint grimaced and Phil turned his most
disparaging expression on Fitz.

“Or,” Fitz amended cautiously. “We can pick up again tomorrow after the room stops spinning.”

“Whee,” Clint replied in a small voice.

“That’s the spirit,” Fitz replied, patting his arm awkwardly before turning to shut down the
equipment.
“Are you alright?” Phil asked, his hand drifting back and forth over Clint’s shoulders in slow, gentle sweeps.

“Little woozy,” Clint replied, his eyes closed as he pressed his nose into Phil’s chest. “I feel like my brain slid to the back of my skull.”

“Hey, just like pulling G’s for the first time in flight training,” Sam said with a grin, giving Clint’s arm a squeeze before gently peeling him off of Phil and levering him onto his feet. “You’ve got to walk it off, keep your eyes down on the floor, don’t look at your feet.”

“Did I go to flight school?” Clint asked, a hint of excitement in his warbling voice as Sam slowly steered him across the rec room.

“Aww, now that’s a tragedy,” Sam declared with a sigh. “Yeah, man, you’ve been to flight school. But I guess you wouldn’t remember.”

“If it really was like this, I kind of don’t want to,” Clint replied as they rounded the sofa. “I’m going to throw up.”

“No you’re not,” Sam insisted nudging Clint down the hall as he resolutely kept his eyes on the floor. “If you were going to throw up you’d have done it going Mach 5 and washed out of the program.” Phil watched them go before turning on FitzSimmons with his most carefully choreographed unimpressed expression.

“We can make adjustments, reduce the severity,” Jemma said quickly, her fingers twisting with nervous energy.

“But it won’t work as well, or as quickly,” Fitz added.

“Then it won’t work as well,” Phil said deliberately, eyeing them both to be sure they understood. Fitz gave a sharp nod of assent that Jemma seconded and Phil reached out to give her arm a gentle squeeze.

“We’re lucky Director Fury pulled you off of your project to help us,” Phil stated. He caught the faint coloring of Jemma’s cheeks as she ducked her head and the flash of something like pride in Fitz’s eyes before he looked back down at his tablet.
“We’re happy we can help,” Jemma said with a sad, fond smile.

“We’d have come on our own time if he hadn’t,” Fitz added with just a hint of sharpness in his tone.

“I know,” Phil said, patting his shoulder as he turned toward the kitchen. “I know.” He let his eyes dart for only a moment toward the mezzanine, just enough to confirm what he already knew, that it was now empty. He passed the bar, sweeping up his coffee mug and heading into the kitchen, loading the k-cup machine on muscle memory.

“Fitz is right about therapy,” Phil said finally, pressing the button.

“I’m not saying he isn’t,” Natasha replied. Phil wasn’t sure when she’d entered the kitchen nor where from, but after years of working with her he’d developed a sense of her presence. She crossed the kitchen with a casual elegance, leaning into the counter beside him, watching him with careful consideration. “I think we all have enough experience to know recovery isn’t painless.”

“Then what’s the problem?” he asked, taking a sip of his coffee. “Normally when you materialize out of thin air it’s because there’s a problem.”

“The Clint Barton I know would choose recovery over comfort,” she said simply. Phil set his mug aside, drawing in a slow breath.

“Natasha, that is not the Clint Barton you know,” Phil reminded as gently as he could. She drew in a shaky breath and he plowed on, giving her what cover he could to mask her emotions. “I know your first instinct is to push, to fight back. You see a problem and immediately you’re looking at all the ways you can take it down and pull it apart but that’s not going to work here. We have to let him set his own pace, make his own choices. We owe him that.”

“Don’t we owe it to him to make him whole again?” she demanded, her voice low.

“Not by forcing him,” Phil shook his head. “He’s vulnerable, he’s still finding his footing and he’s relying on us, trusting us to protect him.”
“You like that trust,” she observed, her tone carefully neutral.

“Yes,” he replied. “I like that he doesn’t feel like he needs to hide it when he’s scared, when he’s hurt. I like that he’ll reach out for help when he needs it instead of forcing me to pry a confession out of him. I like that he doesn’t have to feel alone. I’m not going to apologize for that.” Phil reached out, his hand settling over hers in a feather light caress and she let out her breath in a shaky huff.

“It hurts to watch him struggle,” she admitted.

“Natasha, he was always struggling,” Phil replied. She turned her hand, gripping tight to his fingers like a lifeline and he gave a gentle tug in return, pulling her into a careful embrace. “His whole life has been a struggle, he just never let us see it before. He never let us see it because he never thought it was important. It was never a priority for him. You, me, his team, the mission, the people he can save, the bad guys he can stop. That’s all that’s ever mattered. What he has to go through to have our backs was never a consideration. All that mattered to him was that his people, his friends made it back home.”

“I like it better when I can just bust him out of whatever mess he’s gotten himself into,” Natasha said softly.

“Me too,” Phil nodded. “I promise no matter how long it takes, we’ll do everything we can to get him back.”

“The last time you made a promise like that you got stabbed to death by a Norse god,” Natasha reminded.


Chapter End Notes

I just want to drop a quick note and let you all know that I'm still working on this story and I know the updates are a bit far between. So thank you for sticking it out while I navigate this rough patch. Later parts of the story are actually finished so at some point we might actually see something like progress. Stay tuned.
The soft strains of Nocturne in E Flat Major lilted through the peaceful stillness of the empty lab, coalescing into a point of light behind Bruce’s eyelids with gentle waves of sensation. He let out a slow breath, matching his heart rate to the tempo of the music.

His first warning was the cautious shift, as if the Other Guy had sensed a change, his head coming up as if he were a guard dog that had been roused from a half slumber. Bruce shushed him, drawing in a another breath as he tuned his other senses back into his environment. He could hear the rustle of fabric, the soft pad of footsteps, the feel of their rhythm though the floor. He breathed out, unmoving despite the presence he could now sense in the doorway.

“I went over all the data.”

Bruce didn’t open his eyes but he held up one finger, his body staying loose and relaxed as he drew in another breath. The angry rumble at the back of his mind stirred like a sleeping volcano but he didn’t move. The last strains of Nocturne in E Flat Major drifted into tranquil silence and he drew in one last slow breath and let it out, blinking his eyes open. Betty stood in the doorway of his lab, gazing down at his spot in the middle of the floor.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said apologetically.

“It’s fine,” he replied, stretching out his arms. “I was just wrapping up.” Betty glanced around the lab, taking in the discarded empty tea mugs and stacks of barely rinsed tupperware containers.

“Tranquil,” she observed in amusement.

“I take it where I can get it,” Bruce replied with a self-effacing smile as he peeled himself off the floor.

“I thought you hated Chopin,” Betty said, giving him a scrutinizing if amused frown as she inched closer.
“The Other Guy’s partial to the Romantics,” Bruce replied with a shrug. “I think it reminds him of you.”

“The big softy.” She smiled back at him, leaning into the lab bench between them.

“I’ll pass that along,” Bruce said drily. For a moment they simply stared at each other, the stillness not at all uneasy, as if time had stopped. Betty was the first to look away, ducking her head.

“I put together all of my findings,” she said, holding out the StarkPad she’d been holding. Bruce took it with a grateful nod, flicking it on.

“I appreciate it,” he began.

“And I called a friend of mine working at Fortis Memorial,” Betty added, interrupting him. “He sent me his latest research. It might not help, but it’s promising work.” Bruce stared at her in silence a moment before returning his gaze to the pad, flicking through the files with ever increasing wonder.

“This is...” He paused, drawing in a breath before he looked up at her. “As olive branches go, this is above and beyond. Thank you, you didn’t have to do this.”

“Well, you were right,” Betty admitted reluctantly. “I would have helped if I hadn’t been angry with you. I forgot that for a little while.”

“I think you could be forgiven for any lapses, under the circumstances,” Bruce replied.

“I think the thing that hurt the most was realizing that, after everything, you didn’t trust me,” she said, looking away.

“It was never about trust,” Bruce insisted. She let out a huff of a laugh and he reached out, his hand settling gently over hers. She didn’t pull away.

“Betty, you are the single most generous person I’ve ever known,” he declared, shaking his head. “Tony Stark included. You would have sacrificed anything to help me, I wouldn’t even have had to
ask. You’d done it before. You would have done it even if we’d only been friends. I couldn’t allow myself to take advantage of you like that. I couldn’t put you in that position. I thought a small cruelty that made you hate me was a just price to pay to ensure that I didn’t do anything more to destroy your life. I just honestly never thought it all the way though. If I didn’t trust anyone, it was myself.”

“You trust yourself around a bunch of dysfunctional super heroes,” she pointed out, the hurt still carved sharply into her expression. “You trust them enough to stay here.”

“I trust that Thor can pin the other guy if he has to,” Bruce said, nodding. “That nothing I can do to Steve or Natasha can actually kill them, that Tony can afford to clean up the mess, that Clint… that Clint would have shot me though the head if it came to it. Yeah, I trust them because I don’t have to trust them very far. I don’t have to trust them with anything that matters.” He gave her hand a squeeze as if willing her to understand and then seemed to realize he was still holding it. He let go, forcing his attention back to the StarkPad.

“What do you have on your head?” Betty asked. He glanced up at her with a frown to find her pointing above her ear near her temple. He stared back at her a moment before he seemed to realize what she was talking about.

“Oh, this?” Bruce ducked his head in shy embarrassment as he peeled the sensor from the side of his face. “It’s um, it’s Neuro-Stimulation for calming the Other Guy.”

“Neuro-Stimulation?” Betty frowned. “Like what they use for treating seizures? Wouldn’t that just make him cranky?”

“Lower level current,” Bruce replied with a shrug. “We’re still making adaptive changes to the hardware, trying to get the settings right. It’s basically targeting the Parasympathetic Nervous System in an attempt to calm things down.”

“And this is working?”

“Well, your mileage varies,” he admitted. “It makes it easier to meditate, definitely keeps my heart rate down. Tony thinks that if we can perfect the technology it’ll be adaptable to treating anxiety, PTSD, that kind of thing.” Betty shook her head with an amused smile.

“Sometimes I think that man just gets up in the morning looking for ways to turn us all into
cyborgs,” she said, forcing back her smile.

“Oh no, this was all Jane,” Bruce smiled fondly. “It was just Tony’s idea to adapt it for the Other Guy.”

“Jane?” she asked in disbelief. He nodded in reply.

“I guess she’d been watching *the Matrix* one too many times,” Bruce explained. “She got this idea in her head that she was going to rapid train Darcy as a scientist by implanting skill sets, but all Darcy did with it was cheat at video games. So it was mostly a failure.”

“Back up,” Betty said with a frown. “Jane developed this device to download skills into her lab assistant?”

“I’m pretty sure her ultimate goal was to just download the entire internet into her own head,” he admitted. “I mean, it works, to a certain degree, but every brain is different, so mapping a set of skills from one brain onto another isn’t that cut and dry. Apparently you have to actually want to learn what the machine is teaching you. The only thing Darcy got out of the experience were some of Tony’s hacker skills and the ability to hotwire cars and security locks.” Bruce shook his head with an amused snort. When he looked back up at her Betty was staring at him as if she weren’t seeing him, her eyes blinking slowly.

“What?” he asked cautiously.

“Somewhere in this lab is a piece of equipment that can alter neuroplasticity in a subject brain so that it more closely resembles the neuroplasticity of a donor brain,” she stated more than asked.

“Well, not exactly,” Bruce admitted. “I mean, it’s less alteration than it is encouragement, but. Oh.” He let out the last word in a huff of a breath, his mouth hanging open slightly.

“We have large, lovely, entirely complete scans of Clint’s neuroplasticity from before his injury,” Betty said, her eyes shining.

“I mean, even if we couldn’t reconstruct it entirely we could probably help it along a bit,” Bruce replied.
“Enough that he’d recover maybe ten or fifteen percent of the missing memories?” Betty suggested.

“If it works, probably more like twenty-five,” Bruce replied, his brow furrowing. “And there isn’t any reason we couldn’t keep trying; we had increased success with each session.”

“We need to talk to Jane,” Betty said breathlessly.

“Jarvis, where’s Jane?” Bruce demanded, heading out of the lab with Betty on his heels.

“She and Ms. Lewis are currently at Headquarters, availing themselves of ladies night.”

“Alcoholism is built into your current career, isn’t it?” Betty asked skeptically.

“It’s not what you think,” Bruce replied, “Come on, we’ve got to go.”

“This is a bad idea,” Steve declared, his tone resigned as his hand closed over the antique handle of the carved oak door, the word “Headquarters” emblazoned in gold lettering on its crown glass window. He heaved it open just as Bucky ducked around him, steering Clint ahead of him into the pub.

“What are you talking about?” Bucky demanded with a shark-like grin. “This is the best idea I’ve had all week!”

“You got us in trouble for running away to Brooklyn,” Clint reminded as Sam dug his shoulder into Steve’s back, jostling him reluctantly over the threshold.

“It’s an admittedly low bar,” Bucky conceded, firing off a sloppy salute at the bartender. The
“I’m going to get us some drinks,” Sam said with a smirk, winding his way around Steve and heading toward the bar. “You want a beer, Clint?”

“Hell no!” Bucky protested, glancing back at him. “Does this look like a ball game to you? You know what we want.” Sam gave him a thumbs up and Bucky shuffled past a few more tables before parking Clint at a oversized, rounded booth in the corner and sliding in beside him.

“This is a bad idea,” Steve repeated, clambering into the leather padded bench from the other side and slouching down with a sigh. “Phil is going to freak out.”

“Phil is not his mom, Steve,” Bucky replied, pulling the basket of pretzels closer and popping one in his mouth.

“Phil is everyone’s mom,” Steve said, though there was no real fire behind his protest. “He’s going to come down on us.”

“He won’t,” Bucky insisted.

“You’ve never had to deal with his disappointed look,” Steve cast him a half-hearted glare.

“He had pajamas with your face on them when he was six,” Bucky said, eliciting an amused snort from Clint. “So any disappointment you’ve had from him was probably imagined.” Steve only rolled his eyes as Sam appeared, sliding two beers across the surface of the aged oak table and carefully setting down two large, apple red glasses topped with whipped cream and red sugar sprinkles.

“Hell yes! Girly drinks!” Bucky cheered, enthusiastically placing one in front of Clint as he stuffed the serpentine straw of his own drink in his mouth.
“The most girly one they had,” Sam agreed, settling in beside Steve and taking a pull of his beer.

“That’s sexist,” Steve complained, fiddling with his beer mug.

“Oh my god that’s amazing!” Clint declared, eyes wide with awe as he stared at the glass, the straw dangling from the corner of his mouth.

“How is it sexist?” Bucky demanded with a scowl, ignoring Clint who was using his straw as a whip cream spoon. “There’s a half-gallon of 90-proof alcohol in this thing. As far as I can tell ‘girly’ is the twenty-first century word for badass.”

“He has a point,” Sam admitted. “The more girly it is, the more likely it is to lay you out on the floor.”

“Kind of like Natasha,” Steve said thoughtfully. Sam nodded in agreement as he settled back into the plush seat.

The pub was fairly crowded for a Thursday, most of them in small clutches around the faux antique tables. It was the sort of bar that was trying to be tastefully thematic and falling just shy of the goal. The replicated period furnishings certainly wouldn’t have been out of place in any historic pub in London but the effect was slightly spoiled by the World War II propaganda posters that dotted the walls and the other memorabilia scattered about, lining shelves near the ceiling and littering collector's cases. Behind the bar was a blown-up version of what looked to be a cell phone photograph of dubious quality depicting Captain America standing on the street in front of the bar itself, his arm swung back ready to fling his shield at the oncoming Chitauri. Steve glanced at it for exactly one second before turning away and purposefully ignoring it. Clint looked back and forth between them a moment before opening his mouth as he turned to Bucky.

“Don’t go there, pal,” Bucky cut him off, carefully pushing his drink closer. Clint seemed to consider this a moment before giving a shrug.

“I don’t remember ever being here,” he said instead, looking around the table at them. “Do we do this a lot?”

“We don’t do it a lot,” Sam replied, jerking a thumb in Steve’s direction. “This one gets maudlin because he can’t get drunk.”
“I don’t get maudlin,” Steve protested.

“And that one,” Sam ignored him, jabbing a finger at Bucky who began to chuckle around his straw. “Takes it as some sort of challenge and drinks out half the bar.”

“I’ve got a lot of back pay and emotional trauma I’m working my way through,” Bucky replied with a serious expression.

“The bartenders here love him,” Steve added, struggling to hold in his smile.

“And then we talk about girls,” Bucky finished, taking a decisive sip of his drink.

“What girls?” Clint asked curiously.

“The girls none of us have, apparently,” Sam replied, looking very slightly disgruntled on the subject.

“That’s a lot of girls,” Clint observed. Sam nodded in agreement.

“What are you two drinking anyway?” Steve asked, casting a suspicious look at the horrifyingly vivid red concoctions.

“I don’t know” Clint shrugged sucking on his straw. “But it tastes like pie.”

“Whip cream vodka, Angry Orchard, and Fireball,” Sam replied. Steve pulled a horrified face.

“Slow, down there, Hawkboy,” Bucky said, cringing just a bit as he edged Clint’s glass away from him. “Pace yourself.”

“Alcohol poisoning,” Steve sighed, “I’m going to have to call Coulson and report alcohol poisoning.”
“That was already a risk before we ordered,” Bucky jerked his head toward the other side of the bar where a pair of college boys were leaning into one of the bar tables, attempting to get a view down the front of Darcy’s dress. She seemed supremely unimpressed with them as she toyed with the umbrella in her drink, she flashed Bucky a look before turning back to Jane who was slouched across from her, a two-foot-tall lurid pink cocktail glass clutched in both hands as she slowly sucked at a rainbow twisty straw.

“Oh, that looks bad,” Sam observed with a frown.

“Should we,...” Clint paused, his brow furrowing. “Help?”

“He meant Jane’s bucket of vodka, not Darcy’s admirers,” Bucky replied in amusement, thumping him gently on the back. “Don’t worry about her, if she needs backup she’ll call it in.”

“Did you know they were going to be here?” Steve asked accusingly.

“I had my suspicions,” Bucky admitted with a lazy shrug, licking whipping cream off his glass. Steve rolled his eyes.

“The last time Darcy had to beat off her admirers, she let Bucky and Steve hold them for her,” Sam explained.

“Good times,” Bucky remarked fondly. Steve had the good graces to look chagrined as Clint held in a snort of a laugh. The bell at the door let out a soft chime and they glanced up to see Tony gracefully guiding Pepper into the vestibule. The copper bell at the bar gave another clap and some smattering shouts of ‘Iron Man’ littered the room. Tony gave them his best press wave as Pepper patted his arm fondly before making a bee-line for Jane and Darcy. Tony scanned the bar once before spotting them, making his way over and stopping on occasion to press a few hands.

“I thought you had a date,” Steve said as Tony slipped into the bench beside Sam.

“I took my best girl to a very nice restaurant with an extremely sumptuous wine list,” Tony nodded. “And for some reason she decided that if everyone else was getting wasted she wasn’t about to miss out.”

“It’s not everyone,” Bucky pointed out.
“Wait for it,” Tony replied, holding up one finger. A moment later the door to the bar chimed again and Thor fairly burst over the threshold, heading straight for Jane as if following a homing signal. The bell at the bar gave another call but the Asgardian ignored the patrons hailing him. No one at all seemed to notice Natasha strolling lazily in in his wake, an amused though slightly threatening smile curling her lips.

“A friend will help you move,” Tony observed, with a smitten smile in Pepper’s general direction. “A best friend will help stop you from murdering your clingy fiancé in the middle of a bar.”

“Still not everybody,” Bucky gave a token protest, though he looked decidedly amused at the college boys beating an intimidated and hasty retreat in the presence of the god of thunder.

“Everyone fun,” Tony said with a shrug.

“I’ll try not to take that personally,” Phil stated, his tone dry as a desert. Tony was the only one who actually jumped, but as Phil had appeared almost directly behind Bucky it was a near thing.

“Where’d you come from?” Bucky demanded, looking just a touch worried.

“Wisconsin, originally,” Phil replied as Sam snickered into his mug.

“You were here waiting to manage the fallout when Thor turned up,” Steve said, his expression shrewd. Phil gave a disinterested half shrug as he leaned against the side of the bench at Bucky’s shoulder with an amused twitch of his lips.

“Phil, I don’t actually work here so I feel okay saying this,” Sam leveled a serious frown at him. “As a professional I have to tell you, stalking your assets doesn't actually constitute a social life. You need a hobby for when you're off the clock.” Tony bit his lip to keep from laughing.

“You’re presuming there is a point when I’m off the clock,” Phil replied, completely unruffled.

“I keep telling you, Stevie,” Bucky stated in a loud stage whisper. “Robot.”
“If he was a robot Tony would have taken him apart by now,” Steve replied, earning a snort of amusement from Phil. Bucky made a face, licking the whipped cream from his straw for good measure.

“What the hell are you drinking?” Tony demanded, throwing Bucky’s glass an affronted look. Bucky opened his mouth to reply but Sam cut him off.

“They’re calling it ‘American as Apple Pie’,” he said. There was a beat of silence and then Tony and Bucky busted up laughing. Sam watched them smugly a moment as Steve scowled.

“The commemorative collectors cup seemed a bit much so I passed on that,” Sam added.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Steve groaned, leaning forward to let his forehead thump against the table.

“You are not my friend any more,” Bucky stated, leveling an accusing finger at Sam.

“I’ve got to have one,” Tony declared, making an exuberant dash for the bar.

“Can I have another one?” Clint asked, glancing at the dwindling contents of his glass.

“No!” Sam, Steve, and Bucky said in unison. Phil only gave them a droll look before turning away.

“Come sit down, we’ll make room.” Clint said quickly. Phil paused mid step, turning back to look at Clint, the faintest crinkle in his brow.

“Yeah, shift, Barnes,” Sam directed. “You never let your hair down with us, you might as well start.” Steve nodded in agreement.

“I haven’t got that much hair,” Phil replied wryly as Bucky shuffled closer to Clint, making space.

“I’ll buy you a pie!” Clint offered enthusiastically, giving his glass an enticing spin against the bar table. Phil let out a chuckle.
“I’m going to see if I can’t peel Thor away before he causes an incident,” Phil replied with amusement. “But thank you for the offer. Enjoy yourselves.” He turned back to wind his way across the bar and Clint’s shoulders slumped a little. Not a moment later Tony was coming back from the bar, a overly large mug decorated with red white and blue shields in one hand and a waitress in his wake.

“Oh my god, it’s bigger than the last one!” Clint said with glee as the waitress set four patriotic-themed concoctions on the table. An apple slice with an American flag sticking out of it was perched on the rim and this time the sprinkles were red and blue stars.

“Waters,” Steve said to the waitress before she could leave. “Lots of water.” She gave him a wink, before turning away giggling.

“It’s not half bad,” Tony observed, sucking on his red white and blue twisty straw. He turned to Steve. “Katniss is right, it tastes like America, only drunker.” Sam let out a snort, nearly inhaling his whip cream.

“That’s pretty drunk,” Clint observed, sucking down the last drops of his cocktail with a loud slurp and pulling his fresh bucket of alcohol closer. Bucky nodded, downing his with a few last gulps. The bell at the door gave a tinkling ring and they all looked up.

“Well,” Sam observed as Bruce fairly ran into the bar, Betty hot on his heels as he skidded up beside Jane, jostling Thor out of the way. “Everyone’s definitely here now.”

“I didn’t realize he actually knew where this place was,” Steve said, his brow knitting in mild confusion as Bruce and Betty began talking a mile a minute in hushed tones. Jane sat up straighter, shaking her head as if trying to throw off inebriation. Thor was wearing a hang-dog expression and Natasha gave him a gentle pat on the arm before shifting around him so that Pepper and Phil could get into the conversation as well.

“I didn’t realize he knew where my lobby was!” Tony protested. “He’s never used it.”

“It’s not that hard to find, you press the down button,” Bucky observed.

“Oh you can talk, Buck,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. “How many months did you shuffle between the same three rooms?”
“Ancient history,” Bucky insisted, jostling Clint playfully as he stared across the bar to where Bruce, Betty, and Jane had pulled a half dozen napkins from the dispenser and were drawing on them with Darcy’s eyeliner pencils.

“Hey, Cap?” Clint asked, chewing pensively on his straw. Steve nodded, ignoring his horrific cocktail and returning his attention to his beer. “How do you… tell someone how you feel about them?” Steve made a choking sound, letting out a cough as he inhaled his beer.

“Wow,” Tony said softly as Sam thumped Steve on the back.

“I think you picked the wrong guy to ask,” Bucky finally replied when his shoulders had stopped shaking in silent laughter.

“Well I’m not going to ask you,” Clint pointed out.

“Fair enough,” Bucky agreed.

“So you do fancy the biologist, huh?” Sam teased gently.

“Better get her before she’s gone,” Tony added. “Do you want me to set something up? Because I could do that. She’s a class act, you need to take her somewhere nice. I can do nice.” Clint’s cheeks colored.

“I don’t belong in places like that,” he replied, his expression shy.

“I have personally seen you work a room at some of the most high profile events in New York,” Tony protested.

“Well I’m a performer,” Clint replied with a nervous shrug. “Even before I was in the center ring, far back as I can remember I was putting on shows, pretending things weren’t what they were. I’m even good at it. But that’s not,” his voice trailed off and he looked helplessly at Bucky.
“You’re an Avenger,” Bucky reminded his tone lacking it’s usual teasing. “You’re kind of a catch, pal.” Clint took a deep breath.

“Maybe,” Clint shrugged, “but that’s putting on a show too.”

“You do something for them,” Tony stated, looking the slightest bit uncomfortable at the openness of his statement. “You can throw around gifts or money, but that stuff’s easy. You do something for them, that’s effort.”

“I just always thought that if somebody was really important to you, you should tell them,” Clint admitted. “Because they should know, they shouldn’t have to guess. There’s people go their whole lives and never hear that because there’s no one to say it. I think it’s even worse if there’s someone who could say it and they don’t. I just don’t know what words to use.” It was a few moments before he realized no one was speaking and he looked up to find Tony, Bucky, and Steve staring at each other with blank expressions while Sam slowly rubbed his temples.

“What?” Clint asked.

“Drink your pie, Barton,” Sam said, reaching out to edge his flag bedecked bucket of alcohol closer to him. Tony drew in a breath, glancing over at the table across the bar. Pepper looked up at almost the same moment, motioning him over with a flick of her hand.

“That’s my cue, gentlemen,” Tony stated, clambering to his feet and smartening himself up before heading across the bar. Bruce looked up from the napkin he was scrawling on, motioning Tony to come have a look.

“What do you think they’re doing?” Clint asked curiously.

“Whatever it is, it’s probably about as good an idea as this,” Steve replied, flicking the rim of his red white and blue mug with disdain.

“Can I have yours?” Clint asked, perking up.

“No!” all three of them replied in unison.
Chapter End Notes

The folks over at HRL labs, CA have definitely been watching the Matrix one too many times and if you google them you can get details on their work in rapid learning systems. I can't download books into my brain yet but it's not because they're not trying.
Bobbi Morse leaned in closer to the screen of what was obviously her phone to get a better look at Natasha’s face, the bright smile she wore slowly dissolving into a sadder expression.

“How’s he doing?” She asked, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear.

“We’re still working on it,” Natasha admitted with a hint of reluctance. Bobbi’s nose wrinkled in a barely detectable flinch and she glanced over her shoulder at some distraction from the other side of the quinjet before turning back with a sigh, shifting to create what privacy she could.

“Hey, at least you’re not calling me with bad news, right?” she said with a hint of hopefulness. Natasha couldn’t help the thin smile that pulled at her lips.

“We think we have something,” Nat said. “We’re trying to modify some tech we have and SHIELD apparently did something similar a few years back. We’ve been going through the redacted medical research files, and we haven’t been able to find anything concrete from the project but we were hoping that if we could find someone who’d seen it first hand they could tell us if we were on the right track, or at least what mistakes not to make.”

“And you want me to hunt someone down for you and lean on them?” Bobbi asked with a grin. “I thought that was your area.”

“Actually I’m calling because all the visitors to the facility were logged in using only their SHIELD ID, no names. Yours was the only one I recognized.”

“You know my SHIELD ID?” Bobbi asked, looking put upon. Natasha shrugged in reply and Bobbi shook her head, fighting back a smile.
“If it makes you feel any better,” Natasha offered in her most conciliatory tone. “No one actually knows about this call.”

“Helps a little,” Bobbi admitted, gently rolling her eyes.

“It would have been right after New York,” Natasha prompted. “A field team of five and a guest.”

“Oh, yeah I remember that,” Bobbi nodded slowly. “Can’t tell you much. All we knew about the facility was the coordinates, no designation. My team and I never got past secure holding. And those guys all turned out to be Hydra anyway. Well except for the Mark.”

“The guest you mean?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah,” Bobbi replied. “Army doctor. They sent us in to extract and deliver. He was treating IED injuries in a burned out coffee house outside of Mosul, if you can believe that. We dropped him off and left.”

“This guy have a name?” Natasha asked hopefully. Bobbi seemed to think a moment.

“Pierce,” she said finally.

“Ben Pierce?” Natasha asked disbelievingly.

“Friend of yours?” Bobbi asked with a coy smile.

“He’s the thoracic surgeon who treated Tony after Afghanistan,” Natasha replied.

“Damn, talk about a small world,” Bobbi stated.

“Well when a patient rolls into your evac hospital with an experimental cold fusion battery in his chest and you don’t immediately freak out, that’s the sort of thing SHIELD tends to notice.”
Natasha said. Bobbi nodded in considering agreement.

“He was a hard to rattle kind of guy, yeah,” She observed. “Do they stay in touch?”

“No idea,” Natasha replied. “But I’m pretty sure after all that, Pierce is obliged to take his calls.”

“Fair enough,” Bobbi agreed. “We’re wheels down in ten, I need to get going.”

“Stay safe,” Natasha said fondly.

“Hey, take care of Barton?” Bobbi said hesitantly. “Just because we didn’t work out.”

“I’ll keep you in the loop,” Natasha promised. Bobbi gave a nod and the screen went dark. Natasha sat back in her chair at the bar, rubbing her temples.

“JARVIS, what’s Tony doing?” She asked.

“Mr. Stark currently appears to be attempting to solder his shoe to an electromagnet.” JARVIS replied primly. Natasha closed her eyes, holding in a sigh.

“Alright, I’m sorry I asked,” she admitted, she tilted her head back, rubbing at her eyes. “I’ll tell you what, if things look like they’re about get out of hand, wake Darcy. I promise to keep her from taking it out on you.”

“As you wish, Agent,” JARVIS answered. Natasha rolled her head slowly, rubbing at the back of her neck before reaching out to pull her laptop closer. A cold, gray mid morning stretched out beyond the windows, its thin light making the room seem dreary, but she ignored it, turning her attention toward the data fields that filled her screen.

“Mmm, thanks,” she murmured, barely looking up from her work as Bucky set a steaming coffee cup on the bar beside her. Her brow knitted and she reached for the mug, cradling it between her hands as she leaned back in her chair, her eyes still fixed on the screen with a calculating expression.
“You look like you could use a break,” Bucky said cautiously, settling into the chair beside her.

“I probably could,” she admitted, taking a sip of her coffee as she studied the screen with a frown. “We need a memory recall test so we can gauge the effectiveness of the treatment. Out of everyone available I’ve known him the longest.”

“Since Coulson has Hawk-sitting duty,” Bucky added, his eyes twinkling. Natasha turned to him with a look that was meant to be disapproving but really came off as more exasperated.

“There’s a reason Clint doesn’t drink very often,” she reminded.

“And now he knows what that reason is!” Bucky replied cheerfully, saluting her with his mug.

“His friends are idiots?” Natasha asked. Bucky seemed to consider that a moment.

“I hadn’t thought of that one, but it’s probably on the list, yeah,” he replied.

“How bad’s the hangover?” She asked, setting her coffee aside to peck at her keyboard.

“Apparently I’m a horrible person and he’s never speaking to me again,” Bucky stated proudly. Natasha gave a soft hum of agreement that only seemed to make his self satisfaction deepen. Out in the hall the elevator dinged and they both turned with a frown as the doors slid open.

“Ah finally made it,” the figure who exited the lift could only be described as flamboyant. He was shorter than Tony by a few inches, but his brown hair, combed back in a pompadour, almost made up the height difference. He wore a denim blue cashmere suit with white pinstripes and a red silk waistcoat, one hand waving absently in the air as the other pressed his StarkPhone to his ear.

“What?” Bucky muttered, staring in dumbfounded astonishment.

“Oh boy,” Natasha let out a soft, resigned sigh.
“Well, ah’m just going to ‘ave to rely on you to deal with it, Howard,” the newcomer continued, his thick accent rounding out each word. “Ah mean, you’ve seen it, it’s stunning, ah work of art, it’s the most gorgeous, most perfect thing ah’ve ever seen. Ah’m going to change all of it.” The stranger glanced up, his gaze falling on Natasha and his expression lit up like a kid at Christmas as she smiled demurely back.

“Howard, Ah ‘ave to go,” he insisted. “Make me look brilliant.” Without another word he thumbed off his phone, slipping it into his pocket as he sashayed across the rec room.

“Natalie, gorgeous as ever, dahling, it ‘as been too long,” He declared, looking too delighted for words.

“Hello, Franck,” Natasha said sweetly, tilting her head so that Franck could buss her cheek. He leaned back, clapping his hands together before turning his piercing expression on Bucky.

“And who is your,” Franck paused, his gaze raking down Bucky’s frame and back up to his eyes. “truly impressive friend ‘ere?”

“James, this is Franck Egglehoffer,” Natasha introduced, pressing her lips together to hide her grin. “He’s Tony’s west coast party planner.”

“Eveha so charmed,” Franck said holding out his hand to Bucky, palm down. Bucky gave it an awkward half shake as he struggled to keep from laughing.

“What are you doing in New York?” Natasha asked with her most charming smile. “I didn’t think you liked to leave L.A.”

“Well, you see,” Franck replied, his expression turning colluding. “Ms. Potts called and ah told her ah don’t do weddings any more but she was insistent that ah just ‘ad to come. Apparently ah am the Knight in Shining Armor of the hour.”

“She held Tony’s birthday party over you, didn’t she?” Natasha asked in shrewd amusement.

“There is nothing about that that was actually my fault,” he protested, his brow furrowing.
“Wait, that was your party?” Bucky asked, an evil grin spreading across his face as Franck’s frown deepened. “I am so damn sorry I missed that.”

“Ah will *neveah* serve melon sangria again as long as ah live,” Franck replied, crossing himself and raising his eyes to the ceiling. Bucky covered his mouth to muffle his snort of laughter as Natasha shot him a disapproving look. The elevator dinged again and Franck glanced over his shoulder.

“That’s the groom,” he said, his expression even more delighted. “We talked earlier and this wedding is going to be *fabulous*, ah will ‘ave entirely forgotten why ah don’t do them any more. Just wait, you are going to louve it! Thor!” With that he turned on his heel, sashaying toward the prince of Asgard who was beaming at them.

“Ten bucks says he’s going to entirely remember why he quit doing weddings about five minutes into the ceremony,” Bucky said with a considering look, watching as Franck and Thor launched into an unintelligible conversation that was probably about canapés on their way toward the kitchen.

“Please,” Natasha rolled her eyes. “He’s going to crack before we even get the bride properly wrestled into her dress.”

“Done,” Bucky stated with satisfaction. Natasha spared one more glance to be sure that Thor and Franck were properly distracted and then returned her attention to her computer. Bucky watched her a moment around his own coffee mug, fidgeting with it just a little.

“So, there’s this new place out in Queens,” he began, picking at his words carefully. “Escape Rooms.”

“Escape Rooms,” Natasha stated blandly, her attention never leaving her screen.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Bucky replied, his grin widening. “But the guy who sets up the scenarios at this place is ex KGB.” Natasha opened her mouth to answer and then paused as if reconsidering.

“How do you know he’s ex KGB?” she demanded suspiciously. “Any former soviet agents in the US legally would be in witness protection.” Bucky gave her a half shrug and a slightly guilty expression.
“Friend of yours?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t say ‘friend’, no,” Bucky admitted hesitantly.

“Escape Room,” Natasha repeated.

“Well, I just thought, you need a break and I could stand to blow off some steam,” Bucky said. “So I thought maybe we could have some fun, or, you know, do some other things?” Natasha turned her attention entirely from her laptop, staring at him with unblinking eyes.

“Your face is doing that thing again,” Bucky observed with no small amount of concern.

“My face isn’t doing anything,” Natasha replied, her voice completely without tone.

“That’s the thing I’m talking about,” he nodded, leaning away from her ever so slightly. “It feels like you’re dissecting me with your brain.” Natasha didn’t move, her dewy, emerald eyes staring back at him.

“James, I think I can speak for everyone when I say how pleased we all are that you’ve made so much progress,” she said finally, her tone completely sincere. “What a relief it is to know that regardless of everything that Hydra did, it wasn’t something you couldn’t come back from.”

“Okay,” Bucky replied with a confused frown.

“I really do think it’s wonderful that you’re finding your footing, that you’re comfortable again,” she continued. “But whatever you’re doing here, it’s unnecessary. If you’re looking to ‘blow off some steam’ it’s perfectly fine to just say so.”

“Wait, what?”

“Normally I’d be enthusiastic about some casual stress relief,” Natasha stated wryly, returning her attention back to her laptop and hitting several keys. “But with everything I have to do before Clint’s first session, I’m afraid this just isn’t a good time.”
“A good time for-” Bucky made a face, his brow furrowing. “What are we talking about now?”

“I need to get down to the lab and help set up for tomorrow’s test, so rain check,” she replied, pausing to turn back to him. “You know, if you need to get it out of your system, you should consider Franck. He’s definitely into you.”

“Consider Franck for what?” he asked, bewildered as she gave his shoulder a gentle pat on her way toward the elevator. He foundered a moment, long enough for the doors to close on her and Bucky stared at them blankly, blinking his eyes with his mouth half hanging open.

“I honestly don’t know if I struck out or not,” he mutter to himself, rubbing his forehead.

“So I’ve been at this since last night,” Tony declared, his expression very slightly manic as his fingers flew over the holographic interface.

The lab was in a state of disarray unusual even for a Stark trademark project. Unwashed coffee mugs and a half dozen empty pizza boxes littered the work surfaces between welders and wrenches. Steve and Phil, watching it all from the periphery, gave each other side eyed looks of healthy skepticism.

“Two nights,” Bruce corrected, rubbing tired eyes. “We’ve been at this for forty hours straight.”

“Speak for yourself,” Darcy said, popping her bubble gum as she carefully fitted Clint with a pair of futuristic looking glasses. “I crashed out in the back of the Rolls he has in pieces in the machine lab.”

“Is that what that was?” Betty muttered, her brow furrowed in consternation. She gave her head a tiny shake, zeroing in on the holographic interface in front of her as if she could drown out her surrounding through sheer force of will. Jane looked up from her laptop, one eye half squinted shut and she turned, zeroing in on Tony.
“You took apart a Rolls Royce?” she demanded, repulsed.

“I was having a bad day,” Tony said defensively. He paused a long moment, his mouth hanging open. “What was I saying?”

“You were explaining what you’re about to do,” Phil replied, looking not the least bit amused.

“Really?” Tony asked, his eyebrows twisting in a complicated expression. “That doesn’t sound like something I’d do.”

“Why don’t we just pretend it’s something you would do,” Steve suggested drily, folding his arms over his chest. Tony stared at him a long moment as if trying to gauge his seriousness.

“Okay,” he said finally, his shoulders rolling in a sloppy shrug. “Widow ran a test about an hour ago, just a baseline for what Robin Hood recalls from missions and standout events from the last few years and he scored?” He turned to Natasha who glanced up from her tablet.

“Four percent,” she replied, her expression neutral. Tony stared at her blankly before turning to Clint.

“You couldn’t cheat any better than two questions out of fifty?” he demanded as if he felt personally wronged.

“Tasha told me not to,” Clint said defensively, his eyes blinking owlishly though his glasses.

“No lie, the fact that you even listened at all kind of freaks me out,” Tony said. Clint only shrugged.

“So we’re going to be calling anything over four questions right a 200% improvement?” Jane asked with a cheeky grin. Steve let out a snort as Phil schooled his face into his most deadpan expression. Tony scowled at her but he seemed unable to come up with an appropriate retort, his eyes glazing with exhaustion in mid thought.
“Just ignore them,” Natasha said to Clint, clipping a sensor over the end of his finger. He glanced up at her before darting a look in Phil’s direction.

“What am I supposed to do exactly?” he asked with a hint of nervousness.

“Stay relaxed and let the technology do its job,” Natasha replied gently, giving his arm a squeeze. “Each session is only an hour. Then you can take a break.” Clint nodded nervously, chancing a look in Phil’s direction again.

“Someone will be here the entire time,” Phil promised and Clint drew in a steadying breath, puffing his cheeks as he lit it out.

“This is the input disk,” Darcy declared holding a small sensor attached to an adhesive pad in front of Clint’s face. “Do. Not. Touch it.” she reached out, gently but firmly pressing it to the middle of his forehead. A complicated series of equations ran across the screen of the main interface and it blinked twice before letting out a cheery tone.

“What’s a kumquat?” Clint asked her, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“If you’re thinking about kumquats that’s how we know it’s connected properly,” she replied with a satisfied nod. Clint’s eyes narrowed at her suspiciously but she pretended not to notice.

“Really?” Bruce demanded, giving Darcy his most bewildered look.

“You’re the one that made me set up the operating parameters,” Darcy reminded, leveling an accusatory finger at him.

“I regret it, believe me.” he replied.

“I still don’t know what a kumquat is,” Clint stated, slowly shaking his head.

“I feel like there’s something I’m missing here but I don’t even know what to ask,” Betty admitted.
“You get used to that,” Jane stated blandly. “You’re better off not asking.”

“Well, I had to pick something he wasn’t likely to think of,” Darcy said with a hint of condescension. “And it’s a good safeword… not mine, I knew a guy.”

“You’re right,” Betty nodded before turning to Jane. “I am better off not asking.”

“It’s perfect,” Darcy continued, unperturbed. “Because it’s never going to come up in normal conversation and, bonus, it’s a total mood killer.”

“I know my mood just died,” Steve muttered half under his breath.

“That’s definitely what I look for in a safe word,” Phil agreed, nodding slowly. Tony paused mid step, rounding on Phil

“What would you need a safe word for?” he demanded.

“Keep it up Stark, and you’ll find out,” Phil replied emotionlessly.

“Ahoy, awkwardly sexual taser jokes on the horizon, Captain!” Jane declared in her most droll tone.

“Batten down the hatches,” Steve added resignedly.

“Is everyone ready?” Bruce asked the room in clear exasperation that made him look very much like a grade school teacher rounding up a class for recess. He got several replies and a few thumbs up before turning to Clint who stared back at him worriedly.

“It’s totally fine,” Darcy soothed, patting his shoulder. “I did this, it doesn’t hurt at all. Just tingles a little.” Clint swallowed, nodding slightly and Tony reached out to the interface, tapping a series of instructions.

“The left half of my head is going to sleep,” Clint said warily.
“Yeah, that’s your brain trying to decide if it’s turning into a cyborg,” Tony replied.

“Is it?” Clint asked, but he didn’t seem too worried about that.

“Do I look like a cyborg to you?” Darcy demanded. Clint gave her a calculating look.

“Don’t cyborgs look like everyone else?” he frowned back at her. Darcy seemed to consider this a moment.

“Fair enough,” She said finally. “Yes, you’re turning into a cyborg. After your treatment I’ll send you the paperwork so you can join the official organization. Meetings are every other Thursday.”

“Cool,” he replied.

“Nobody ever sent me the paperwork,” Tony said with a huff of disappointment. Darcy gave him a consoling pat on the back.

“The program’s starting up,” Betty observed, watching the readings on the display.

“Just relax,” Natasha said, brushing a kiss on Clint’s temple.

“Yeah, Barton, lie back and don’t think of kumquats.” Tony declared with a grin.

“Oh yeah, like that’s going to happen now,” Clint groused, but he settled back into the chair with a sigh. Betty took the chair beside him, pulling the display closer so that she could watch the program run while Jane settled on his other side, giving a nod to Natasha who herded the others silently out into the hall.

“So how long is it going to take before we see any results?” Steve asked, darting tense looks back into the lab.
“Well,” Darcy said thoughtfully. “I broke into Tony’s servers like an hour after my first session.”

“That was an anomaly and that is never happening again.” Tony insisted with a frown.

“You’ve got that right, once was enough,” Darcy gave a full body shudder before turning to him with a depreciating look. “Do you really need that many terabytes for porn? I’m just saying.” Natasha let out a sigh, gently draping her arm around Darcy’s shoulder and covering her mouth with her hand. Darcy froze for a moment, side-eyeing Natasha before letting her shoulders slump in resignation.

“So we should see some results immediately,” Phil observed as if nothing at all unusual were happening.

“Some,” Bruce agreed, nodding slowly.

“It really kind of depends on Barton,” Tony admitted tension coiling in his shoulders. “A lot of it’s on him.”

“Then there shouldn’t be a problem,” Steve said with conviction, his arms folded over his chest as he stared into the lab. “When has Clint ever let us down?”
Phil let out a sigh as the elevator doors closed on him, leaning back into the wall and letting his head rest against the polished mahogany paneling, his eyes slipping closed.

“What did I miss while I was out, JARVIS?” he asked. He was seldom pulled into the raging tire fire that SHIELD R&D could be on a bad day, but today had involved contracted search and rescue drones from Stark Industries and the resulting fallout had included no less than twenty recruits with micro laser burns, three exploded coffee pots, and a breached plumbing line on the floor directly above Fury’s office. All of which might have been avoided if the eager beavers in research had, firstly, not tried to reverse engineer Stark tech and, second, had bothered to read the damn directions in the first place.

Honestly he had no idea how they were ever going to get rid of the sewage smell.

“Mr. Egglehoffer has requested your approval of a short term lease of one of SHIELD’s C-17 Globemasters for the purpose of wedding transportation from Orlando to Bermuda.” JARVIS said in his most neutral tone.

“Oh it’s Bermuda now?” Phil asked with faint curiosity. He paused a long moment, his brows drawing together slowly. “Exactly what would we be transporting from Orlando?”

“I’m made to understand that the list includes a selection of mouse-shaped pastries, a pumpkin coach and four white horses, and between ten and fifteen cast members of Cirque du Soleil.” JARVIS replied, his tone just on the cusp of droll. “There was also talk of a fire eater.” Phil stared blankly at the elevator doors, his face devoid of expression.

“Jugglers?” he asked finally.

“That would appear to be one of the options under consideration, yes,” JARVIS said. Phil nodded slowly.

“Tell Franck that if he books the juggler it’s worth the paperwork,” Phil said decisively.
“I shall pass that information along,” JARVIS replied with a hint of disapproval in his tone.

“I really like jugglers,” Phil said unapologetically. The elevator doors opened and he stepped out onto his floor, loosening his tie as he headed down the hall. “What else?”

“Ms. Potts’ office has asked me to remind you of your tardy RSVP for next month’s Stark Foundation charity fundraiser.”

“Unless something blows up I’ll be there,” Phil said, wincing as he let himself into his suite. “I’m certainly not going to leave Steve, Tony, and Johnnie Walker alone together without supervision.” He tossed his tie on the breakfast bar, shucking his jacket and draping it over the back of one of the barstools.

“Also, Agent Barton failed to report for his most recent treatment in the lab.”

Phil froze in the middle of unbuttoning his cuffs, a barely there flinch ghosting over his features.

“You might have led with that,” he said finally but JARVIS made no reply. “Where is he?”

“He entered the gym showers approximately an hour before his scheduled session and never reemerged,” JARVIS replied with a touch of exasperation. “Neither myself or Agent Romanov have been able to locate him.”

“You don’t have monitoring devices in showers or bathrooms,” Phil muttered with a slow nod. “I presume he hasn’t left the building?”

“Any opening that could provided either entrance or egress of any kind is strictly monitored,” JARVIS replied. “I have not detected his departure. Sergeant Wilson suggested that he seemed agitated at the apparent lack of improvement in his test results.”

“Five?” Phil asked, pulling a face as he turned on the k cup machine and resumed unbuttoning his cuffs.
“Five.” JARVIS confirmed.

“It’s a 300% improvement,” Phil pointed out, though his heart didn’t seem to be in it. JARVIS didn’t reply and Phil let out another sigh, heading down the hall toward his bedroom. “He’d do this when he was younger, slip into a hole and hide. Tell Agent Romanov that I’ll conduct a sweep of likely locations as soon as I change into something more appropriate but not to worry, he’ll come out as soon as he gets hungry.” He pushed open his bedroom door and came up short on the threshold.

His bed, freshly made that morning, was rumpled, an unidentifiable lump tangled in the bedclothes on the left hand side. Phil’s eyes narrowed, the gears of his mind slipping over what he was seeing.

“Of course,” he mutter to himself, half under his breath. “I shot out the security cameras on this floor.”

“I’m sorry, Agent?” JARVIS questioned hesitantly.

“Can you tell Agent Romanov that I’ve located Agent Barton, please?” he asked, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as the lump on the bed wobbled, drawing in as if trying to make itself look smaller. “Also, you might want to inform Tony that the security in the main wet wall is grossly inadequate.”

“The main, wet wall?” JARVIS’ tone was confused and Phil ducked his head to hide his chuckle despite the fact that the AI couldn’t see him. “All the utility walls are steel lined and,”

“Wet walls, JARVIS,” Phil insisted gently.

(Of course, Agent Coulson, I shall pass on that information.” Phil shook his head, waiting until he heard the telltale click of JARVIS disconnecting the suite’s intercoms before crossing the room to settle on the end of the bed.

“Really, Clint?” he asked gently, bending to loosen the laces on his shoes.

“I don’t feel good,” Clint’s muffled reply came back, the blankets shifting restlessly. “I might be sick.” Phil made to answer but paused, weighing his words for a moment.
“Clint, you don’t admit to being sick when you are sick,” Phil stated, brushing at a scuff on one of his shoes before setting it aside. “You only say that when you’re trying to deflect attention from something else.” Clint let out a frustrated huff, kicking down the covers as he rolled onto his back to stare at the ceiling. He folded his arms over his chest in a motion that looked suspiciously like a hug, his eyes red and puffy as he chewed on his lower lip. Phil watched him a long moment, waiting patiently until finally Clint’s body language loosened.

“Tasha’s mad at me,” he admitted hoarsely, rubbing at his face with his hands.

“She’s not,” Phil assured quickly.

“Her face is doing the thing!” Clint said, his brow knitting in distress.

“The blank thing,” Phil asked, Clint nodded rapidly, his arms wrapping around himself once more. “I don’t think it’s actually you.”

“I got five right,” Clint blurted out. “I don’t even know which five!” Phil closed his eyes, drawing in a steadying breath. He shook his head slowly, opening his mouth to reply.

“It’s not working,” Clint interrupted, a terrified tremor in his voice. Phil felt his shoulders sag and he let out a sigh, kicking his sock clad feet up on the comforter and stretching out on the bed beside Clint.

“It doesn’t appear to be,” he said in grudging agreement, his heart aching in his chest. “But Tasha isn’t mad at you. She’s scared and, as far as I can tell, she and Bucky are having some… difficulties.” Clint winced.

“That’s what adults say when they don’t want to tell you people aren’t going to be together any more,” Clint declared with a derisive huff. Phil’s lips curled up in a smile of amusement.

“Well, that’s often the case,” he admitted. “But sometimes they work things out. It’s presumptuous to think you know which way things are going to go.”

“Is it because of me?” he asked in a small voice.
“Clint, no,” Phil said with a sigh. “They just, don’t seem to be communicating well, it’s not anything you’ve done.” Clint rubbed at his eyes, shining in the half darkness of the room.

“I don’t want her to be mad at me,” he said in a small voice.

“You don’t want to lose her,” Phil corrected as gently as he could. “And you won’t. Natasha will always be there, nothing could change that.” Clint shifted closer to him, his head brushing Phil’s shoulder.

“Barney used to say that,” Clint murmured softly. Phil struggled to keep the wince off his face.

“I’m not going to get my memories back,” Clint added, resigned. Phil drew in an unsteady breath.

“Not for quite a while, it seems,” he admitted. “You might never get all of them back.” Clint nodded but he didn’t seem as worried as Phil would have been in his place.

“I don’t know what to do,” Clint said, sounding a little scared. “If I can’t be an Avenger any more I don’t want to leave my friends but I don’t want to spend every day playing guinea pig in the lab.”

“Well it’s not like you don’t have options,” Phil said with a smile. “What would you like to do?”

“What’s somebody like me do?” Clint asked, shrugging. “I’m real good at shooting targets and that’s about it.”

“Don’t be silly,” Phil scoffed, jostling his shoulder. “It’s not like you can’t go back to college and study anything you like.”

“College?” Clint twisted his head around to stare at him, dumbfounded. “Who would let me into college?”

“Harvard, apparently,” Phil answered drily. Clint’s eyes widened to twice their normal size and Phil had to bite his lip to reel in his snort of amusement. He schooled his face into his most bland
“Granted I was a bit put out about it. You enrolled under an alias and never bothered to tell anyone.” Clint stared at him in muted shock.

“Injuries resulting in long recovery times are part of the job,” Phil said, trying not to look amused. “Apparently you needed something to fill the hours.”

“So I went to college?” Clint demanded, looking horrified. “I didn’t even graduate High School.”

“That was the first thing you did when you joined SHIELD,” Phil replied proudly. “You’ve never let circumstance hold you back before.” Clint slumped back down on the pillows, his head resting on Phil’s shoulder.

“What did I study at Harvard?” Clint asked hesitantly.

“Physics,” Phil replied readily. “You already had a masters from UMass at the time. You told me, years later, that you thought you wouldn’t be able to stay at SHIELD so you wanted a respectable backup plan. But mostly you wanted the skills to make your bow the safest, most effective weapon you could create with the least amount of loss of life.”

“That makes me sound like more of a good guy than I thought I was,” Clint said softly.

“I think the word you’re looking for is Hero,” Phil declared with a soft smile, pretending not to notice the color rising on Clint’s cheeks. “I know this is frustrating, just try to stick it out a little longer. If the next session doesn’t show improvement, I’ll talk to them. I promise.”

“It’s not going to work,” Clint whispered, his fingers tangling in the sleeve of Phil’s shirt.

“No,” Phil agreed, his throat tight. “But it’s fine. You think about what you want to do and when you decide, I’ll help you make it happen.”

“Well, I feel like a fifty foot train on a dress is a bit much,” Jane declared in an exasperated tone from where she’d sprawled on the couch on the other side of the rec room. Thor was perched on
the arm beside her, leafing through a portfolio of studio photographs as Franck hovered nearby, chattering unintelligibly into his StarkPhone.

Natasha’s eyes flicked up from the book she was reading, just long enough to take in Clint, ensconced in the farthest corner of the room at the poker table, her laptop set up in front of him and a pair of headphones on his ears. Her eyes made a rapid sweep of the room before settling back on the page but not so quickly that Bucky didn’t notice.

“What did you say to her?” Steve muttered half under his breath as he popped the caps off a pair of glass bottled Cokes at the bar.

“I don’t know,” Bucky hissed back in frustration. “I asked her out and then the next thing I know she’s.” he paused, shifting his shoulders so that he could surreptitiously point at Natasha out of her line of sight.

“I don’t know why you’re doing that, she knows you’re talking about her,” Steve observed, his voice low.

“Well then why are you whispering?” Bucky demanded, taking a long gulp of the Coke Steve passed to him.

“Because if I make enough noise to distract Clint I’m a little concerned she’s going to stab me with something dull and rusty, and I like this shirt,” Steve replied as if that were obvious. Bucky glanced over his shoulder with his peripheral vision.

“You’re probably okay, she’ll take me out first, give you time to duck and cover,” he said finally, resigned.

“Apparently he’s at Massachusetts General now,” Pepper was saying, her attention half divided between her StarkPad and the way Tony was rubbing her shoulders. He leaned over the back of her armchair near the window, brushing a kiss on the top of her head before peering down at her StarkPad.

“Fancy that,” Tony stated with a huff of amusement before going back to working the knots out of her shoulders. “Never would have believed that one.”
“You should call him,” Pepper added, ignoring the way Tony stiffened. “At this point.”

“It’s fine,” Tony said with a shrug, renewing his massage efforts. “Too early to tell how things are going anyway.”

“Tony,” Pepper sighed, she darted a look at Bruce who was seated on the floor beside her, his legs folded in front of him and his eyes closed but he made no response to her silent please for backup.

“I do love ice cream,” Jane said, staring at the ceiling. “But a whole bar for ice cream? On top of the cake, and the pastries, and those guys that do fifty flavors of frozen daiquiris?”

“How much longer you going to let this go on?” Sam asked, dumping an unholy amount of sugar into his coffee as he leaned against the other end of the bar.

“I beg your pardon?” Phil looked up at him, confused, before slowly swiveling the barstool to face him directly.

“This whole thing?” Sam gestured toward Clint with a minute flick of his fingers. “It’s got out of hand.”

“I’m aware,” Phil said defensively. “I’ll address it.”

“Well someone needs to be addressing it, is all I’m saying,” Sam declared with a frown.

“So Helen and Jane and I went to this big sciency, thing in Saint Petersburg,” Darcy said, carefully painting her toes in bright orange varnish. She paused a moment, the brush hovering over an outstretched toe “The one in Russia, real weird, started with a Q.”

“The International Workshop on High Energy Physics and Quantum Field Theory?” Betty asked, her eyes round.

“Yeah, I think so,” Darcey nodded gamely. “Anyway, we’re at the hotel bar, and by the way, what they say about Russian boys and vodka is totally true.”
“You act like you don’t want to talk to him,” Pepper tried to frown but Tony had apparently found a spot that made her sound like she was purring instead.

“I don’t want to talk to him,” Tony protested. “I’m still bitter he wouldn’t come work for me.”

“You are not.”

“I am so!”

“Yes,” Jane declared, draping one had over her eyes. “I’m aware the Bus will already be in Florida anyway. That’s not the point.”

“Did you say something stupid when you asked her out?” Steve asked with a perplexed frown.

“What kind of moron do you think I am, Stevie?” Bucky demanded.

“I think you’re the kind of moron whose dame is angry enough with him to kill him,” Steve replied tipping his bottle at Bucky. “Also the kind of moron who picks a dame whose day job is killing people.”

“You’re the one she’s going to kill when she finds out you called her a dame,” Bucky observed.

“No,” Betty declared, her mouth hanging open.

“Can you believe it?” Darcy grinned in delight. “She’s so tiny, I totally didn’t see it coming. Neither did the guy.”

“If anyone’s going to put their foot down, it has to be you,” Sam said, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Not that I’m disagreeing, but why?” Phil asked cautiously.
“You’re the Dad Friend,” Sam replied. Phil made a face. “Don’t take it hard. I’m the Shrink Friend, you’re the Dad Friend. It’s a dirty job but somebody has to do it.”

“I’ll trade you,” Phil said drily. “I’ll deal with the social maladjustment and you can put Stark in time out.”

“I don’t like any of these losers enough for that,” Sam replied.

“That’s ridiculous. Where in the world am I going to carry a six pound broadsword in a dress like that?” Jane asked, looking perturbed.

“Why don’t you just tell her you’re an idiot?” Steve said in his most sensible voice. “She knows you, she’ll believe that.”

“I’m not calling,” Tony declared with a huff. “You can’t make me.”

“There’s a reason I won’t live here,” Sam said shaking his head. “and it’s because there’s only so much crazy I can cope with, and before you say anything, a room full of special forces with PTSD has got nothing on this nut farm.”

“Thor, I’m not ‘descending on the ceremony’ in a chariot pulled by a pack of black leopards!” Jane insisted. “I don’t care that they’re specially trained from Asgard!” She had abandoned the sofa, pacing a small track in front of the coffee table but she’d stopped, her body vibrating with coiled frustration.

“But it is tradition,” Thor replied cajolingly. “The brides of the royal household are delivered to the sacred bower at the behest of the grooms mother. It will not be a proper wedding otherwise.”

“Then maybe I don’t have any business having a proper wedding!!!” Jane fairly shouted at him. A cold stillness settled over the rec room and Thor drew in a cautious breath.

“My love, what are you saying?” he asked softly. Jane’s opened her mouth to reply and her breath hitched in a strangled sound.
“Howard, Ah ‘ave to go,” Franck stated, hanging up his phone without another word, his eyes wide and terrified.

“I’m saying I can’t do this,” Jane choked out as tears welled in her eyes. “I just, I can’t, I.” She let out a wounded whine and spun, darting up the stairs as fast as her legs would carry her.

“Jane, Beloved, wait!” Thor called after her, shaking off his shocked stupor and chasing after her. Bucky let out a huff, fishing a twenty out of his pocket and handing it to Steve as Phil did the same, handing his twenty to Sam. Sam took it passing it to his other hand before handing it to Steve as well. Pepper let out a sigh, pulling a bill from the pocket of her blouse and handing it to Bruce, whose only movement was to gently raise his hand.

“Cough it up,” Darcy insisted, snapping her fingers and holding out her hand to Tony who made a show of taking a hundred from his money clip and slapping it into her palm as she grinned smugly. “Easiest money I ever made.”

“Well, this is… unfortunate,” Frack stated, staring up the stairs with thinly muted horror before turning to face them. “But Ah am sure this will all be fine. Ah am a professional. Ah will sort out all of this.” He took a steadying breath, wobbling in distress a moment.

“And then Ah will become a monk.” he added, turning to scurry up the stairs. “Thor!!”

“Shit,” Bucky bit out, sliding off his bar stool and stalking the handful of paces to Natasha’s chair, handing her his last ten before stomping back to the bar as Tony bitterly peeled off a second hundred, handing it to Darcy as well.

“I’m going to buy really great shoes,” Darcy declared with satisfaction, wiggling her orange toes.

“Does this mean we aren’t getting a dog?” Clint asked, keen disappointment in his tone. Almost as one the remainder of the room turned toward him and he shifted uneasily in his chair, eyeing them. “I finished.”

No one said anything as Natasha slowly rolled to her feet, crossing the rec room. She reached out to turn the laptop toward her, tapping a few keys. A pinched expression flitted across her face, there and gone in only a moment.
“Four,” she stated without emotion.

“Four?” Tony demanded, affronted. “Last time it was five!”

“Tony he’s never gotten the same ones right twice,” Natasha said as Bruce and Betty exchanged looks of resigned disappointed. Tony’s jaw worked as if he were having trouble getting words out in complete sentences and finally he let out a huff.

“It doesn’t matter,” he snapped. “It was probably a long shot anyway. There’s other things we can try. We’ll just start out fresh in the lab tomorrow.” Clint’s nose wrinkled as if he were trying not to wince and he shot a pleading look at Phil who, drew back his shoulders, opening his mouth.

“Why can’t you just stop?” It was Bucky’s voice that cut across the room, his lean, muscled body coiled tight as if he were struggling to keep himself in place. He’d abandoned his seat at the bar and now stood as if rooted to the floor in the middle of the room, gritting his teeth with a scowl.

“Excuse me?” Tony demanded.

“I’m not going to say I told you so,” Sam muttered half under his breath.

“Don’t you think he’s been through enough?” Bucky snapped, waving a hand in Clint’s direction. “Look at him! He looks like he’s about to freak out!”

“I noticed!” Tony bellowed back angrily. “I’m the one trying to fix it!”

“No, you’re trying to fix him!” Bucky snarled, stalking a few angry steps closer and then reigning himself back as if he were afraid to be too near to anyone. “But you can’t, because he’s not broken, Stark, there’s nothing wrong with him!”

“James!” Natasha snapped. Bucky rounded on her, his eyes narrowing menacingly.

“Oh, are you talking to me again?” he asked. Across the room Steve and Darcy made identical faces of horror.
“With that level of charm one wonders why I stopped,” she said evenly. “You need to back off.”

“No, I really don’t,” Bucky replied. “Because every single person in this room has had their head messed with, but I’m the only one who knows what it’s like to have big gaping holes in your memory where your life used to be.” He turned back to Tony, his jaw clenched.

“You gave me a chance, how come he doesn’t get one?”

“Buck,” Steve said softly. But Bucky turned on his heel, stalking out into the hall toward the elevator without a word.

“The rest of you want to give up go right ahead,” Tony mocked scathingly, heading up the stairs.

“You were right about the nut farm,” Phil acknowledged, rubbing his eyes tiredly as Bruce clambered to his feet hustling after Tony. Natasha let out a sigh, crossing back toward Clint and carefully packing up her laptop.

“Are you mad at Bucky?” he asked uneasily into the awkward silence that filled the room. Natasha’s shoulders hitched only a moment then she turned a gentle smile on him.

“No, of course not,” she replied. “We didn’t see eye to eye on something else and I’m little disappointed, that’s all.”

“I think he really likes you,” Clint observed with a hopeful look.

“I think he probably does,” Natasha agreed, nodding and ignoring the eyes of the rest of the room. “Just, apparently not in the way I’d hoped. Still, we’re friends, we’re adults, and we work together. I’m sure I’ll get over it. It isn’t the first time things didn’t turn out like I’d imagined.” Clint gave an unhappy nod, his shoulders slumping.

“Are you mad at me?” he asked.
“Clint, no, I…” her delicate smile transformed instantly into a look of genuine distress but before she could say more he interrupted her.

“Just disappointed?”

Natasha closed her eyes with a pained huff and it was a moment before she opened them again but when she did she met his gaze unflinchingly.

“You know what?” She said, one hand reaching out to gently stroke his cheek. “I’d always hoped you’d make it to retirement. I couldn’t think about that for me, couldn’t let myself think about what I’d do if I couldn’t be what I’d always been. But you, I could picture you an old man rattling around SHIELD, terrorizing the recruits. Ruling over the academy range with an iron fist. Maybe this isn’t the way I’d imagined it either, but its better than the alternative.” She drew her shoulders back, schooling her face into a decisive expression before turning to look at the others.

“I think we need to let Clint make the calls from here,” she said firmly. “We need to support him if he wants to wait it out.”

“Tasha?” Clint’s face crumpled worriedly but she only turned back to him, brushing a kiss on his forehead.

“Remember how you wanted to build a hunting cabin with your own hands?” she asked with a warm smile. “Somewhere on a lake. You said you were always fascinated with the way people could just pick a spot and make a house right where they were.”

“I never told anyone that,” he said breathlessly.

“You told me.” she replied, simply. Clint’s cheeks colored and she gave him a brighter smile before turning back to the rest of the room.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out,” Betty stated firmly. “But if you ever decide you need my help again, just call, okay?” Clint nodded shyly and she gave his arm a squeeze as she passed.

“I’ll let SHIELD know,” Steve said with a nod, glancing at Sam.
“Yeah, I’ll check on Barnes,” he sighed heading out of the room.

“Tony will come around eventually,” Pepper advised sagely, returning her attention to her StarkPad as she stood. “I’ll keep him in check.” Clint’s eyes widened in surprise but he shook it off.

“I’m going to go down to the range for a bit,” he said to Natasha sheepishly. She gave him an encouraging nod and he rolled out of his chair, padding silently toward the elevator.

“You did the right thing,” Phil declared gently, slipping up beside her as they were left alone, his hand settling in a comforting weight between her shoulder blades.

“For Clint,” She nodded in agreement, leaning into the contact just a bit. “I just hope the rest of the world doesn’t regret it.”
The part of Dr. Benjamin Pierce, former US Army Captain and chief surgeon at the Combat Support Hospital, Afghanistan, will be played by Alan Alda, circa 1977.

“I’m sorry this didn’t work out.”

Betty looked up from the laptop she’d set up on the coffee table in the rec room, a brittle smile pulling at her lips as she spied the elegant strawberry blonde leaning in the doorway, dressed in a t-shirt and yoga pants, her hair in a sloppy ponytail as if she had just wandered in from the gym.

“For me or for Stark Industries?” She asked a careful note in her tone. Pepper ducked her head to hide her smile, shifting over the threshold easy casual steps.

“Let’s clear some things up,” Pepper said, settling into the other end of the sectional sofa, tucking one foot up under her knee. “I think we both know that I’m perfectly capable of enticing you into staying with SI. And I want you to know that’s still on the table, by the way. If you told me right now that you wanted to work in any of our labs anywhere in the world I would delightfully make you a thoroughly embarrassing offer that you absolutely could not refuse.” Betty let out a snort of a laugh.

“But you haven’t,” she pointed out, her smile softening.

“Tony asked me to let you sort this out on your own,” Pepper replied frankly. “If you were going to stay he wanted you to be here for the right reasons.” Betty considered that a moment, reaching out to close her laptop before settling back into the plush leather.

“You always do what he asks?”

“Within reason,” Pepper replied. She let out a soft sigh, brushing lint from her pants. “When I first met Tony we were both young, I thought he was a rude, self absorbed, hedonist.”

“I can see where you’d get that impression,” Betty admitted with a wry smile. Pepper’s lips pursed
in amusement.

“He can be all those things,” she agreed. “On a bad day he can be all of them at once. But if you let yourself be distracted by that you’ll never realize that at the same time he’s generous to a fault, deeply compassionate, and unfailingly loyal. And on his best day he can do all of that while he’s being a narcissistic vulgarian.” Betty’s face broke in a grin that Pepper returned.

“What we do,” Pepper paused, choosing her words carefully. “Steve likes to say the Avengers are more than the center stage act. The team needs good support, they live and die on it. I’m sorry this didn’t work out because, after seeing you in action, I feel like you could definitely hold your own here, and that’s hard to find.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t tempted,” Betty admitted, the soft, sad smile returning. “It’s the kind of important work I think a lot of people dream of doing.”

“I like to think it is,” Pepper nodded. “I know the team does everything they can to make that true” Betty drew in a shaky breath, turning her gaze out the window.

“When I was younger,” She said. “I’d always promised myself I wouldn’t make my career choices for someone else, that I’d never choose something I didn’t really want just to be with a boy. It just never even occurred to me the I’d find myself walking away from something I believed in because of one.”

“Bruce would have never put you in this position if he’d realized-”

“How I felt?” Betty’s face crumpled in a painful imitation of a smile.

“For superheroes they do seem to lack situational awareness,” Pepper admitted grudgingly.

“Is Tony aware?”

Pepper stilled, a breath held in her chest, her gazed turned inward, then the moment passed. Her shoulders rolled in a sigh and she turned a knowing look on Betty.
“If that’s what you need, you’re right, you’re not going to find it here,” she admitted, a flicker of something fragile in her expression. “The hardest part, the part that made me so angry at first, was realizing that I’d have to share him. Tony will always be Iron Man first. Everything else is second. I wanted to protect him from himself but ultimately that would mean taking away the very best of him, better than most of us will ever be.” Betty seemed to consider that a moment before nodding.

“I don’t think I’m as frightened of the risks as I am that he won’t tell me what the risks actually are,” Betty replied, closing her eyes.

“He won’t,” Pepper said. “He’ll keep things from you to protect you. There will be no end of things you find out about when it’s too late to help. You’ll ask yourself every day if he really does trust you, it hangs like a cloud over everything.”

“But you still stay,” Betty pointed out. A wide, sharp grin tugged at Pepper’s lips.

“I’d never choose something I didn’t really want just because of a boy,” she replied, her eyes twinkling. Betty let out a laugh, and Pepper joined in, the pair of them giggling as they settled more comfortably.

Tony leaned into the wall of the kitchen, his empty gaze searching the bottom of his coffee mug in the cold gray morning light that cast uneven shadows over the counters. He drew in a long, slow breath before emptying the last few dregs of coffee and dumping the mug in the sink, heading into the elevator. The floors slid passed without his notice and he stepped out, his feet carrying him into the lab where he slouched into his desk chair, staring out the windows at the falling snow. It melted against the glass, clinging in wet clumps at the corners of the panes before trickling down toward the sidewalks below.

“Sir, incoming return call from Doctor Pierce,” JARVIS said. Tony drew in a shaky breath, rubbing tired eyes. He ruffled his fingers through his hair, smoothing it into place with a practiced hand before turning toward the monitor on his desk.

“Put him through Jay,” Tony instructed masking his tension behind his best smile. “Hey, Doc, how’s it going?”

“Hey, Doc?” The man on the screen had dark hair just beginning to gray and warm brown eyes that sparkled mischievously. He gave a comedic eye roll. “You don’t call you don’t write, just abandon me for other conquests. I was beginning to think I’d never see you again without a news crew in tow.”
“Hey!” Tony choked down a laugh. “As I recall you were not sorry to field questions from those attractive young journalists just clamoring for the juicy details of my recovery.”

“It’s impressive how far the press will go to get a story,” Ben replied with a sigh. “I don’t suppose you’re calling to tell me I’ll get a chance to debrief them again after we yank that thing out of your chest?”

“In your dreams, Ben,” Tony replied biting back a laugh.

“Hey, a guy can hope,” Ben shrugged. “I’ve probably seen enough of them in their briefs anyway.”

“You know if it ever comes to that, you’re the guy I’m going to call,” Tony said, his expression tuning serious. “There’s a really short list of people I’d trust.”

“All joking aside, it’s like I told you in Afghanistan,” Pierce replied with a frown. “It’s not without risks. Your other lifestyle choices are likely to kill you before your magic magnetic defibrillator.”

“I thought you heard, I’m in a stable relationship now!” Tony declared, feinting insult as Ben burst out into laughter. He shook his head, his warm smile returning.

“So if this isn’t about a patch job on your windpipes, to what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked.

“I got a situation here,” Tony admitted hesitantly.

“Does it involve a couple of really leggy nurses?” Ben asked, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“I so want to say yes, just to see what you’ll do.” Tony replied, his lips curling in amusement. “But no. I’ve been digging for information on a little project I have going and funnily enough, your name came up in one of the shovels.”

“I was young, I needed the money,” Pierce said blandly, his eyes twinkling despite his serious frown.
“I bet you were,” Tony shook his head. “What do you remember about a consultation for SHIELD about three years ago at a remote research facility called the Guest House?”

“SHIELD,” Ben said, his eyebrows arching thoughtfully. “Is that who I was working for?” Tony let out a huff.

“Didn’t tell you that, huh?” he asked, masking his disappointment.

“Need to know,” Pierce answered with an easy shrug. “You know how it is. State department said they needed their best chest man, so I went where they sent me.”

“So you weren’t there doing research?” Tony asked, rubbing at his forehead absently. Ben paused a moment as if reading his expression but he seemed to think better of commenting.

“Nah, called me in to work on a chest wound,” he explained. “Mind you, weirdest shit I’ve ever seen. This guy had a big gaping hole in his upper thoracic cavity, nearly severed his pulmonary artery. I have no idea what kind of secret tech they had him on, but the fact that the guy hadn’t already bled out before I got there.” Ben shook his head again as a calculating look creased Tony’s brow.

“Definitely one of the most mind blowing things I’ve ever seen,” he added, the corner of his mouth ticking up. “And I’ve seen you in your skivvies.”

“This patient,” Tony inquired carefully, pointing to the left hand side of his chest. “Rear perforation from the third intercostal to the fifth?”

“Yeah, actually,” Ben frowned. “Did this patient just stop being hypothetical? Because you know how I feel about confidentiality, Tony.”

“I know exactly how you feel.” Tony nodded, his smile the slightest bit fond. “Did they tell you who the guy was?”

“I have a feeling you already know who he is,” Ben answered grimly. “They never gave me a name, the senior surgeon on staff mentioned she’d been honored to work with him. I really can’t
say more than that. If you know the guy he probably has more answers than I do.”

“Oh, I’m going to get some answers,” Tony replied, making no effort to hide his scowl.

“I know that look,” Ben stated, disapprovingly. “That is your stupid idea look.”

“I don’t have a look,” Tony protested but Pierce was unrelenting.

“It’s the same look that came rolling into my evac hospital in the desert and tried to backhand me when I wanted a look at your chest,” he stated. “For the record, punching your doctor when he’s trying to help you is bad form.”

“We’d just met, you hadn’t even bought me dinner!” Tony protested, earning a snort of laughter. “I’m easy, I’m not cheap!”

“I’m going to be uncharacteristically serious here a moment,” Ben declared.

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

“I’ve been working out,” Ben replied with a dry look. “I saw things in that facility I’d like to unsee. I’ve been a doctor twenty years, I think that was the first time I realized you could go too far saving a life. Whatever hornet’s nest you’ve got yourself into, Tony, take my advice; Back off this one.”

“I can’t do that,” Tony replied, his jaw ticking in anger. “Somebody lied to me, and one of my friends is suffering because of it.”

“Yeah,” Ben nodded, resigned. “Can’t blame me for trying. I don’t actually want to know what’s going on with this one, so don’t tell me. But promise me you’ll be careful. Whatever was going on at this place was next level. You might not want to know what you find out.”

“Kind of too late for that now,” Tony replied, but he nodded all the same. “I’ll let you get back to arterial bypasses.”
“Don’t stay out of touch so long this time,” Pierce replied. disconnecting the call. Tony stared at the blank screen a long moment, his jaw clenched. Finally he drew in an unsteady breath.

“JARVIS, where’s Coulson?” He demanded, his tone clipped.

“Agent Coulson is in a meeting at SHIELD with Director Fury,” JARVIS answered.

“Good,” Tony said, a sneer curling his lips. “Pull out the heavy armor, I’m going to have them read me in on this one.”

“Are you fucking with me, Coulson?” Nick Fury sat behind his desk, a look on his face as if he could not decide if he needed to be disgusted or angry and so was splitting the difference.

“I checked with HR,” Phil replied, his expression unruffled. “They have a procedure for Agents to pull their deferred vacation time and I haven’t had more than a handful of days off -”

“If you finish that sentence I am going to shoot you,” Fury interrupted. Phil opened his mouth to reply but Nick cut him off. “And this time it’s not going to be non-lethal ordnance.”

“I liked that suit,” Phil said, a cold disapproval leaching into his tone. Nick tossed his hands up in a like-I-care gesture.

“What the hell is this?” Fury demanded.

“It’s in the report,” Phil replied tersely. “Barton is looking at an extended recovery period, he may never be field ready again even if he does recover and I’ve spoken at length with several specialists. He’s going to need assistance reorienting himself after an injury like this. SHIELD owes him, the planet owes him. The very least we can do is provide the help he needs.”
“Contrary to popular belief, you are not SHIELD,” Fury stated, leveling an accusatory finger at him.

“If I believed that for even a moment do you think I’d be putting in for leave?” Phil shot back. Fury’s eye narrowed.

“And just what are you going to do when I deny your request?” he asked.

“It’s not a request,” Phil said. Nick leaned back in his chair with an acidic glare, his lips disappearing in a thin angry line.

“Don’t test me, Coulson,” he said warningly.

“You’re not going to change my mind on this,” Phil let out a sigh. “I’m asking you as my friend not to back me into a corner neither of us wants me to fight my way out of.”

“You honestly expect me to believe you’d resign?” Fury demanded, his expression cold. “Buy yourself a little place in the burbs, be his full time nanny?”

“If I have to.” Phil replied, unshaken.

“Cheese,” the Director let out a huff, rolling his eyes. “It’s Barton, he means a lot to all of us. But you’re talking about throwing away your career, and then what? Are you even thinking about how you’re going to do this?”

“Are you honestly going to sit there and imply that I need SHIELD?” Phil asked, irritation marring his face. “Do I have to remind you who Clint Barton is to the rest of the Avengers? Do you think for one moment that Tony Stark wouldn’t move heaven and earth for one of his best friends, for the man who’s saved his life time and again? You can say what you want about him, but Stark never lets a debt go unpaid. I do not need your help or your permission.”

“You can lie to yourself all you want,” Fury shot back venomously. “But you and I both know what this is! You couldn’t have him the way you wanted him so you’re settling for this!” Phil reared back as if he’d been slapped, his mouth hanging open in shock.
“You son of a bitch,” Phil whispered.

“He never saw you as more than a friend,” Fury declared, staring Phil down.

“It doesn’t matter,” Phil shook his head.

“It matters if I lose my one good eye to someone who didn’t see a good thing when it was right in front of him!” Fury snapped angrily. “He’s my friend too, and he was the best damn field operative SHIELD’s ever had. But that’s over now. That’s what happens in this line of work, you have a good run and then it ends and you pick up and you do the damn job and you move on.”

“Not this time,” Phil insisted.

“Cheese.”

“Not this time!” Phil barked back. He drew in a breath, some of the anger leaving his tone. “He’s scared and he’s confused and most of the time it’s like he’s that kid I recruited all those years ago. And it’s a damn nightmare. I keep waiting to wake up because I brought him to this, he wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me and in spite of that he’s had my back every single day for the last decade. So it doesn’t matter how I feel about him, it doesn’t matter if he’s ever field ready again, none of it matters because I owe him my life, I’m not going move on with mine while he’s losing his.” Phil squared his shoulders, his eyes flaming as Nick stared back at him in stunned silence.

“You want me to admit I’ve been in love with him for years? Fine,” Phil said, giving a resigned shrug. “but that’s not going to change anything. It’s not going to change me, it’s not going to change him. It’s sure as hell not going to change the fact that I’m going to help him as long as he needs me. Because he’d do the same for me and you know it.” It was Fury’s turn to look stricken. He turned his eye to the wall with an angry scowl, the silence growing uncomfortable between them. Finally he let out a huff of a sigh.

Fury’s computer buzzed.

“Sir!” Fury’s Assistant’s tone was alarmed but she didn’t have time to say more. There was a high pitched whine and a moment later the office door blew off its hinges, clattering across the room in splinters.
“Nicky-poo,” Tony Stark declared, jovially, his rictus grin spreading further across his face as he pulled off his designer sunglasses, tucking them neatly into the breast pocket of his bespoke suit. The repulser on his outstretched palm retracted, folding back into his watch as he crossed his arms over his chest with a casual elegance.

“Was that entirely necessary?” Fury asked, seeming unperturbed as Phil stared blankly back at Tony.

“I thought it was high time you and Agent and I had a little chat about TAHITI,” Tony replied, his expression taking on a threatening edge. “I hear it’s a magical place.”
This chapter was a bear to get out but take courage, the rest of the chapters are in a somewhat better state of finished because I've been working on them instead of this one.

“I’m going to be sick.” Bucky said, letting his forehead fall against the window with a soft thunk and making a face as if he were chewing on his tongue. Sam reached over, lightly patting his back, his eyes fixed on Phil with his most disapproving frown. Coulson only stared back at them with a resigned if unapologetic expression.

The Avengers were scattered about the penthouse living room, heavily redacted medical files documenting the TAHITI project scrolling over a series of holoprojectors. Pepper and Natasha were reading over them with narrowed eyes, Pepper’s lips pressed in a thin, angry line. Across the room Darcy and Jane made identical faces of disgust as they hunched over a Starkpad together, sharing a pair of earbuds. Thor watched them with a silent, brooding expression. Steve and Tony seemed far more intent on Phil and his near emotionless recitation of the summary data. Steve’s arms were folded over his chest, his brow furrowed in a disappointed frown. Phil was very carefully not looking at him.

“You are incredibly squeamish for an assassin,” Tony observed in wonder. Bucky flipped him off but never moved his head from the cold glass as Tony turned to Steve. “Was he like this before?”

“I honestly can’t say,” Steve replied with a shrug, giving Phil a condemning side eye. “I don’t think he ever came across anything remotely this bad in the war.” Pepper threw Phil a venomous look and he let out a sigh.

“It wasn’t my call,” Phil stated simply, pinching the bridge of his nose with a wince.

“Well it was your call to lie to us,” Tony scowled, turning narrowed eyes on him. “To Bruce! You stood right in my lab and told him you didn’t know anything about the Guest House!”

“Please don’t drag me into this,” Bruce said, his voice unnaturally even and his eyes closed as he sat very still on the floor, his legs folded in front of him.
“You’re in it already!” Tony protested jabbing at Bruce’s shoe with his own foot before turning his ire back on Phil. “SHIELD has synaptic editing tech and you stood there and lied to us about it.”

“Well I’d think it would be obvious why!” Phil replied with a hint of frustration. “The facility’s destroyed, and the experience isn’t one I care to talk about. I didn’t see that it mattered.”

“No.”

Phil’s shoulders stiffened and he stood still as stone for only a moment before turning to face Clint who had been sitting silently in the corner though the whole messy business. He glanced up, meeting Phil’s gaze with a flash of betrayal before looking away.

“I know about the kind of stuff you don’t want to talk about,” Clint said, his brow furrowed and his shoulders hunched up around his ears. “Secrets you keep, ‘cause you’re scared or because you’re not sure who to trust. When you keep secrets you tell half the truth and you leave off the bad bits, just enough so that whoever’s asking thinks they have the whole story. The only time you don’t say anything at all is when you don’t have half a truth to tell.” Natasha turned from the holloprojectors, her face a carefully neutral mask.

“What happened to the Guest House, Phil?” She asked, folding her arms over her chest.

“Right before the Hydra incident my team and I went there looking for intel on TAHITI.” Phil admitted. “We got what we were looking for but in the process we triggered the self destruct. The whole place went up. I thought that was it. It wasn’t until later that I found out that the MOOREA research had been diverted to another project under the direct supervision of WSC Secretary Alexander Pierce.”

“So it’s safe to say they’ve been implementing it at least as long as you’ve been back,” Natasha stated. Phil nodded, letting out a resigned sigh.
“Well that explains why The Winter Soldier’s been more active,” Tony said with a tinge of disgust.

“Don’t,” Steve snapped at him.

“He doesn’t need us walking on eggshells,” Tony barked back, flinging a hand in Bucky’s direction. “It won’t fix anything.”

“Boys,” Natasha interrupted warningly. Steve gritted his teeth, carefully not looking at Bucky whose ragged breathing was distracting even in the noisy room.

“We can’t let Hydra hold on to that kind of research,” he said instead. “There’s no reason to believe they couldn’t use it to manipulate anyone they can get their hands on.”

“Which is why you didn’t tell us,” Natasha added, her tone cold as she turned on Phil. “You didn’t want anyone else to have that sort of power. Not Hydra, not SHIELD, not anyone.”

“JARVIS, cross reference the component technology from the research files,” Tony ordered. “Standard dirt pile dig, find out who’s ordered the stuff to build this thing, where they are, who their friends are.”

“You’re looking for a needle in a haystack,” Phil protested, Tony’s only reply was to shoot him a withering look.

“I have narrowed down the probability to five facilities all in North and Central America.” JARVIS replied only moments later, a map springing to life and highlighting the locations. “Shall I deploy covert surveillance?”

“Find me a memory messer-upper,” Tony said with a sharp nod before turning to Natasha. “Widow, you should take point on the planning for this one, It’s going to have to be a calculated strike. Get in, get out, like we were never there.” Natasha blinked back at him silently as Jane let out a horrified bleat and Bucky’s head popped up, his eyes wide with panic.

“Tony,” Steve protested.
“JARVIS will have detailed schematics of the facility in twenty-four hours,” he continued as if he hadn’t heard. “I’ll whip you up a little something that’ll fry all their records, but any hardware itself we’ll have to eliminate the old fashioned way.”

A startled silence settled over the room, cold and quiet.

“A couple of strategically placed pulse bombs should fry all the electricals without causing any obvious damage to the structures,” She said, breaking the silence. “A three man team should be able to handle it.”

“You ought to have aerial surveillance, just to be safe,” Sam added, Natasha nodded in agreement.

“We need to make sure no one ever uses this tech again,” Tony declared decisively. He turned to Steve, his back ramrod straight as if expecting some sort of challenge.

“I’ll go along,” Steve said turning to Natasha instead.

“Yeah, you get cranky if you go too long without breaking anything,” Tony observed. Steve cast him a cold look that he ignored. “Let JARVIS know if you need any hardware solutions,” he added, heading toward the door. He paused at Coulson’s side, his expression stony.

“You should have trusted us,” he said, shoulder checking Phil on his way out the door, never pausing as Steve’s hand brushed over his arm. Steve shook his head, letting him go and turning toward Bucky, crossing the room to crouch in front of him. The others seemed to take that as their cue, slipping out of the room. Thor opened his mouth to say something to Jane but she was already beating a hasty retreat, Darcy on her heels. With a miserable, hang dog expression he trudged out behind her.

“Come on,” Bruce said with a sigh, rolling to his feet and patting Clint gently on the shoulder. “We should find Betty, we don’t want to be late.” Clint nodded, biting his lip before casting Phil a wary expression.

“Do you still want me to come?” Phil asked, nearly choking on the words. Clint glanced at Bruce for only a moment before nodding stiffly in reply. “I’ll go get changed.” Clint nodded again, allowing Bruce to tug him away just as Steve hauled Bucky to his feet, shuffling him out of the room with a hand on his back. When Phil turned around he and Natasha were alone.
“When JARVIS knows where you’re going I’ll give you any intel we have,” He said with a forced calm. Natasha only stared back at him with a frown. “Is there a problem?”

“Do I have a problem with you keeping the Avengers out of the loop on a serious Hydra threat?” She gave a lazy shrug. “No, why would I have a problem with that?” Phil’s lips twitched in a barely visible wince.

“This is about Clint,” he stated, meeting her gaze.

“This is about your sudden request for an extended leave,” she replied, settling onto one of the bar stools. “That you’ve neglected to mention to your team.” Phil’s jaw ticked.

“Yet,” he said. There wasn’t any point in asking how she knew. Natasha always knew.

“Yet,” she nodded in agreement. “What’s going on here Phil?”

“He needs someone to help him readjust,” Phil replied, and the words sounded good, sounded right even to his own ears. “Someone he trusts. I can’t leave that to just anyone, I owe him, we owe him better than that. I couldn’t let him down.”

“Not again?” Natasha asked, giving him a penetrating look. “Is that how that sentence ends?”

“Tasha,” Phil let out a ghost of a sigh.

“Phil, you’re abandoning your team and your career,” She observed, her expression unreadable. “and I’m not naive enough to believe that you honestly think the Avengers don’t need you. So I have to wonder why it is you’d make a call like this.” Phil watched her for a long moment with narrowed eyes, the wary look of two predators staring each other down, each waiting for the other to blink.

“Mistakes were made,” Phil admitted cautiously. “I’d like to think I learned from them. That I at least learned enough not to make them again.”

“I guess I just want to know what it is you think you learned,” she admitted. Phil drew in an
unsteady breath, never meeting her eye. He gazed out the wide expanse of windows, the autumn day bright and clear.

“When I brought him in,” Phil began leaning back against the bar and shoving his hands in his pockets. “I manipulated him into the Opps Academy. I shouldn’t have done that. The intel he brought with him was more than enough to buy a fresh start. Any other kid his age I would have cut them lose with a scholarship, a pat on the back, and a stern warning. But I wanted the Amazing Hawkeye. So I leaned on him, a lot harder than I should have. In ways I shouldn’t have. I should have let him make his own choices. But I didn’t, I made those choices for him. Not this time.” He turned to face her, his jaw tight.

“I can’t go back and undo any of it,” he said. “I wouldn’t even if I could. But from here forward I can make sure it’s his choice, all of it.”

“Are you prepared to live with his choices?” she asked bluntly.

“Probably not,” Phil admitted. “But I’m going to have to leap off that bridge when we come to it.”

The narrow street in East Flatbush was piled with cars dotting either curb in front of tightly packed, narrow colonials, the trees were bare of leaves, letting the pale light of late autumn filter down to warm the air. The houses were in various stages of restoration, on the corner a cluster of three homes had fresh paint, their postage stamp front lawns blanketed in summer sod that was just starting to brown before winter. Across from them one of the houses had been recently condemned and farther down the block a cluster of perhaps a hundred volunteers were swarming over a pair of half gutted semi-detached houses, scurrying about like ants. Across the street a team of plumbers were heaving a cast iron tub, the enamel scratched off in spots, down the front steps toward a dumpster.

Phil slipped out from behind the wheel of the blacked out SUV, pulling his sunglasses from the breast pocket of his black button-down as Bruce emerged from the passenger side.

“This is kind of nicer than I thought it would be,” Clint observed cautiously as he crept from the back seat, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans.
“Well the plan is to improve as much of a failing neighborhood as possible.” Betty explained, stepping out of the car behind Bruce. “Most of the new homeowners on this street will have already met their new neighbors as they’ve helped work on each other’s homes. It builds community and it helps the existing residents by improving property values.”

“Generally when Habitat moves onto a street and refurbishes a few existing houses or builds new ones on empty lots then all the houses on the street see some small upgrades too.” Bruce added. “It’s important work that improves people’s lives.

“Doctor Bruce!! Doctor Bruce!!” A chorus of yells came from the newly renovated houses across the street and half a dozen kids under twelve years old fairly charged them.

“Hey kids,” Bruce said with a kind smile, leaning down to meet their eyes. “How’s everyone?”

“The basketball hoop you promised came yesterday!” the oldest boy declared, his eyes shining gleefully.

“We didn’t think it would ever come!” a younger girl said bouncing in delight as she pointed at a large box laying in the narrow alley between two of the houses. A piece of PVC plumbers pipe swung from one wrist, bedazzled with glitter stickers and bright designs drawn in magic marker. Betty gave him a scrutinizing look over the top of her sunglasses.

“It’s portable, it’s not a code violation,” Bruce said defensively, his ears turning pink. “They can wheel it behind the house when they’re not playing with it.”

“Can we put it up today?” another girl pleaded, clasping her hands under her chin, her own makeshift plastic bracelets clacking together.

“Please Doctor Bruce?” the smallest boy, about seven, added with what was clearly his most charming smile. “It’s going to snow soon and then we can’t play until spring.”

“I promise I will make sure it’s up before we head home, okay?” Bruce replied. The kids let out squeals of delight, hopping up and down.

“I can put it up,” Clint offered a little shyly.
“You’re sure?” Phil asked. Clint gave him a nod and a shrug.

“Yeah, can’t be any harder than rigging a bigtop, right?” he replied a little cautiously.

“There’s a full toolbox in the back,” Bruce said hiding his smile as Clint made a beeline for the back of the SUV. He turned back to the children with a serious look. “My friend Clint’s going to help you, he’s new, so take good care of him, okay?” his request was met with earsplitting squeals as the children darted after Clint like a flock of magpies after a bit of string.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” The youngest boy declared, giving Bruce’s arm a reassuring pat as the other children mobbed Clint, dragging him and his toolbox toward the small strip of lawn in front of their homes.

“Well he’s dangerous,” Betty observed, biting her lip to hide her grin as the boy stuffed his hands in the pockets of his dusty jeans, a swagger in his step as he marched into the fray.

“Oh you have no idea,” Bruce sighed, shaking his head as the kids helped Clint pry open the cardboard packing box. “I’m fairly convinced that the fate of the universe hinges on him and Tony never meeting.”

“Good to know where the potential threats lie,” Phil nodded, adjusting his sunglasses.

“Doctor Banner!!” A petite asian woman with a smile that lit up her round face clambered around a group hammering in landscape edging and hurried toward them. “It’s so good to see you again.”

“We appreciate you taking the time for us, May, I know you’re busy.” He said, shaking her hand before turning to Betty and Phil. “Doctor Ross.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” May beamed at her, shaking her hand enthusiastically before turning to Phil.

“Phil Coulson,” he said taking her hand with his most unassuming smile.
“When you called and said Hawkeye was interested in seeing our work I was thrilled. I’ll be able to fill my volunteer roster for months on the rumor he stopped by,” she glanced around with a worried frown and Bruce bit his lip before furtively pointing a finger toward the lawn across the street. Clint was slicing through the industrial sized rubber bands that held the poles securely together with a utility knife. One of the boys was dangling off his shoulders while two of the girls had settled themselves on a chunk of the cardboard and had set about creating more bracelets from cast off plumbing pipe. Clint was already wearing a particularly glittery one on his right hand.

“Well that escalated quickly,” May observed, struggling not to laugh.

“There were puppy dog eyes,” Betty said with her most evil grin. “He didn’t know what hit him.”

“I know you’re just here to tour our project but I was wondering if before we started you could take a look at one of our volunteers?” May suggested uneasily. “He brained himself with a kitchen cabinet and he insists that he’s fine but I’d feel better if we checked him for concussion.” Bruce gave her a self-effacing smile, ducking his head.

“You know what, I’ll take this,” Betty interrupted before he could reply. “You two keep an eye on Clint. You’re terrible at charms the reluctant patients.”

“What are you talking about? I’m charm itself.” Bruce deadpanned. Betty’s only reply was to pat his arm before following after their host. Bruce watched them go, his expression fond. It was a moment before he realized that Phil was eying him with a scrutinizing smirk.

“How lucky for her you just happen to know an Avenger,” Phil observed.

“She thinks I’m on the board of the Maria Stark Foundation,” Bruce replied with a shrug.

“You are on the board of the Maria Stark Foundation,” Phil replied.

“Convenient, isn’t it?”

Phil shook his head, glancing over at where Clint had the base of the basketball hoop set out on the walkway, his face nearly pressed to the ground as he tried to affix the wheels. He held out his hand and the youngest boy slapped a screwdriver from the toolbox into his palm.
“How did you get involved with this exactly?” he asked finally.

“Well some of it was the Foundation,” Bruce admitted. “After the Chitauri Pepper basically put me to work helping her dole out grants. May had put in an application for a few thousand dollars to replace some equipment they’d lost. It was one of the smaller requests and I just remember looking at it and thinking; really? I couldn’t decide if it was a scam request, we got a lot of those, or if they didn’t realize how much funding was available.” He settled back against the side of the SUV, shoving his hands in the pockets of his sweater.

“So I borrowed a car and came down here,” Bruce continued. “May told me that one of their trucks had been in Manhattan that day picking up donations not too far from the Tower. Apparently Tony dropped a space whale on their refrigerator.”

“That’s got to ruin its energy efficiency,” Phil nodded.

“Next thing I knew I was standing on a ladder holding a kitchen cabinet in place while this tiny little Latina woman with a pneumatic drill bolted it to the wall.” Bruce admitted. Phil let out a laugh, glancing over to where Betty had a young man sitting on the curb, her pocket flashlight flicking over his eyes.

“Betty used to volunteer with Habitat back in Willowdale,” Bruce stated, turning his attention back to Clint.

“Really?” Phil asked in surprise.

“She knows how to get her hands dirty for a lab coat,” Bruce replied fondly. “Part of that whole Army Brat thing, I think. She used to try to talk me into going with her but I always blew her off. I had more important things to do, research waiting. Research that was going to save thousands of lives. I didn’t have time to worry about one family’s dreams.”

“The research is all still there,” Phil observed.

“But the perspective isn’t,” Bruce said, nodding toward the house next door where one of the girls, who looked to be about eight or nine, was helping the volunteers plant an azalea. Her small hands were covered in dirt to her elbows and soil dotted her nose and cheek, doing nothing to hide her wide grin. “It’s here. That’s what she was trying to tell me at the time. You can pour yourself into
your work and you can do good, but you can’t make it your whole life without losing what’s important.” Phil smiled, basking for a moment in the sheer innocent domesticity of it all.

It all happened so fast he barely had time to blink.

Bruce’s hand clamped down on his arm, jerking him behind the cover of the SUV. Phil let out a gasp as his back hit the pavement, Bruce landing almost on top of him as screams and gunshots rang out.

“Oh Shit,” Bruce whispered, his eyes wide with horror as his fingers brushed against the dart lodged in the side of his neck.

“Doctor Banner stay with me!” Phil barked out as Bruce’s eyes turned acid green. Another scream rang out and Bruce’s head whirled, zoning in on the sound two houses down where a man in tactical gear had Betty around the waist, dragging her toward a blacked out van as she struggled to fight him off.

“Clint,” Phil whispered. scrambling out from under Bruce and diving toward the house across the street.

“Get them back!” Phil shouted, grabbing two of the horrified children by their arms and propelling them toward Clint. “Get them behind the house!” As if on instinct Clint scooped up the two smallest girls, one of the boys still dangling from his neck as he herded all the kids down the narrow alleyway and into the back yard just as Hulk let out a feral roar.

“What happened?” Clint asked, his eyes wide with panic.

“I don’t know!” Phil admitted, drawing his sidearm and checking the clip. “You are not cleared for field duty. Stay with the kids, keep them safe, keep them out of the fighting!” One of the girls in Clint’s arms whimpered and he clutched her closer.

“But,”

“Clint!” Phil barked at him. “Keep them safe!” Without another word he spun on his heel, charging back the way he came, following Hulk’s deafening roar. One thing was certain, Brooklyn Habitat for Humanity was going to have a hell of a time getting volunteers now.
“I brought Iced Creams,” Thor said, a worried expression on his face as he leaned in at the doorway of the lab, a plain, white paper bag dangling from his fingers. Darcy looked up from where she had been staring at Jane’s latest readings, her tired eyes owlish behind her glasses.

“Rocky Road, take me home!” She cheered, bounding from her seat and making grabby hands at the bag as she snagged it from Thor’s grasp.

“I believe that one is Salted Pretzel,” he said, his attention straying back to where Jane was hunched over her computer at the far end of the lab.

“Close enough,” Darcy assured him, peeling the lid off and scooping an obscene dollop of ice cream into her mouth.

“Will you not even speak to me?” Thor asked hesitantly. Jane didn’t look up. Darcy seemed to consider her a moment before flopping down onto one of the lab stools.

“You brought ice cream, I’ve got time to chat with you,” She said with a grin. Thor opened his mouth as if to protest and she hooked one of the rolling chairs with her foot, kicking it in his direction. “Sit down, muscles, and tell me your troubles.” She thought it was a testament to how desperate he was that he obeyed. His shoulders sagged in a morose sigh and he stared at her in silence for a long, uncomfortable moment as if struggling to find the right words.

“I am not sure where I went wrong,” he admitted finally.

“That’s because you don't pay attention,” Darcy replied, pointing her spoon at him. “Because I know exactly where you went wrong, would you like me to tell you?”

“Of course,” Thor replied, casting a desperate look in Jane’s direction.

“It was the butterflies,” she said, licking her spoon.

“The butterflies?” Thor asked, bewildered.
“You were getting a little out of hand before that but the butterflies were definitely the place where you crossed the line,” Darcy nodded, pausing to pick a pretzel from her container and licking it clean before popping it in her mouth.

“I do not understand how the butterflies,”

Darcy reached out with her spoon and smacked him in the middle of the forehead with it. Thor blinked back at her startled but didn’t move.

“You asked Jane to marry you and she said yes,” Darcy stated with a frown, wagging her spoon at him. “I know because I was there. That was weird, by the way. I don’t want to be at any more proposals that aren’t mine. But Jane said yes, and she said just one other thing. One. What was the thing she said, Donald?” Thor opened his mouth to reply and just as quickly closed it. Darcy scowled back at him, rapping him on the forehead with her plastic spoon again.

“She said she would be pleased with any sort of wedding arrangements so long as they were simple and understated,” he replied, his entire face twisting up in a complicated expression.

“News flash: a thousand butterflies are not simple,” Darcy said, around another bite of ice cream. Thor did not reply.

“I perhaps overdid it?” he finally asked.

“My telling you that you were definitely overdoing it didn’t clue you in?” she asked unsympathetically. Thor had the good grace to look chagrined. Darcy scraped her spoon in a lazy twirl around the inside rim of the container before popping it in her mouth, her judgmental look never wavering.

“On Asgard it is the bridegroom who prepares the feast,” he said, reaching into the bag and pulling out one of the ice cream containers. He fished out a spoon as well and pried open the lid. “It is widely considered that his regard for his bride is displayed in the lavishness of the ceremony.”

“So dude’s happy he’s getting married, dude throws one hell of a shindig,” Darcy nodded. “I can see how that works.” Thor licked chocolate ice cream from his spoon.
“It is considered an insult to the bride and her family if the wedding feast is but a trifling.” Darcy consider that for a moment.

“Judgy,” she observed finally. “But I can sort of see how that works too.” Thor shrugged. Darcy watched him with narrowed eyes for a long moment, her spoon dangling absently from the corner of her mouth as Thor ploddingly dug his way through his ice cream with far less enthusiasm than it’s quality warranted, his eyes more focused on Jane who was very carefully ignoring them both.

“You met my dad,” Darcy said finally, chasing ice cream around her container again.

“A fine and noble man,” Thor nodded.

“I am going to tell him you said that,” she replied with a grin. “Hell of a guy, my dad. Everyone says so, not just you. That restaurant he and mom own, he started out in a food truck while he was still in college. He bought this nasty broken down truck that was older than he was and he sold fried chicken out of it on nights and weekends while he finished his MBA. He worked long, awful hours and I honestly have no idea how he even found time to date mom but by the time I came along they’d already opened the restaurant.”

“Such ambition and dedication should be commended,” Thor said, poking glumly in his ice cream.

“He wanted me to go to business school and take over for him some day,” Darcy said, Thor frowned.

“You did not want this,” he stated more than asked.

“Oh hell no,” Darcy shook her head with a wicked grin. “I wanted to run for city council. Far back as I can remember that was all he talked about though; One day this’ll be your place. Remember to be good to our employees when you take over. When you’re in charge here promise me you’ll do me proud. I told him I didn’t want to run a restaurant. He’d just laugh and tell me I’d change my mind when I was older.”

“What happened?” Thor asked.

“I let my folks pay for my first two and a half years at Culver and then changed my major to Polly-Sci,” She replied with a shrug. “Dad was so mad he threatened to cut me off but I’d been putting
my tip money away since I was fourteen so it wasn’t much of a threat.” Thor let out a chuckle.

“Really good guy, my dad,” Darcy said with a nod. “Pillar of the community. Generous, really great boss. Completely blind to anything that doesn’t fit into his plans.” She bounced out of her chair, heading for the door.

“Jane, I’m going for a Snickers,” she called over her shoulder. “Be back in twenty.”

“You’re eating ice cream!” Jane replied, looking appalled.

“I am going to put the Snickers in the ice cream,” she declared unrepentantly, a light skip in her step as she disappeared down the hall.

“How have you not died of diabetes?!” Jane shouted after her. Darcy didn’t reply and Jane screwed her face up in a frustrated scowl, bracing her elbows on her lab bench and rubbing her temples. A half pint of ice cream appeared in front of her, a plastic spoon held securely to the top. She stared at it a moment, rubbing her face with both hands before taking in.

“Thank you,” she said without looking up as she pried off the lid, scooping a generous spoonful into her mouth so she couldn’t say anything more. Thor settled into the rolling chair beside her, leaning over the back as he went back to his own ice cream.

“I apologize for my lack of consideration of your feelings,” Thor said simply.

“I’m… It’s…” Jane drew in a shaky breath. “You shouldn’t apologize for who you are, it’s just… obvious we want different things.” her voice warbled at the end and she stuffed her spoon in her mouth.

“No,” Thor replied gently. “This has been about many things but my expectations have not been among them.”

“You’re a prince,” Jane said, never meeting his eye. “You’re going to be a king. It’s easy to forget that when you’re here, when you’re wearing Star Wars t-shirts and playing Legend of Zelda and eating Pop Tarts but it’s the truth. You’re going to rule an entire world and I’m… I’m never going to be that.”
“I never expected you to be,” Thor replied. Jane’s jaw tightened and she threw him an angry look before staring back down at her ice cream. He let out a huff of a breath, setting his ice cream aside. “Your encounter with my father did not go well.”

“You could say that,” Jane replied with a watery laugh.

“And my mother is no longer there to temper him,” Thor added. “He is burdened, by her loss, by Loki, by my own choice to remain here. He wishes that I return to Asgard, and he has grown so focused on it that he has forgotten it is only that, a wish and not a need. I forgot how like him I can be. If he was to doubt my choice I wanted it plainly demonstrated that I did not. It was never about my expectations, it was about defying his. I will have many lifetimes of Midgard as king, I wanted but this one with you.” She looked up at him, a single tear trickling down her cheek and he reached out to brush it away.

“Thor,” she whispered.

“Jane Foster, say you will marry me in whatever way you deem fit and I will count myself luckier than any in all the nine realms.”

“Now? You’re doing this now?” she demanded, her voice breaking. A delighted smile lit his face.

The Assemble Alarm was so jarring in the stillness that they both jumped.

“Agent Coulson has called for backup,” JARVIS declared with a hint of urgency. “There’s an incident in East Flatbush.” Thor stared up at the ceiling, blinking as if he hadn’t quite comprehended the words.

“Why are you still sitting there!?!?” Jane demanded, waving a hand at the window as it retracted open, the wind rustling a stack of papers on her desk. “Go!” Thor bolted to his feet without a backward glance, three long strides and a single leap carrying him out over New York in an instant. Another gust caught Jane’s lab book, ruffling the pages and sending the empty ice cream bag to the floor, strewing the napkins over the lab.

“What the hell happened in here?” Darcy asked, appearing in the doorway with her ice cream spoon dangling from her mouth.
“Same old, same old,” Jane said with a sigh, tossing Thor’s nearly empty ice cream container into the trash bin as she hid her smile.

“Thor is three minutes out, Agent Coulson,” JARVIS declared in his ear. “Iron Man ETA is four and a half minutes.” The Hulk let out a deafening roar, his fist smashing into the pavement as three heavily armed mercenaries opened fire on him. Phil grasped hold of one of the volunteers shoving them down behind an overturned car. He crouched over them as what appeared to be part of a fire hydrant flew over their heads, followed a moment later by a folding ladder tangled up in one of the mercenaries.

“I don’t think we have three minutes, JARVIS,” Phil replied, scuttling out from behind the car and getting off a few shots. At the end of the block Betty had managed to kick her assailant in a supremely uncomfortable spot. She dropped to the pavement and scrambled toward the dumpster on the sidewalk, the man in pursuit. She reached one of the toolboxes and hefted the largest plumbing wrench Phil had ever seen, her arm swinging around in an arc that connected with her attacker’s head in a sickening crunch. The man went down and Betty grasped the wrench with both hands, her feet planted like a major league home run hitter.

“Okay, we might make it three minutes,” Phil said breathlessly. His next shot found its mark and there was a pained scream, followed by a wet, crunching sound as the mercenary tumbled off a second story roof across the street. Phil winced.

The street that had looked moderately well kept only a few short minutes ago was now in shambles. Injured and rattled Habitat volunteers scrambling for cover, some running outright away from the area which was just as well. Phil wasn’t remotely worried about Hulk, if a platoon of well trained soldiers couldn’t take him, a van full of overconfident mercs were hardly a threat. The whole thing itched at the back of his head worryingly but he didn’t have the liberty of chasing that thought at the moment. Hulk was beating back a pair of assailants on Betty’s right, completely distracted from the ones circling in on her left. Phil leaned over the planter bed he’d taken cover behind, taking aim but before he could get off his shot pain lanced though his arm, the force laying him flat on his back.

“Damnit,” He hissed, eyeing his bloodied bicep. The wound was bleeding profusely but the damage didn’t look bad, small favors. It was going to throw his aim completely off though. As he sprawled in the browning grass, he allowed himself a moment of relief that at least Clint and the children should be out of range by now. If he could just keep from getting shot again for another
two minutes they’d probably all survive this.

Apparently the mercenary who appeared from the other side of the planter bed hadn’t got that memo. Phil had a split second to catalogue the fact that the gunshot wound to his arm had knocked his sidearm out of his grasp and that the mercenary had an extremely unfriendly looking semiautomatic rifle trained at his skull. In the next second his assailant let out a choked sound, clawing at the spot where what looked like a large metal dart had sprouted from his neck. Blood pulsed from beneath his fingers and he went down with a thin, rasping sound and didn’t move. Phil grasped up his own gun, tucking it in his holster in one smooth motion before scrambling for the rifle, his eye tracking the trajectory of the shot.

Across the street a figure in jeans and a purple t-shirt was crouched near the gutter on the far side of the steep pitched roof, the gable shielding him from return fire. Phil felt his breath stutter in his chest as Clint leaned out precariously along the eave, holding what looked like some sort of improvised slingshot in his bow hand and drawing back to half his pull before letting another dart lose, this one find its mark in the upper chest of the mercenary who was near feet from coming up on Betty’s blindside.

“No, no no no,” Phil muttered, crouching in sniper’s position behind the planter and snuggling the rifle into his uninjured shoulder. He took out another of the mercs, while the one beside him went down from a dart shot to the upper thigh. Hulk had grabbed up two more of them, smashing them together like cymbals. Phil winced, deciding he was better off not watching that.

“Doctor Ross, get back!” Phil shouted. Betty’s head whipped around, her wrench still clutched in her fists and she nodded, turning on her heel and sprinting back toward the SUV they’d arrived in. Another mercenary started after her but he went down to another dart before he could gain on her.

“Am I too late?” Thor asked in bewilderment, landing beside him as Hulk snatched up one last mercenary, the handful that remained seeming to finally come to their senses and were running full out from the scene.

“Try and grab at least one of them,” Phil said breathlessly, his eye tracking Betty who dove under the SUV, crawling back until she was almost invisible. “I want to know why they’re here.” Thor nodded, taking off again as the whine of repulsors filled the air.

“Hey, Big Guy, save any for me?” Iron Man asked, hovering over the street. Hulk snarled at him, his breath huffing out like an angry bull as he scanned the street for threats.

“Not complaining, buddy,” Tony said, landing near Hulk with far more gentleness than was his
usual. “It’s just I was in the middle of something and I hate to get dress for nothing.” Hulk let out a harsh huff, but it was more frustrated than enraged and he hunkered down on the pavement with a scowl.

“I think we’re secure, JARVIS,” Phil said, breathing heavily into his com as he leaned back from the rifle, his hand closing over the bloody wound in his arm. In the distance he could hear the unmistakable sound of quinjet engines and he glanced up, his eyes instead landing on the edge of the roof. From this distance he could just make out Clint’s face, white as a sheet, his hands shaking as they clutched his makeshift weapon. Phil held pressure on his arm, twisting his incapacitated hand up to change the channel on his earwig. “Captain?”

“We’ll put down far enough out that Hulk won’t be startled,” It was Natasha’s voice that answered. “Cap’s already on the ground, he’ll be at your position in another minute.”

“Did he jump out of the back of the jet without a parachute again?” Phil demanded with a perturbed frown. He glanced back at the roof across the street to find Clint was now sitting on the edge, his feet braced against the gutter and his head on his knees.

“He asked me to fly low and not look when he opened the hatch,” Natasha replied, a hint of amusement in her tone.

“How very diplomatic of both of you,” Phil said dryly, his gaze tracking down the street to where he could see Steve rounding the corner at full steam. He looked back up on the roof, unease twisting in his gut. Clint hadn’t moved.

“What the hell happened here?” It was Tony’s voice and Phil turned to find Iron Man’s faceplate up as Tony knelt in the street, his eyes narrowed at one of the incapacitated mercenaries. Phil lumbered to his feet, his head swimming for a moment at the pain in his arm as he clambered over the planter bed, stumbling toward where Hulk was now sitting in the middle of the street, crushing chunks of broken pavement in one fist. Steve skidded to a stop beside Phil, grasping his good arm for support as Tony turned, a bloodied metal projectile in his armored hand. Steve blinked at it a moment in confusion and Iron Man’s faceplate snapped neatly into place as he examined first the dart and then the body on the ground before his head slowly turned toward the roof across the street.

From this angle all that could be seen was a shock of dark blond hair and a pair of wide, terrified eyes that almost immediately disappeared.

“Well shit,” Tony’s metallic voice muttered.
“Yeah,” Phil said with a sigh, trying not to pass out.
“What is this thing?” Tony reached out with a screwdriver to poke at the piece of plumbing pipe covered in puffy stickers and purple glitter. The industrial rubber bands tied to it tangled over one another like tentacled limbs as the pipe rolled across the lab bench. Tony leaned closer to it, eyeing it with suspicion.

“Slingshot,” Clint replied defensively, his arms folded over his chest until he was almost hugging himself. “Sort of.” He winced, casting an uneasy look toward Phil whose arm was locked in the Cradle. Pepper was standing over him, her eyes narrowed threateningly but Phil seemed too exhausted to be affected by her ire.

“Why did you get shot? you’re not allowed to get shot!” She demanded, seething. Phil rubbed at his eyes with his free hand, his brow knitting in frustration as Betty gently grasped his wrist, returning it to the arm rest with a scolding look and forcing him to sit still.

“I’m sorry,” he said turning to Pepper with his most bland gimlet stare. “Apparently these particular bad guys lost the notice explaining the prohibition against shooting the Avenger’s field coordinator. I’ll be sure to reprimand them for failing to study their briefing materials.”

“I just wanted to go for donuts,” Steve grumbled half under his breath. Bucky shrugged, disapprovingly eyeing Thor who was happily polishing off the last of their second box of crullers.

“I don’t know why you’re mad,” Bucky replied with a huff. “This happens every single time we go in Krispy Kream.”

“This is,” Tony paused, making a face as glitter glue flaked off the pipe, leaving a sparkling trail on the lab bench. Thor picked it up by the rubber band, staring at it thoughtfully as it bounced in front of his face. “This has got to be the most asinine thing I’ve ever seen. Well maybe not as bad as Hammer Tech, but close.”

“Hammer Tech doesn’t come in assorted rainbow colors,” Bucky observed, draping his good arm over Clint’s tense shoulders with his most obscene grin. Steve covered his mouth with his hand to hide his own smile.

“And you let Clint,” Pepper revved up, waving a hand in his direction. Clint cringed, crowding closer into Bucky’s side as if seeking shelter.
“I didn’t let him do anything,” Phil interrupted, a scowl forming on his face. “I ordered him to retreat and get clear of the fighting.”

“Wow,” Bucky observed, his expression deadpanned. “Just like old times.”

“You really need to stop helping, Buck,” Steve said, rubbing at his jaw in a way that did a poor job of masking his amusement.

“I really don’t,” Bucky replied. “What’er they going to do, shoot me with a rubber band bow?” Clint made a face, shifting back a half step to hide behind Steve and hunching in on himself.

“I am curious what you used for ordnance,” Thor said, a cheerfulness in his tone as he tested the pull weight of the makeshift weapon, the rubber bands stretched out to an alarming thinness, the box of donuts all but forgotten.

“There were these weird looking dart-shaped nail things,” Clint replied awkwardly.

“Landscape spikes,” Phil stared at him. “You made a pocket sized bow that shot landscape spikes.” Pepper let out a frustrated huff, stomping across the medical lab and fairly throwing herself in one of the rolling chairs, folding her arms on the nearest lab bench and burying her face in them with a pained groan.

“I can’t take this kind of stress!” she insisted, her voice muffled. “Why can’t I have a nice relaxing hostile stock takeover like a normal person?”

“You know, I feel like I owe you,” Tony observed, giving Phil a calculating look as Thor snagged a fistful of pens from one of the drawers and began shooting them at the wall with the improvised bow. “She’s been so angry with you lately she’s forgotten everything I’ve done to piss her off.”

“I haven’t forgotten!” Pepper insisted from across the room, never raising her head.

“Damnit,” Tony muttered, stubbornly ignoring the pen that ricocheted off the bullet proof glass, missing his head by only inches.
“A more clever and industrious weapon I have never seen!” Thor said proudly, thumping Clint on the shoulder. Tony stared at him for a long moment before edging closer to Bucky.

“Is he getting laid again?” Tony muttered.

“Pretty sure, yeah,” Bucky murmured back, snagging the last cruller from the box and taking a smug bite of it. Tony nodded, his expression relieved.

Steve gave his head an exasperated shake, catching an amused look from Betty who was tucked quietly into the corner beside the Cradle’s readouts, watching the whole thing with a detached sort of glee. Steve gave himself a moment to appreciate how unruffled she was from the excitement of nearly being killed by a van full of thugs. He thought it probably said something about himself that he was going to miss her level headedness.

“Clint,” he prompted gently. “Why didn’t you take cover like Phil told you to?” Barton shifted uncomfortably on his feet and Bucky gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“I did,” Clint said warily. “At first. I made the kids go inside, told them to stay on the floor away from the front of the house. And I thought I’d just look, just watch to… I don’t know… I don’t know why I went back out to the alley. And all the stuff was right there. And there was a trellis that went all the way up to the roof. And this guy grabbed Betty and then Phil got shot and…” His voice trailed off helplessly and he drew in an unsteady breath.

“See this is why I like him,” Bucky explained to Steve, his mouth half full of donut. “He’s like ‘old you’, only taller and less violent.”

“He shot a guy in the neck with a nail, Buck,” Steve replied, wincing when Clint pulled a repulsed face.

“I didn’t mean to!” he insisted.

“As one half of the pair who is now alive because you did what you didn’t mean to, thanks,” Betty said cheekily. Clint’s ears turned bright red and he ducked his head, casting a worry glance a Phil whose frustrated expression softened.
“It’s not that I don’t appreciate you saving my life,” Phil said the faintest bit chagrined. “We’re just worried for your safety.”

“It might have been instinctual,” Betty suggested with a shrug. Tony nodded.

“He might still have subconscious access to some of his training and it just kicked in like muscle memory,” Tony agreed, rubbing at his face tiredly. “I mean, at this point I can pretty much get into the suit asleep so it sort of makes sense.”

“You do get into the suit asleep,” Steve said blandly. “You sleepwalk. I’ve caught you.”

“Twice,” Bucky added as Tony made a horrified face, shushing them.

“It’s too late, I heard,” Pepper declared, her tone bland.

“Damnit,” Tony hissed.

“It could also be that the treatments haven’t restored his linear memory as much as the knowledge he acquired during that time,” Betty said, her expression pinched. Tony made a face as if he were eating something nasty.

“Well there’s a terrifying thought that’s two hundred percent less helpful than I needed it to be,” he declared, glaring at her. “Thank you, doctor, for that bit of nightmare inducing insight.”

“Happy I could help,” She replied wryly.

“JARVIS, is the big guy still out?” Tony asked, raking his fingers through his tousled hair.

“Doctor Banner should awake in the next hour,” JARVIS said.

“When he’s back on his feet ask him to weigh in on this week’s Eldritch Theory, would you?” Tony asked.
“I think the real question here is why were we attacked in broad daylight in Brooklyn in the middle of a neighborhood renno?” Phil said, breathing out a sigh of relief as the Cradle let out a tone and Betty moved to release him.

“Kidnapping,” Natasha declared, appearing in the doorway. They turned to stare at her in silence for just a moment but her flat expression betrayed nothing more.

“Oh you’ve got to be kidding me,” Tony finally groaned, rolling his eyes. “What kind of moron tries to kidnap the Hulk?” Betty closed her eyes, drawing in a shaky breath.

“Not the Hulk?” she asked, her voice wavering.

“Not the Hulk,” Natasha agreed, nodding slowly.

“What now?” Steve asked, perplexed as Betty sank down on the nearest lab chair, her elbows braced on her knees as she buried her face in her hands. Phil slipped off the gurney, grasping one of the chairs and rolling it in front of Betty before sitting down.

“Doctor Ross,” he said softly. “How many times has your father tried to kidnap you in the last four years?” Betty sat up but she didn’t open her eyes.

“Two,” she replied. “Two other times, this is three.”

“Are you telling me the general sent armed mercs to New York after his own daughter?” Tony demanded, turning to Natasha who just shrugged helplessly.

“Maybe you could catch the rest of the class up here?” Bucky suggested as Thor put down the bow, folding his arms over his chest with a frown.

“The project Bruce was working on,” Steve said with a sigh. “The one that caused the accident. It was run by a General named Ross.”
“The idiot that kept hunting him?” Bucky asked. Steve nodded and he turned to Betty. “That’s your old man?”

“I didn’t think he’d try anything here,” Betty said, clasping her hands as if to stop them from shaking. “Both times he tried before I was. Well I’ve been careful to stay in crowded places since then. It’s been almost two years I didn’t think he’d...”

“Well we’ll need to deal with this,” Pepper nodded decisively, appearing beside Natasha as if by magic. All signs of her earlier frustration erased. Betty let out a resigned sigh, nodding.

“Nat, can you coordinate with SI security,” She continued. “Make sure they have access to all the red flags?”

“SHIELD keeps a close eye on Ross, they could loop JARVIS in but he can probably do it on his own,” Natasha nodded. “He’s already monitoring him for threats to Bruce. It won’t take much to expand the parameters.”

“The extra set of eyes won’t hurt though,” Phil agreed. “The good news is that Ross is going to have a hard time hiring any contract guns for a while after this gets out.”

“Can I just pay the most competent ones not to talk to him?” Tony asked. “Because I’m thinking that could solve a lot of problems.”

“We could certainly put out the word that information about Ross’s plans is worth more than the actual job he’s hiring for,” Natasha said with a nod. “I’ll see that it’s spread around.” Tony gave her a thumbs up.

“I,” Betty drew in an unsteady breath. “I don’t understand.”

“I know I said I’d fly you anywhere in the world you wanted to go,” Pepper stated apologetically, turning to face her. “But I really don’t think that’s such a good idea. If you don’t want to stay in New York we can send you out to the lab in LA as soon as things settle down.” Betty gave her a confused look.

“You know I really hate to argue with you, Pepper,” Steve said with a frown. “But the security at the west coast facility isn’t half what we have here.”
“And if she is safer in more densely populated places the LA campus is pretty rural by comparison.” Phil added.

“We shouldn’t send her overseas for the same reason,” Tony said before turning to Betty. “I’m in no position to tell anyone how to live but you’re probably better off if you stayed here and took on something high profile with a lot of PR, it’s harder to kidnap someone the press follows around.”

“You know, you still haven’t vetted anyone for director of cybermedical,” Natasha pointed out, turning to Pepper “It’s probably way less research than she wants to be doing but she’d be the media darling of every science journal in the country.” Pepper nodded thoughtfully, turning to Betty with an assessing gaze.

“Why would you do that?” Betty asked, her bewildered gaze darting between them. “I’m a liability.”

“You’re the top mind in your field,” Tony said with a blasé shrug. “And the last thing we need is for you to fall into the hands of someone as dangerous as Ross.”

“Don’t let him fool ya,” Bucky said with a grin. “It’s because he’s a huge teddy bear.”

“I’m going to stick electromagnets inside your arm the next time I service it, Barnes,” Tony snapped. Bucky stuck his tongue out at him.

“Also he really doesn’t like the general,” Steve observed.

“A pusillanimous cur undeserving of the rank bestowed upon him,” Thor said with a disapproving frown.

“My trash talk game is never going to be good enough to compete with you,” Tony said with a disappointed sigh.

“I’m going to go talk to Hill about coordinating surveillance,” Phil said, heading for the door.
“Good, I still have a mission to plan for,” Natasha nodded, glancing at Steve before following him.

“Doctor Ross, why don’t we talk in my office?” Pepper suggested linking her arm with Betty’s. The others trailed out after them and Tony let out a breath, staring blankly at his workbench as if his mind were somewhere else entirely. It was a full minute before he realized he wasn’t alone.

“If you had that thing they used on Phil, could you fix me?” Clint asked cautiously. Tony startled, blinking up at him as if he’d never seen him before.


“You could fix it though,” Clint persisted, rounding the lab bench his shoulders drawn in as if to make himself look smaller. “Make it work better, safer? If you knew what it did. It’d work on me, give me my memories back.”

“No,” Tony shook his head, leaning into the lab bench. “Clint, people like us, we’re held to a higher standard. We have to be. To be heroes and not villains there are lines we do not cross, not ever, and the big one is torture and the second is human experimentation.”

“So you’ve never done anything that could have got you hurt or killed?” Clint challenged, his brow furrowing in a suspicious frown.

“That’s different!” Tony snapped. “That was to save people.”

“I used to save people!” Clint said angrily, his face crumpling in a tormented expression. “I used to fight alien invasions and Phil got shot today because I didn’t know what to do with a couple of big goons in a truck!”

“That is not what happened!”

“Who am I going to save like this? I’m not a hero any more,” Clint drew in a shaky breath, his eyes desperate. “I’m not anything.”

“That’s not true,” Tony replied, his tone surprisingly gentle. He rounded the bench slowly and
Clint turned away, ducking his head. “Hey, Clint, look at me.” He hesitated a moment his fingertips resting softly on Clint’s arm as he shifted closer.

“You’re still my friend,” Tony reminded, ducking his head to catch Clint’s eye. “And that’s really important.”

“It’s not,” Clint shook his head.

“It is to me,” Tony insisted. “I haven’t got a lot of friends, there aren’t a lot of people I can trust to be good to me, you know? But I can trust you. You’ve had my back so many times. It’s my turn to look out for you.”

“Who’s going to have your back next time?” Clint asked looking up at Tony with worried, innocent eyes.

“Clint”

“I was scared,” Clint said in a small voice. “Today, I was scared. I was scared of the guys shooting at us and I was scared for Phil and Betty and Bruce and I had no idea what to do. I’ve seen the videos of who I used to be and that guy, he wasn’t afraid. Phil could have died because I wasn’t, the real me, wasn’t there to save him.” A tear trickled down his cheek and Tony looped a cautious arm around him, pulling him into his shoulder as he let out a stifled sob.

“It’s going to be okay, buddy,” Tony whispered into his hair, one hand rubbing circles on Clint’s back. “I promise, we’re going to get through this.”

“You knew this was coming,” Bucky observed. Natasha didn’t reply, she gave one more cautious glance though the glass walls where Tony was comforting Clint before turning away, heading down the hall toward Bruce’s lab. The door whisked open and she settled in at the nearest terminal.

“I want in on the opp,” Bucky waited in the doorway a moment, when she didn’t look up he circled around, putting himself in her line of sight. “I figure if I’m going to go back in the field this is probably a good test run. You could use a sniper.”
“We could definitely use a sniper,” she agreed, looking up at him with her most professional, serious expression. “If you’re sure you’re ready.”

“Not sure I can be sure until I try it,” he replied, settling into one of the chairs across from her. Natasha nodded in agreement before turning her attention back to the display in front of her. Bucky licked his lips, watching her with a cautious expression.

“You rattle me, you know,” he said finally, she didn’t reply and he slumped into the lab bench. “It’s not ‘cause you’re beautiful either.” Natasha glanced up at him with a cold look.

“I… you are… beautiful… it’s just not why you turn me into a blithering idiot every time I’m around you. I mean, you’re out of my league but I figured you knew that because you’re out of everyone’s league. If I thought you didn’t know I wouldn’t bring it up,” he let out a groan, gently banging his forehead into the lab bench. “I can’t believe I’m screwing this up again.”

“At least you’re consistent,” Natasha replied without any real heat.

“I keep telling myself not to be a mess in front of you,” Bucky admitted, lifting his head just enough to watch her out of the corner of his eye.

“Everyone’s a mess,” she said in a tone that seemed equal parts resigned and accepting.

“I’m a smoking hot tire fire, Natasha.”

“None of that’s you’re fault,” she replied, pausing just long enough to catch his gaze before turning back to her display. Bucky leaned back in his chair, running his hands over his face.

“I know,” he said, his shoulders sagging loosely as if his strings had been cut. “I do know that. But none of it’s you’re problem either. It shouldn’t be.”

“What do you want from me, James?” she asked finally, her face a blank mask. He stared back at her a long moment before tilting his head back to stare up at the ceiling.
“I want to go back in time and put down the gun,” he replied, his voice warbling only slightly. “I want to put down the gun and follow you wherever you wanted to lead me. Be whoever you wanted to make me into. Anything to make up for it all. I can’t, I can’t go back and undo any of it, but that doesn’t stop me from wanting it.”

“That red isn’t in your ledger.”

“Isn’t it?” Bucky turned pained eyes on her, his expression pinched. “You keep reaching your hand out and I keep batting it away because I don’t know how to grasp hold of it. How isn’t that part on me?”

“James,”

“I’ve only ever loved two people in my whole life,” he blurted out. “And Steve’s a moron, I busted his face in and he still came for me like we were still brothers, like nothing could ever change. It was bad enough I let him down, I couldn’t.” He drew in a choked breath meeting her gaze.

“I didn’t want it to be like that with you.”

A hesitant smile ticked at the corner of her lips, the faintest softness in her eyes as she pretended to look back at her display.

“You could have told me how you felt,” she pointed out but there was the thinnest thread of lightness in her tone as she spoke.

“I could have not eaten an entire box of Kreme filled donuts today,” he replied with a shrug. “but good choices aren’t something I have a great track record on.” Natasha bit her lip but it only barely stifled her snort of amusement.

“I’d say it’s a good thing you have Steve but I know he’s the enabler that takes you in there every time you look depressed,” she observed.

“Sam’s right,” Bucky nodded slowly. “Being friends with Tony Stark’s money is awesome.” Natasha let out a soft laugh in reply. They were both silent the minutes spooling out comfortably between them, Natasha’s display slowly scrolling along as she poured over the latest information.
“Speaking of stupid best friends,” Bucky finally said cautiously, fiddling with one of Bruce’s pens. The faint half smile slid off of Natasha’s face.

“All of that’s up to him,” she replied.
The jet black Harley-Davidson cornered sharp on the barren country road, kicking up the berm gravel that had tracked onto the edges of the pavement and leaving a dust cloud in its wake, the driver’s knee only inches from the asphalt.

“Awesome, Hotdog,” Sam’s voice drawled in their coms. “Way to go lowpro.” The only reply was the rev of the Harley’s engine as it picked up speed.

“Target a hundred yards on your left,” Sam continued, his voice holding a hint of amusement. “I’ve got eyes on and you’re clear to hook the fish.”

The Harley curved wide onto the dirt lane, bouncing as the tires caught the uneven grade before it skidded sideways into a stop in front of a rundown, rusty house trailer. On its front porch a man wearing a green plaid shirt and a camo cap narrowed his eyes, his hand reaching for the shotgun propped by the door.

“Hey mister,” Natasha pulled off her helmet with a warm, demure smile that seemed to catch the man off his guard. A slow, predatory grin bloomed across his face in reply and he pushed himself out of the rusty metal lawn chair, shuffling down the dilapidated timber porch with a bow-legged stride, his shotgun half forgotten in his grasp.

“I think I must have got turned around,” Natasha continued, tilting her head so her red tresses tumbled down her shoulder as the man walked up beside the bike. “Can you tell me, which way to the Aquarium? I’m looking for a cephalopod.” The man blinked at her in confusion for only a second before his head snapped back and he went down hard and silent.

“A cephalopod, really?” Steve’s voice crackled over the com as he jogged up beside her. Natasha’s only reply was a disinterested shrug as she looked down at the man at her feet, kicking at his leg.

“What the hell was that, Barnes?” She asked drily as Bucky clambered out of the tree line, dusting branches from his shoulders with a frown.
“We talked about it in briefing,” He said defensively, eying her with no small amount of caution. “If he left the gun on the porch like an idiot you’d take care of it, and if he didn’t.” Bucky waved at the crumpled figure in the dirt with a ‘tada’ expression. Natasha let out a derisive snort.

“Bring Jed Clampet with you,” she declared, wrinkling her nose as she stepped over the body on the ground, heading toward the rusty house trailer. “I hate the country.” Bucky let out a huff of a sigh before turning to Steve who was eying him critically.

“Hey look! I shot an asshole and I’m not freaking out or anything!” Bucky said with forced cheer.

“Was that a trank round?” Steve asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“Of course it was a trank round,” Bucky replied, rolling his eyes as he reached down to grab the man by his faded plaid shirt. “He can’t open the door for us if he’s dead.”

“Today boys,” Natasha said, waving at the trailer door as Bucky hauled the man up the steps none too carefully.

“Thanks for the hand, pal,” Bucky stated, slapping the man’s palm down on the scanner by the trailer door. The lock clicked and Bucky tossed his burden unceremoniously into the metal chair on the porch.

“How long’s he going to be out?” Steve asked, unloading the shotgun before setting it back in place against the wall and then arranging the man more carefully in the chair, pulling the camo cap forward to hide his face.

“Stark says 18 hours,” Bucky replied, sweeping up the beer can on the milk crate by the door, he took a generous gulp then immediately spat it out. Steve only shook his head, following Natasha into the house as Bucky carefully placed the beer in the man’s hand before ducking into the doorway.

“How long do you think it will take to crack?” Steve asked, looking around the threadbare, unkempt living room. Natasha was hunched over a computer terminal in one corner whose sleek lines looked jarringly out of place in their meager surroundings.
“I’m in,” she replied, her hands flitting over the keyboard. “JARVIS, tinker with their surveillance for me, I’m going to have a look around their systems.”

“With pleasure, Agent Romanov,” JARVIS answered.

“We’ve got vehicles exiting the west entrance,” Sam reported over the coms. “Heading east.” Bucky kept his eyes on the front door, easing it nearly shut before nodding to Steve who cut through the kitchen to peer out the back window.

“I see ‘em,” Steve said, watching three fuel trucks heading down the road from between the bent blinds over the sink. “Hopefully if they notice our friend on the porch they won’t think anything of it.”

“You need new friends, Cap,” Natasha observed, her brow furrowed in concentration.

“Not going to argue with you there,” Steve sighed as Bucky flashed him a nearly manic grin.

“We were right,” Natasha said frowning at the screen. “There’s an emergency interface here that accesses the shielding. Not sure this bozo even knew it was here, or how to use it if he did.”

“You can cut off one head but the two that grow back are going to be half as smart,” Bucky observed.

“Can you get us in?” Steve asked, eyeing the trucks as they disappeared down the highway. Natasha gave a sharp nod and he stepped back from the window. “Falcon, are we clear?”

“All good out here Cap, no sign they’ve detected you.”

“Okay, fellas, it’s going to be close,” Natasha said. “We’ll only have 1.5 seconds. You should get in position near the shield.”

“That’s nearly 20 meters,” Bucky replied with a frown, peering across the junk riddled yard through the crack in the door. He shook his head as he turned back to her. “You can’t run twenty meters in less than two seconds.”
“Well I’m not pulling Falcon off surveillance,” Steve stated flatly.

“Falcon appreciates that,” Sam’s voice said over their coms.

“I’ll hang back,” Bucky offered, turning toward Natasha. “You’re more valuable to the mission than a sniper.”

“Barnes,” she gave him an unimpressed look. “Go get in position.”

“You heard the lady,” Steve said, grasping Bucky by the back of his tack vest and manhandling him out the door. “Move it Soldier.”

“I thought you were in charge,” Bucky replied with a hint of derision as they shambled down the crooked porch steps.

“Coulson says you need to let your Specialist do what they specialize in,” Steve shrugged, chivvying him around a rusted out ’48 Ford truck and past a stack of bald car tires.

“I think you’re just scared of her,” Bucky insisted.

“My mother didn’t raise any idiots,” Steve said.

“You did just call me ‘Soldier’,” Bucky pointed out. Steve winced.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Naw, it’s fine.” Bucky gave an easy shrug, eying the electric shield that surrounded the compound, its static glow shimmering in the evening air. “I’m thinking of reclaiming it.”

“Really?” Steve gave him a skeptical look.
“I just need a chance to try it out, see how it goes,” Bucky nodded.

“Abbot and Costello are in position Widow,” Sam reported.

“Cute,” Steve said drily.

“I always thought we were more Laurel and Hardy,” Bucky said thoughtfully. Steve turned to look at him with an affronted expression.

“The Howard Brothers,” he said. Bucky pointed back at him nodding. A moment later five gunshots rang out and the back window of the house trailer shattered in a shower of glass. Steve grasped hold of Bucky’s sleeve shoving him through the barrier as it flickered while at the same time a figure burst through the trailer’s broken window, crashing into Bucky just as the shield snapped closed.

“That was fun,” Natasha said brightly from where she was perched in the middle of Bucky’s back.

“You did that on purpose,” Bucky huffed, lifting his face from the dirt. Natasha’s only reply was to pat him consolingly on the shoulder.

“Daylight’s wasting,” Steve said, masking his grin as he offered Natasha a hand up. She hopped to her feet with a cheery grin as Bucky scrambled upright after her, glaring at Steve.

“Falcon you’re up,” Steve declared, ignoring him in favor of opening a pocket on his tactical belt and removing a small rust red metal box. He held the box in his palm and it unfolded until it was three times its original size, spreading bird like wings. It blinked robotic eyes at Steve just once before taking off from his hand and soaring into the air.

“And Redwing is online,” Sam replied. “Damn I love Stark, I’ve been itching for a chance to try this.”

“Going radio silent,” Natasha announced, jogging into the tree line to the north. “Make a racket for me.”
“Be careful!” Steve called after her, turning to head South West toward a rundown pole barn. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Bucky had fallen in step behind him before checking the tree line for signs of Natasha, but she’d already disappeared. “You two work things out?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky shrugged in reply. “Maybe? She’s moved from possibly killing me in my sleep to definitely humiliating me in public so I guess that’s a win.”

“Hey, whatever consenting adults get up to,” Sam’s voice said over their coms with a hint of amusement.

“Well at least that’s better than the last dame you stepped out with,” Steve shook his head as Bucky rolled his eyes. “I’m just saying, you got a type.”

“Terrifying and out of my league?” Bucky asked. “News flash, pal, you got the same type.”

“Also deadly and likely to shoot you,” Sam observed. Bucky nodded in agreement.

“Focus, fellas,” Steve reminded, hiding his smile. “We don’t even know for sure what kind of operation Hydra’s running here.”

“Whatever it is, it ain’t good,” Bucky observed.

“We wipe out their computers we won’t have to worry about it,” Steve replied.

“Good luck finding them in this mess,” Bucky replied, peering through the sight on his rifle at the scraggly field they were marching through, the grass as high as their knees.

“Hey, I think I’ve found something, Cap,” Sam said. “circle around the barn off to your South.” Steve picked up his pace, moving along the back of the barn until he could peer around it.

The main buildings of the farm were clustered off to their West, a rundown farmhouse and a series of out-buildings in disrepair and just ahead of them newer, aluminum structures just off the lane.
“What am I looking for Falcon?” Steve asked.

“On your left,” Sam replied with a hint of a smirk in his tone. Steve’s gaze swung South and he frowned at the collection of low concrete structures near a retention pond.

“I could be wrong,” Bucky drawled. “But I don’t think pig pens need all that air conditioning.”

“I miss Hawkeye right now,” Steve sighed shaking his head. “JARVIS, can you see anything over that way?”

“Surveillance is limited to the exterior of the structures but based on several conversations with Agent Barton about animal husbandry I would tend to agree with Sargent Barnes’ assessment.” The AI answered.

“You go check it out,” Steve said, nodding toward the pig barns. I’m going to scout the other buildings. If it’s the servers, rig it to fry.”

“What if it’s not the servers?” Bucky asked curiously though he didn’t seem like he felt that was likely.

“Fry it anyway,” Steve shrugged.

“It’s like Christmas came early,” Bucky said cheerfully, creeping off toward the south.

“Don’t burn down the neighborhood!” Steve called after him,

“Biddy!” Bucky shot back, waving him off as Steve smiled, lifting a hand to his ear, his finger tips switching the channel.

“Sam, keep an eye on him,” He said in a flat voice, turning to continue west along the side of the barn.
“Steve, you got to take the training wheels off sometime, man,” Sam replied, a hint of reproach in his tone.

“If this one goes alright then next mission,” Steve promised. “I just got him back, I’m not getting him killed again.” He switched the channel back without waiting for Sam’s reply.

“JARVIS, what have we got in here?” He asked, sizing up the blank exterior of the pole barn as if looking for a point of entry.

“I’m detecting extensive storage of conventional firearms and explosives of varying degrees of legality.”

“Paint the target, we’ll light that fire if we absolutely have to.” Steve said, turning to survey the buildings to the southwest.

“On your signal, Captain,” JARVIS agreed as a small orb like object detached from Steve’s utility belt and hovered in the air a moment before zipping silently around the barn toward the main doors.

“We still under cover?”

“Security has thus far failed to detect our intrusion, I am masking your approach.” JARVIS said. Steve gave one last careful look around before heading off at a jog toward the aluminum structures to the West.

“Do we have internal video of the buildings up ahead?” He asked, ducking down behind an abandoned tractor, his eyes flicking cautiously over the farmyard beyond.

“They appear to be barracks, currently unoccupied, and a series of research labs” JARVIS answered. “Chemistry and engineering to be precise.”

“This day just keeps getting better.” Steve muttered under his breath “What’s the security presence look like?”
“Guards stationed at both entry points of the labs, on the north and south ends,” JARVIS replied.

“None on the roof?” Steve asked his brow crinkled in confusion.

“They appear to be relying on automated surveillance,” JARVIS observed.

“Well that was a poor choice on their part,” Steve said wryly.

“Indeed, Agent Romanov has incapacitated the guards in the main administrative facility and is in position.” Steve’s face broke into a slow grin and without another word he darted out from behind the tractor, sprinting toward the gap between two of the structures.

He slowed his pace, edging along on silent feet as the walls pressed in like an aluminum clad ravine. He chanced a look to the north when he reached the corner of the building, the narrow space abutting the back of another building. He couldn’t see anything that way but a quick check to the South gave him a view of two Hydra guards.

“Steve?” Bucky’s voice came over his com, high and tight.

“Cap, something’s wrong man,” Sam added on his private channel almost at the same time.

“Buck?” Steve whispered, cupping his hand over his ear as he crouched back, well out of view.

“Steve, it’s not the servers.” Bucky said, his voice warbling.

“Shit, man,” Sam swore. “I can’t be sure, but from what I’m getting on Redwing’s surveillance it looks like some of that hardware we found in that Hydra lab in Paramus.”

“The erasure Hardware,” Steve said.

“Yeah.”
Steve let out a curse, tapping the channel again.

“Buck, listen to me,” he said softly. “You with me?”

“Yeah,” Bucky replied, but his voice was shaky.

“Did you bring heavy pyros with you even though I told you not to?” Steve asked, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Yeah?” Bucky answered cautiously.

“Blow it all,” Steve ordered.

“But,” He seemed to waffle a moment as if he were half afraid to speak. “We’re supposed to be low profile.”

“I changed my mind,” Steve answered. There was no reply for a moment and “That’s an order.”

“Yes sir,” Bucky said, his tone more steady.

“I’ll keep an eye on things,” Sam promised.

Steve darted one last look around the corner before shifting his grip on his shield and charging forward, the shield flew, not even scraping the sides of the building before taking both guards down with a blow to the head. He snagged the shield out of the air before turning on light feet and sprinting north between the building and coming out of the shadows, his shield raised in front of him. The pair of guards there didn’t even have time to react as he punched one in the jaw and caught the other with the flat of his shield, sending him crumpling to the ground.

Steve grasped hold of one of their nightsticks, yanking it free of his belt and wedging it into the door handles. He checked carefully for any further threats before moving swiftly back the way he’d come.
“JARVIS, we’re going to need a SHIELD clean-up crew in route.”

“Already moving into position, Captain,” JARVIS replied. “Deputy Director Hill requests that you keep the wildfire to a minimum this time. It is, apparently, terribly difficult to extinguish flaming corn.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Steve said, his jaw set as he eyed the electronic lock on the door the pair of Hydra soldiers had been guarding. He gave a shrug before slamming the edge of his shield into it, peeling it off the wall. He spared a single glance at the farm house across the barnyard where Natasha was no doubt hard at work uploading any number of nasty things into Hydra’s systems before ducking back into the shadows between the barn and what appeared to be a rusted out tool shed to the south. “Anyone else I need to worry about around here?”

“There are several Hydra operatives to your South West in what I can conclude is the motor pool,” JARVIS said. Steve circled the back of the tool shed, peering around it to spy the mechanics, grease covered and tinkering on a green Hummer. He leaned back well out of sight, shaking his head. There were far too many of them for him to take out before they could raise an alarm. His eyes tracked South as he weighed his options and he blinked slowly.

“JARVIS, are those solar panels?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“They are indeed Captain,” the AI answered.

“On, chicken coops?” Steve’s eyes narrowed further until they were barely slits. “Are those chicken coops with solar panels?”

“I take it urban chickens in the 1930’s had no need of electricity?” JARVIS asked with an amused tone. Steve shrugged.

“It’s probably an off grid power system,” Steve observed, eyeing the buildings with consideration. “This much pull on a municipal power grid would have pinged someone’s radar. Best way to hide is to not tap the grid.”

“I would concur, Captain.”

“What’s Tony always saying about keeping the data systems near the power core in the suit so that
if the extremities are damaged the controls are still getting power,” he hummed to himself softly. He glanced off to his left. His attention barely catching on a small, nondescript building pressed up against one of the labs. Several large fans built into its roof.

“Bingo,” he muttered, closing the couple of yards distance and wrenching the door open with a loud pop of metal. “Guys, I’ve found the servers.”

“Give me just a couple more minutes, Cap,” Natasha replied as Steve crept into the darkened room, ignoring the rattle of the overhead fans and the cold upward swoop of air as he reached out to place a flat metal disk on the nearest blade tower. “I almost have JARVIS into their remote servers. He’ll be able to move around their entire network.”

“We’re going to have to wrap this up pretty soon, Widow,” Steve said, continuing to methodically mark the servers. “Buck, Sam, how are you doing?”

“Last charge is in place,” Bucky said, his voice only slightly more stable.

“As soon as you’re clear, blow it,” Steve said decisively, circling back toward the door. “With any luck the noise will draw most of them off.” He tucked his shoulder into the frame of the door peering out of the crack toward the old wood frame barn that housed the motor pool.

A deafening boom rent the air and shouts rose up from the motor pool as a half dozen mechanics took off toward the old pig barns, their voices almost drowned out by the second explosion.

“Overkill maybe?” Steve asked drily.

“It’s exactly the amount of kill I was going for,” Bucky replied, his tone still breathy as Steve watched the last mechanic take off at a dead run across the field to the south. Steve opened the door, slipping back around the aluminum structure, cringing only slightly at the third explosion and the resulting screams. He shook his head, trying not to smile as he rounded the shed, which was most likely how he missed the fist that connected with his jaw.

The force of the blow sent him reeling, his shield flying from his grasp and Steve staggered, shaking his head as if throwing off water. He stumbled back upright only a moment later, rubbing at his jaw as he stared at the man in front of the shed.
“Wow,” he declared softly, tilting his head to look up into the man’s face.

“Oh that’s not good!” Sam said in his ear, clearly alarmed. “What is that, a golem?” The hulking beast of a man grinned down at Steve, his muscled chest rippling as he pounded one fist into his palm.

“I can do this all day,” Steve said, settling into his stance and raising his fists.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure he can too, Cap!” Sam replied but Steve didn’t have time to answer, the man swung and Steve dodged, slipping out of the path of his fist on feather light feet. He dodged the next swing as well before stepping into an uppercut, his fist cracking on the man’s jaw.

“Ow,” Steve observed in surprise as he shook out his hand. “Seems to me you’ve had some work done, pal.”

“More than a match for you, old man.” he replied with a feral grin. Another explosion went off and the man’s fist connected with the side of Steve’s face, sending him backpedaling.

“Cap, you need to get out of there,” Natasha warned as Steve shook off the punch. Instead he shot forward, landing a pair of blows to the man’s kidneys. He raised his arm, blocking the haymaker to his ribs but the uppercut from the opposite direction caught him under the chin, sending him reeling. His foot caught in the uneven gravel and he tumbled back, landing hard, wincing as the rough stone cut into his scalp. He blinked twice and that was all the time it took for the streak of navy and blue to dart over him.

Bucky’s metal fist connected with the goon’s chest in a sickening crunch, sending him flying to the ground. The man’s eyes widened in horror as he looked up, staring down the muzzle of a handgun.

“You,” he said, wide eyed. “You’re…” his voice trailed off.

“I’m the Winter Soldier,” Bucky replied. “And unlike this idiot, I got no problems shooting you.”

He pulled the trigger.
“I had him on the ropes,” Steve said irritably as he shambled to Bucky’s side, his shield once more in hand.

“You take too long!” Bucky declared in exasperation. “How many times do I have to tell you, just shoot them! They’re bad guys, you don’t have to be all fair about it!”

“This is like a complete reversal of when we were kids,” Steve observed, looking down at the behemoth of a man. “I can’t believe you shot him.”

“My ma would have kittens,” Bucky agreed, nodding. “She was right, you’ve been a horrible influence on me.” Steve gave him a consoling pat on the shoulder, not even cringing as the next explosion went off and more screams could be heard from the direction of the pig barns.

“How’s the name going to work for you?” Steve asked curiously as they headed across the yard.

“I think it’ll grown on me,” Bucky said nodding. “The fact that I’m pretty sure that guy wet himself before I shot him kind of sells it.” Steve nodded in agreement.

“JARVIS, torch the servers once you’re done,” he ordered

“Permanently disabling now, Captain,” JARVIS replied. “A SHIELD response team is en-route, estimated arrival time in ten minutes.”

“Everyone Assemble in the farmyard in eight,” Steve ordered, stopping in the middle of the lane to survey the smoking pig barns in the distance and the farm house that was now quietly on fire.

“This went alright,” Bucky observed.

“Oh no,” Steve let out a groan. “You had to say it.”

As if on cue at least a dozen Hydra security poured out from behind the structures that ringed the farmyard, their weapons drawn as they circled up. Instantly Steve shifted, his back to Bucky’s as they were hemmed in.
“Well this has been fun,” Bucky said, eying them warily.

“You used up all the pyros, didn’t you?” Steve asked, raising his shield to cover his chest and face, but it was poor cover at best.

“Yes I did,” Bucky replied, resigned.

Across the field, the ammo barn burst into flames, the sounds of small consecutive explosions that could only be firearms detonating one by one filled the air but it wasn’t enough to distract the Hydra agents. Except for the pair who had their backs to the explosion.

A whirlwind of black and red fell on them, driving them both into the ground before spinning right, ducking behind the next guard as shots were fired. She caught him with a garrote as he was riddled with bullets, dragging him sideways and slamming him into the next man before spinning light on her feet and kicking the next in the groin. He doubled up and she brought her knee up into his chin, sending him tumbling into the next soldier who was distracted just long enough for Natasha to hit him full in the face with mace. He crumpled, screaming as she vaulted over him, her legs wrapping around the neck of the next man and bring him down with a twist as she drove her Widow’s bite into the neck of the man beside him. She leapt free of both of them as they crumpled, using her bite on the next as well and smoothly dropping into a crouch as Steve’s shield took out the last three before sailing over her head.

Natasha straightened, tossing her curls over her shoulder with a smug smile, the exploding fireball that consumed the ammo barn behind her ringing her tresses in a halo of death and mayhem. Bucky stared at her for a long moment, his jaw slightly open. Steve caught his shield on its return trajectory before reaching over to pat him gently on the shoulder.

“Avengers, we have pickup inbound for you,” Maria Hill’s voice announced over their coms. Steve glanced up to see a Quinjet easing down into the farmyard, Sam standing on it’s lowered ramp and a SWAT team of SHIELD’s finest behind him. Bucky only continued to stare mutely.

“That was….” he finally croaked, his voice trailing off.

“All in a day’s work,” Natasha replied, folding her arms over her chest.

“Are you blowing off the life saving thing, or me?” Bucky asked, shifting into her orbit, his head
tilted to the side with a besotted cant. Natasha considered him a moment.

“Probably both,” she replied. Bucky drew in an unsteady breath.

“God, I love you,” he said softly. Natasha’s lips puckered in an impish smile.

“Stockholm Syndrome?” She asked curiously as he edged closer until they were nearly touching.

“They don’t have a cure for that in this century, do they?” Bucky asked, his brow furrowed.

“Not that I know of,” Natasha said with a shrug.

“Thank god,” Bucky whispered, leaning closer. Natasha grasped hold of the front of his tack vest, yanking him forward into a heated kiss. Bucky let out a whine, his hands wrapping around her hips.

“God damned, finally,” Steve muttered half under his breath as he stalked past them toward the Quinjet. Another explosion rocked the ammo barn in the distance. “Both of you get on the damn plane.”

“Language,” Bucky peeled himself away just enough to mutter. He let out a huff of surprise as Natasha forcefully reeled him back in for another round.
The Borrowers

Pepper let the tension ease out of her shoulders as the elevator rose, its quiet stillness allowing her a breath of air from the hectic day. She rolled her head slowly, a soft smile settling on her lips at the promise, however faint, of an evening free of peril and interruption. All her T’s crossed, and I’s dotted, and Steve’s team wrapping up their mission with no casualties. She was looking forward to some peace and quiet for a change.

The express elevator doors slid open on the living room and the soft hum of Tony’s voice met her ears.

“No, that’s… that’s probably bad actually, let’s leave that for now.” he said with what was, for him, an alarming amount of caution.

“As you wish, sir,” JARVIS replied.

“Are you two up to trouble again?” she asked in amusement as she crossed the living room, slipping behind the bar to open the wine fridge. Tony was standing in the middle of the living room, a half dozen or more projection screens hovering around him and data scrolling over the micro-screen on the armature in front of his eye.

“JARVIS and I have spent the last hour or so poking around in Hydra’s retirement fund,” he admitted, his fingertips lightly flicking over blocks of data like a conductor in an orchestra of mayhem.

“Oh, how’s that been going?” She asked with casual interest, pouring herself a generous glass of the Shiraz.

“We’ve shut down three shell corporations and we might have accidentally freed a small island nation.” Pepper paused, her wine glass in one hand and the bottle in the other as she stared back at him, her posture unnaturally stiff.

“Accidentally,” she said.

“Sir, it does appear that the local residents are, in fact, hanging the members the governing council they’ve been able to catch from the walls of the Hammer Industries factory.” JARVIS reported. A
projection of what was clearly a street riot winked to life in front of him. Tony made a horrified face, grasping it in his fist and tossing it aside.

“They were all Hydra,” he said quickly alarm making his eyes wider. She stared at him another beat before her shoulders finally relaxed and her lips pursed in a poorly hidden smile.

“I’ll see that the Maria Stark Foundation offers to help them rebuild their government,” Pepper nodded when she was once more composed.

“This time without the Nazis,” Tony agreed. He winced at one of the screens, rubbing his forehead “JARVIS, let’s just come back to this later. Keep an eye on things, use your best judgement, okay?”

“I shall endeavor to make you proud, sir,” JARVIS answered, amused.

“You always do,” Tony replied fondly. He closed one eye, squinting at the micro-screen on the armature before tugging it off his head and laying it aside. The other projections winked out around him as he turned in place, watching her easy sashay toward the sofa. “You’re home early.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Pepper replied, smirking at him as she waved her wine glass though the air and settled into the plush leather. Tony stared at her a long moment before snapping his fingers.

“Date night!” he said, pointing at her.

“I’m making a wild guess that you didn’t plan anything,” Pepper observed as she paused to sip her wine, though she didn’t seem too put out about it. “It was your week to plan.”

“My style is really more fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants,” he admitted.

“But you always fly in style,” She added. Tony nodded in agreement.

“I mean, you know me,” he said, circling the room. “If I do any planning at all it’s almost always over-planning before it’s five minutes in. It’s not like there’s even any point in packing anyway, we can just buy what we need when we get there.”
“Pack?” Pepper asked in amusement, settling back into the sofa.

“At first I was thinking Vegas,” Tony continued to ramble, his feet aimlessly traveling the living room. “But that’s entirely me and not nearly enough you. So then I thought Aruba, because I probably own part of Aruba, or Hawaii, you love Hawaii and that pretty much covers the flowers bit, right?”

“What flowers are we talking about here?” Pepper asked eying him.

“I’ll send a jet for your sister’s family and buy a resort,” Tony continued on as if he hadn’t heard the question. “Rhodey can meet us there and I was wondering if we should invite the team or just kind of do it on the sly? I’ve got to tell you the truth, I think Natasha is going to go a little crazy on me if she misses the cake.”

“Tony,” she asked cautiously, setting her wine glass on the coffee table and standing to face him. “Are you asking me to marry you?” He stared back at her with wide eyes for a long moment.

“Ummm,” Tony paused, drawing in a shaky breath. “Yeah I think so.”

“You look…” Pepper stopped, her eyes narrowing in a calculating expression. “Are you afraid I’m going to say no or that I’m going to say yes?”

“I…” Tony waffled a moment, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. “Yeah, that’s it.” Her face softened and she rounded the sofa to step in close to him, taking his hands.

“I don’t need to get married,” She said gently. “I mean it’s lovely, it’s lovely that you’d ask, and I certainly don’t object to the idea but it seems… unnecessary.”

“You know, right?” He choked out. “You know that you’re the only thing that matters, the only thing that ever mattered.”

“Tony.”
“I need you to know that,” He drew in another unsteady breath, his hands shaking as he raised them to gently cup her face. “I need you to know that all of it, everything you’ve loved, everything you’ve hated, it’s all been for you, because I can’t have a world without you in it. I can have you mad at me or not speaking to me but I can’t have you not here.”

“You love it,” she accused softly.

“I do,” He nodded. “But I’d do it if I hated it as long as it kept you safe.”

“Tony.”

“I need you to know that,” he said again. “For everything I’ve put you through, for every mistake I’ve made. You’re the first thing I think about in the morning and the last thought I have before I fall asleep and there is nothing I can give you that’s worthy of you. I’d do anything to make sure you know how important you are.”

“Including marry me?” she asked. Tony made to answer but stopped, watching her warily.

“Why do I think this is some kind of trap?” he asked softly.

“Because you are very intelligent, Mr. Stark,” Pepper replied with a soft smile, her eyes glimmering.

“That rumor has been going around,” he nodded as she tugged him closer, twining her arms around his neck.

“Well if you’re as smart as the rumors say,” Pepper said, her lips brushing over his lightly. “You’d know a good plan when you hear one. So, I’m going to suggest that you think about getting married.” Tony made to interrupt but she shushed him with a finger on his lips.

“Just give it some thought,” she insisted, leaning into his shoulder to let her lips brush his ear. “And if you’re ever more afraid that I’ll say no, that’s the time to ask me.” Tony let out a tiny shiver before leaning back to meet her gaze.
“So for the record,” he said, his lips nearly brushing hers. “If I asked you’d say yes?”

“Yes.”

“Is that you saying yes or you saying you’d say yes?” He demanded. Pepper opened her mouth to answer but she was interrupted by a ding from the elevator followed by the dull clamor of four people talking at once.

“I thought you gave the kids ten bucks to go to the movies,” he said with a frown.

“You should have loaned them the car when they asked,” Pepper countered with a teasing grin. Tony let out a huff of frustration as she patted his shoulder consolingly before stepping away, sashaying back to the sofa and her glass of wine. Tony watched her, wincing as the noise from the hall grew louder.

“She just sailed though the air,” Bucky was saying, his good arm waving over his head, the prosthetic one was serving as a brace to support Natasha who was draped over his back, her legs locked around his hips. Clint was trailing after him like an excited puppy, hanging on every word.

“And at the last second she ducked under Steve’s shield, bad guys scattered all around her like dominoes,” Bucky continued. “It was magical.”

“Poetry in motion,” Natasha agreed smugly, stretching, cat-like before melting over Bucky’s shoulders, her arms dangling loosely in front of his chest.

“Put the conquering hero down, Barnes,” Sam said, rounding the bar to grab a couple of beers from the fridge. He popped the top off of one before handing it to Natasha.

“I’m comfy here,” she protested, patting the top of Bucky’s head before taking a pull of her beer and propping her chin on his skull.

“JARVIS said no problems,” Tony observed as Steve loped into the living room after them, his hair askew and a smudge of dirt on his face but otherwise unmarred.
“Nothing worth noting,” Steve nodded in agreement. Across the living room Bucky copped a feel of Natasha’s back side with his metal hand. Her fingertips skated down the back of his neck in a featherlight touch that made him shiver and he lost his place in whatever he was saying, sputtering a moment.

“Are they…” Tony’s voice trailed off as he blinked at them in befuddlement, his hands grasping at thin air.

“Yep,” Steve nodded, accepting a celebratory beer from Sam as he passed on his way to collapse on the sofa.

“Wow.” Tony said, staring in thinly veiled shock as Natasha shifted, her chin coming to rest on Bucky’s shoulder so she could whisper in his ear. Bucky’s eyes widened but otherwise he didn’t move.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed.

“I’m impressed,” Tony declared, and it was clear he was. “I had no idea he had that level of smooth in him. I thought she’d stab him in his sleep before he ever got to first base.”

“He just needed to get back in the swing of things,” Steve replied with a shrug, taking a pull of his beer. “Remind me to tell you later about the time he took up with this ATS mechanic in London named Betts and we got picked up by the King’s Guard when she missed her curfew.” Tony stared blankly for a long moment, blinking slowly.

“No,” he said finally, a look of knowing horror dawning on his face.

“Oh yeah,” Steve nodded with a put upon sigh. “You try explaining that to your C.O.”

“No,” Tony protested as Pepper began to giggle, her fingers pressed over her lips as her eyes sparkled. Sam’s eyes rolled so hard his head fell back on the couch and he made a rather undignified noise as he covered his face with his hand.

“And the Queen,” Steve added. Tony made a face as if he’d eaten something slimy.
“Air conditioned pig pens?” Clint demanded, gaping at Bucky as if it were one of the stupidest things he’d ever heard.

“I’m from Brooklyn, I don’t know any better!” Bucky defended as Natasha laughed, the sound almost enough to drown out the ding of the elevator down the hall.

“A sumptuous repast has arrived!” Thor declared, entering the room carrying no less than a dozen extra large pizza boxes, Phil following him with an additional armload of takeout containers. “We shall feast in celebration of your victory, my friends!”

“Pizza!” Clint cheered, grabbing the top boxes from Thor and spreading them out across the bar as Phil deposited his own bounty on one of the bar stools.

“Why did we get called off our project for data analysis?” Bruce asked, looking confused as he and Jane trailed up from the staircase to the rec room.

“Nutrition is the new frontier of research?” Tony asked with a shrug, shaking a paper plate at him.

“Is there Veggie?” Jane asked, peering into one of the boxes.

“That’d be me,” Natasha replied slipping gracefu lly off of Bucky’s back and fishing a keychain drive out of her back pocket.

“How did she have that and Barnes didn’t notice?” Tony asked in wonder.

“And he was really looking,” Steve nodded in agreement.

“This is everything Hydra had on memory tampering and implantation,” She held the drive out to Clint. “M.O.O.R.E.A. The Winter Soldier, even some stuff they got from the Red Room.”

“Natasha,” Bucky gave her a nauseated look but she only turned to him with a firm but subtle shake of her head.
“It’s your choice, Clint,” She said, taking his hand in hers and pressing the drive into his palm. “Not for me or the team or anyone else. When you brought me in you told me that the choices from here forward were mine. This is your choice. You can hide it and never let anyone see it if you want. You can think about. Whatever choice you make, I will back you up.”

“Natasha, I agree he has the right to make his own call on this,” Bruce said, strain clear on his face. “But I’ve gone over SHIELD’s data a dozen times or more. He’d have to be awake for the entire procedure, and I’m not comfortable participating in torture, even if it is voluntary.”

“With that much cross-referenceable data we might be able to incorporate the neural inhibitors we developed to use on Cap,” Tony pointed out cautiously.

“It’s at least possible,” Jane agreed. “If the data includes the original designs for the M.O.O.R.E.A. device, I’d say even probable.”

“They’re there,” Natasha said, nodding at the drive in Clint’s hand.

“It won’t block out everything,” Steve admitted with a slight flinch.

“Since when?” Tony demanded. Steve just gave him an apologetic look.

“I’m not afraid of a little pain,” Clint said defensively.

“Don’t think I’m done with you about this,” Tony shook a finger at Steve warningly before turning to Clint. “I can’t be sure we can make it work. And I’m with Bruce, I don’t want to do this if we can’t at least dial down excruciating to uncomfortable.”

“But if you can, I’ll get my memories back?” Clint asked, holding the drive out to him.

“If we can make everything work, yes,” Bruce said uneasily, “But Clint, it’s still dangerous. If we make a mistake there’s a very small chance it could kill you, or you could lose even more of your memories.”

“How small?” Clint asked.
“Based on my current numbers, 4%,” JARVIS answered.

“Even if it works, there’s a good chance you could lose some of the memories since the accident,” Bruce added. “If it works as intended you could wake up from the procedure thinking you just left the battle.”

“A couple of weeks versus ten years,” Clint pointed out. Tony drew in a shaky breath before squaring his shoulders and stepping closer so that he and Clint were face to face.

“If I make a mistake,” he began. Clint let out a disbelieving snort but Tony shook his head, wincing. “I made a mistake and that’s why you lost your memories in the first place. It’s my fault, I didn’t take into account… it’s my fault.”

“But I’d have died,” Clint said, looking at him with worried eyes. “If you didn’t use the cradle I would have died, that’s what Phil said.” Tony nodded, rubbing his eyes.

“Then you didn’t make a mistake,” Clint shrugged. “Sometimes you just got to do the best you can with what you have.”

“Says the guy that never misses,” Tony replied. Clint blushed, ducking his head.

“I can’t believe we’re even entertaining this,” Phil said, his tone clipped.

“It’s not up to us,” Natasha replied, narrowing her eyes at him.

“He’s going to recover his memories naturally with enough time,” Phil protested. “Without any risk to his life at all.”

“Three years for forty percent of my memories,” Clint interrupted. “That’s what Doctor Ross said.”

“Clint,” Phil gave him a wounded look.
“I don’t want forty percent!” Clint declared desperately, his voice rising. Phil let out a huff of frustration before stalking out of the room. Clint glared after him with a hurt look before turning back to Tony, holding out the drive once more.

“We’ll compile all the data,” Tony said, not moving to take it. “And before we do anything we’re going to sit down and make sure you know what you’re agreeing to.” Clint gave him an eager, desperate nod and Tony finally took the drive.

“Yeah, Betty,” Jane said, her phone wedged up against her ear as she shoved three pizza boxes and a salad into Bruce’s arms. “Can I interest you in one last science binge before you break out of here?” She wheeled him around toward the elevator, herding him ahead of her. Tony gave Clint one last nod before following after them.

“They’ll do their best,” Natasha assured, draping an arm around Clint’s shoulders as the others moved toward the remaining pile of pizza boxes. He only nodded in reply.

“What do you mean the neural inhibitors don’t block out everything?” Sam demanded, his eyes narrowed at Steve menacingly.

“Oh boy,” Steve sighed.
"That was Jane," he said, taking her frail hand in his, his thumb tracing soft circles on her papery thin skin as he brace his elbows on the edge of her bed. “She’s on our support team, she’s, well I was going to say she’s our ‘you’ but that would be Pepper.” Peggy let out a soft chuckle.

"I told you about Clint," he continued and Peggy gave him a nod in reply. “She wanted me to know they’ve worked out a procedure and they’re going to do the surgery tomorrow morning.”

“You’ll need to head back soon then,” Peggy replied, matter of fact. “Your team needs you and it’s a fair way to New York.”

“Well everything’s closer on the Stark dime,” Steve answered in amusement.

“It always was,” she agreed, smiling. “I’m glad Tony’s looking out for all of you. Is that what you’ve been worried about since you got here, that he wouldn’t be able to find a way to help Clint?”

“Some,” he nodded. “Clint got injured saving my neck.”

“That’s not your fault,” she replied, kind but stern.

“I know,” Steve sighed, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t always remember it but I do know it. You’d like him, he doesn’t let anything rattle him, just takes every hit and rolls with it, gets back up, stops to give a hand up to the guy behind him.”

“He sounds like a good man to have at your back,” Peggy observed.
“The best,” Steve agreed. “He kept an eye on me when I first got back, made sure I settled in okay. He did the same for Bucky too when we brought him in. I don’t know where any of us would be without him, especially me.” He drew in a shaky breath.

“Probably should have told him how much that meant before he cracked his head open,” Steve said with a sigh.

“I think we all leave things unsaid and then regret it,” Peggy murmured, her lips curling in a sad sort of smile. Steve looked up from their hands lying tangled together on the bed sheets.

“I definitely should have told you how much you meant before I ditched that plane in an ice berg,” he said.

“Steve.”

“I should have told you,” Steve insisted, he let out a frustrated huff, running his fingers though his hair. “Don’t know why it’s so hard to tell someone something they already know.”

“Maybe that’s why you never told me,” Peggy said, her eyes crinkling in a smile.

“The sun rises and sets on you, Peggy Carter, the fact that you know it doesn’t let me off acknowledging it.”

“Now, Steven?” She said, something thin and watery in her voice. “Really? You wait until now to learn how to talk to women?”

“My timing was never any good,” he said with a bashful smile. Peggy only shook her head.

“I think I fell in love with you on that stupid car ride through Brooklyn,” she said. “I was so angry at myself at first too.”

“Well I was a bit of an idiot,” Steve smiled at her, her frail, bony hand clung to his tighter and he ducked his head. “I was going to ask you to marry me after the war.”
“I was going to say yes when you did,” she said.

“I’m not so proud that I can’t admit I have no idea why,” Steve said. Peggy let out a throaty laugh that ended in a cough and Steve quickly reached for the glass by her bed, holding the straw steady for her.

“If it helps at all, I’ll always regret that we didn’t find you sooner,” She told him, tears stinging her eyes. “All that time lost.”

“I’ll only regret the time we didn’t have,” he said. “And the things I didn’t say. You were always too good for me and I was always afraid you’d realize it. I’m glad you moved on, that you had a life. That you were happy. I know you’d want the same for me, I know that. But there’ll never be anyone but you.”

“Maybe not,” Peggy allowed hesitantly, releasing his hand and letting her palm settle on his cheek. He leaned into the contact, his keys closing. “You always did throw yourself into things with everything you had, so if you don’t have it in you to give your heart away again there’s no shame in that. But that’s not the only kind of love there is, and it’s not the only thing that gives life meaning. You’ve done well, Captain, and I expect you to keep doing so. I believe in you.”

“You always have.” Steve replied, drawing in an unsteady breath. He leaned in close to brush a kiss on her forehead and she closed her eyes with a soft sigh.

“You should go,” she said finally. “Your team needs you.” Steve swallowed, nodding tightly.

“Keep an eye on Howard, would you?” she murmured, her eyes growing heavy. “Make sure he isn’t taking unnecessary risks again.”

“I’ll keep him check,” Steve promised.

“Barnes will be fine,” she said assuringly. She frowned. “No, not him, the other one. I’ve forgotten his name. He’ll be fine. Howard’s money is worth the best doctors.”

“It’ll all be fine, you rest,” Steve assured. Peggy have him a faint nod, her eyes slipping closed as
his fingers brushed soothingly over her silvery hair.

“No, Maria,” Phil let out a frustrated huff, shouldering open the door to his suite, tucking his phone against his ear as he shuffled off his suit jacket. “I know that, but could you just.” He pressed his lips together as if he were forcing words to stay behind his teeth.

“No I understand but I think if they saw,” He bit down a growl at her reply. “Well maybe if you had, you’d understand why I’m… No, no, are you going to help me with this or not?” His eyes narrowed to menacing slits and without a word he pulled the phone away from his ear, glaring at it a moment before thumbing it off. He switched off the sound and flung it at the sofa with a snarl of frustration, his chest rising and falling in unsteady breaths.

“JARVIS?” he prompted after a long, tense moment.

“Yes Agent Coulson?”

“Could you please send Deputy Director Hill an apology gift basket tomorrow morning?”

“I’ll place an order for a selection of her favorites from the bakery on 7th Avenue,” JARVIS replied. “Shall I sign the card: My condolences on your continued friendship with me?”

“Sounds about right,” Phil sighed. He flung his suit jacket over the back of one of the stools at the breakfast bar and yanked off his tie as he headed down the hall toward the bedroom. Under the category of days he’d completely screwed up this one definitely made the top ten. He might even argue for five. He pushed open the door with a self-flagellating huff and stopped just over the threshold.

Maybe eighteen.

“Why don’t you want me to get better?” The lump of misshapen blankets on the far side of his bed asked with Clint Barton’s voice.
“It’s not that I,” Phil drew in a shaky breath, closing his eyes. No lies this time.

“I don’t want you to be in pain,” Phil said, sinking down on the corner of the mattress, his back to Clint. His shoulders sagged as he reached up to rub his eyes. “I don’t want you to get worse. I don’t want you to suffer. I don’t want you paying the price for the mistakes I made.”

“It’s not your fault I got hurt,” Clint mumbled impatiently from under the pile of blankets. “Steve and Tony think it’s their fault too but it’s not.”

“It’s my fault you were there in the first place,” Phil replied. He stared down at his hands for a long moment, he swallowed uncomfortably before he continued. “I made a mistake when I recruited you. It was an honest mistake, made for good reasons but you paid for it, and you’ve been paying for it ever since.”

“So what?” he asked, the blankets untwisting until Clint was sitting cross-legged beside him, the duvet wrapped around his shoulders. He glanced at Phil uncomfortably out of the corner of his eye. “I’m not good enough to be an Avenger?”

“You’re the best one out of all of them,” Phil declared vehemently. Clint let out a huff, looking away and Phil shook his head with a heavy sigh.

“The first time I ever saw you you were running from a cartel of sex traffickers,” Phil began, reaching out to let his hand rest on Clint’s wrist. “You’d just taken out their entire transportation network. No support, no tactical training, and if you hadn’t stopped to save two of my agents you would have pulled it off without a scratch.” A shy half smile tugged at the corners of Clint’s mouth and he cast Phil a sideways glance.

“You saved more than a hundred children that day, two SHIELD agents, my mission, and probably my career and I paid you back for that with a wing shot to the leg and a threat,” Phil said.

“But,” Clint turned confused eyes on him and Phil shook his head.

“No,” Phil cut him off. “What I’d just watched you do, it was the most extraordinary thing I’d ever seen and all I could think was how incredible you could be with the right training. You’d be a superhero. And I wanted that, I wanted it so badly I, I did something I’m not proud of. I manipulated you, I bullied you into joining SHIELD.”
“Phil,”

“The one thing I always swore I wouldn’t be,” Phil’s voice cracked. “I wanted you working with SHIELD and I betrayed you and myself to get it. I wounded you so you couldn’t run and I arrested you. I stuck you in a holding cell and fed you a bunch of half truths until you believed I was your only shot at a future.”

“But you thought you were doing the right thing,” Clint argued, distress in his tone.

“That’s not an excuse,” Phil insisted. “And if that was the only time I let you down maybe I could live with it, but there were others. It seems like every bad call I’ve ever made you’re the one who had to deal with the fallout, and none of that would have fallen on you if I’d done the right thing that day. I told myself that if I gave you a chance I could make the world better, make you better. That you could do some good. I never gave any thought to what was good for you.”

“But I did do good,” Clint said, his tone hopeful.

“Clint Barton you never needed me to do good,” Phil insisted, turning to meet his gaze. “All you needed was a roof over your head and food in your belly and you would have made good on your own. You are one of the best human beings it has ever been my privilege to know.”

“You’ve met Captain America.” Clint said.

“And he doesn’t hold a candle to you.”

Clint’s cheeks colored and he ducked his head, listing to the side so that their shoulders were touching.

“I thought I was saving you,” Phil said, leaning into the contact. “But you didn’t need saving. You’re the one who saved me, you took the thing I’m most ashamed of and saved the world. You became a hero in spite of my mistake, not because of it.”

“I remember sometimes,” He said softly, letting his head sink to Phil’s shoulder. “there’s a flash and I remember being him, and then it’s gone. I think that’s what happened in Brooklyn. I was on the roof before I even realized what I was doing.”
“Your instincts were always very solid,” Phil allowed.

“My luck not so much.”

Phil let out a watery laugh, draping his arm around Clint and gently tugging him closer. Clint went willingly, one arm tangling around Phil’s waist.

“I almost lost you, Clint, I don’t ever want to do that again.” Phil winced, the terrible truth of the words cutting deep. “That technology is responsible for one of the worst things that’s ever happened to me. I don’t want to put you through that, I don’t want to watch it. You shouldn’t have to do this. You shouldn’t believe that this is the only thing you’re good for. You could do anything, be anything and you’d be amazing.”

“But I wouldn’t be Hawkeye,” Clint said softly.

“No,” Phil agreed, resigned. “You wouldn’t.”

“After,” Clint choked, clinging tighter. “We’ll still be best friends, right?”

“Natasha’s always been your best friend,” Phil blurted out before he could stop himself.

“She’s awesome,” Clint admitted. “I wouldn’t trade her for anything in the world, but I wouldn’t trade you either. I know you feel bad about the things you did, and maybe I was mad at you about it, I don’t know, but I’m glad you did it. If you hadn’t I wouldn’t have you or Nat or the Avengers. I might not remember things that happened but I remember what’s important, I remember the people who’re important. I wouldn’t give any of you up, you’re the only family I’ve got, and I wouldn’t have a family at all if it weren’t for you.”

“No matter what happens,” Phil promised. “No matter what you decide, I will always be there for you.”

“Can we still have sleepovers and make banana pancakes for breakfast?” Clint asked hopefully.
“If that’s what you want,” Phil nodded, his face crumpling in a miserable expression as he let his cheek rest against the top of Clint’s head.

“I’m scared,” Clint admitted in a small voice. Phil only nodded in reply. “Is it okay if I stay here tonight?”

“Of course,” Phil cut him off before he could say anything more. Clint relaxed into him, the tension in his body going loose and Phil closed his eyes, savoring the moment.

“If you don’t want to be at the procedure tomorrow it’s okay” Clint said hesitantly. “I get it, so it’s okay if—”

“I’ll be there,” Phil said firmly. “I promise.”

“You sure?” Clint asked in a small voice.

“I’m sure I would never let you face it alone,” Phil replied.
The Snowy Day


“Agent Coulson!” Phil stopped, turning to look back over his shoulder to find a bare headed blond in a half done up parka scrambling through the snow strewn lawn of the cadet barracks. Phil smiled fondly as her untied boots skittered over an icy patch and she windmilled her arms before plowing through the last drift and onto the sidewalk beside him.

“What can I do for you, Cadet Carter?” he asked, struggling to hide his amusement.

“I just talked with Agent May,” the girl said breathlessly, brushing her blond hair out of her eyes with one gloved hand. The other was bare and she stuffed it under her arm to warm it. “And she said I’d been promoted to level 1 Specialist under your recommendation and I just wanted to thank you. Thank you, so, so much this is—”

“You’ve earned it, cadet,” Phil replied, his smile gentling. “Or should I say Agent, now?”

“Tomorrow,” Carter replied, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “My paperwork is supposed to go through tomorrow.”

“I’m sure your Great Aunt will be very proud,” Phil replied.

“I was going to call her tonight,” Carter replied, blushing bright pink. “Agent May said I’m schedule on the next milk run and just in case I don’t see you before we head out, I wanted you to know, you’re the best teacher I’ve ever had.”

“Thank you, Agent Carter,” Phil replied, his own lips quirking in a teasing smile as her blush depended. “I look forward to working with you in the future.”

“Yes sir,” Carter beamed at him. “Thank you again, sir.” Phil nodded back toward the dormitories and Carter shot him a grin before turning and bounding back through the snow the way she’d come, sliding on the same patch of ice again and nearly going down on her back side.
“I was never that young,” Phil muttered to himself, shaking his head as he turned and headed up the steps into the administration building. The halls were nearly empty, the recent snow storm sending most of the students and staff towards warmed bunks and microwaved hot chocolate.

It wasn’t that he was unhappy at the Academy, compared to some of his previous postings at SHIELD it was certainly closer to his ultimate career goals. His students on the whole were highly motivated and discipline, with a few minor exceptions, was only a passing concern. Still he found the work lacked challenge and the endless day-in and day-out of grading papers and surrogate parenting could become tiresome. He relished days like this where the weather kept students from knocking on his door and he was free to delve into the analysis he longed to be doing full time.

Almost free at least.

The door to the Academy Director’s office was ajar and his assistant missing from her desk. His eyes swept over the room, narrowing in disapproval as they came to light on the papers on the desk, the clearly unlocked file cabinet, and the metal storage cupboard along the far wall. Academic environment or not, the secretary should have secured the area. Maybe because of the Academic environment, now that he considered it. With a sigh he tucked the stack of freshly graded papers under his arm and crossed the reception area.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Phil asked, his fingers rapping softly on the door jamb. Senior Agent Nicholas Fury looked up from the scattered piles of paperwork on his desk, his eyes narrowing to angry slits.

“We’re out another Senior Field Agent,” He announced. Phil drew in a long, slow breath, letting it out in a huff. Well there was one of the discipline problems rearing his head again. He glanced over at Fury’s sofa where Melinda May was sprawled, a pen clutched between her teeth as she read over her after action report.

“Morelli didn’t cut it?” Phil asked, schooling his face into an expression of bland disinterest as he crossed the small office and settled into the chair in front of Nick’s desk.

“Morelli was crying when he turned in his resignation,” May’s voice announced, lifting one leg off of the sofa and waving her cast-clad foot at him in greeting.

“He was not crying,” Nick objected, turning narrowed eyes on her. She rolled over, sprawling over the arm of his sofa with a wicked grin and he turned back to Phil with an irritated expression.
“He’s too soft,” Phil insisted. “I told you he wasn’t cut out for command. He’s a good agent, but he doesn’t have what it takes to be AiC.”

“His leadership scores were perfectly acceptable,” Nick snapped angrily.

“He cries a lot for a good leader,” Melinda stated, Fury shot her a withering look, but her amusement was undimmed by his dark glower. “Just saying.” Phil smothered his own smile as she shrugged disinterestedly. Nick’s incensed expression darted between the pair of them and finally came to rest on Phil before slowly narrowing to one of outright threat.

“That jackass archer of yours,” Nick snarled.

“He doesn’t actually belong to me,” Phil said.

“He’s a free range jackass,” Melinda agreed, she seemed to consider what was written on the page in front of her before taking several broad pen strokes to the form that were most definitely not representative of the English Alphabet.

“He’s been on report twelve times in the last four months,” Nick fumed. “Brown, Williams, Rumlow and Gonzales have all pulled out of senior field ops training and transferred to different divisions.”

“Rumlow’s a prick,” Melinda announced.

“And you can’t count Gonzalez,” Phil protested.

“If Barton hadn’t shot him in the leg he’d have got his damn head blown off,” Melinda agreed decisively.

“The part you’re missing here is that the stupid fucker shot a fellow agent!” Fury lashed out.

“He’s not stupid,” Phil defended.
“No, he’s what?” Melinda nodded. “About six years old and everyone just thinks he’s stupid because he can’t shave yet.”

“If this is how you help, I’d really rather you didn’t,” Phil requested, turning to her with a sigh.

“You’re poor choice in friends isn’t really my concern, Coulson,” She replied sweetly.

“Are we talking about you or Barton?” Fury questioned with a sour look.

“Barton’s not—” Phil protested but May cut him off.

“He’s a dumb kid,” Melinda observed with a shrug. “Weren’t you ever a dumb kid? Or were you like Phil here?”

“If you make the robot crack again,” Phil threatened. “And he’s not a dumb kid. His marks are at the top of his class.”

“He got a C in World Politics,” Fury said

“Nick, you got a C in World Politics,” May reminded rolling her eyes.

“Everyone gets a C in world politics,” Phil added in agreement. Nick gritted his teeth as Phil glanced over at Melinda’s paperwork. “Did you just draw an erupting volcano under trainee performance review?” Her only reply was to grin at him devilishly before turning back to Nick.

“At least part of the blame is on the higher ups for tapping some of these guys for Senior Field Agent,” May insisted. “They don’t think on their feet, they’re not good at improvisation. Just because they have good leadership skills doesn’t mean they belong in charge of field operations. Phil told you all of this, he hasn’t been wrong yet.”

“Well why don’t you sign up for field command, then?” Fury suggested bitterly. “He said you’d make an excellent AiC.”
“Hell no,” Melinda said, flopping back on the sofa. “I’ve got one more surgery and three more months on injured reserve and I’m spending them right here in Cadet Assessment, thank you. And then I’m going back into the Specialist Pool where I get to do whatever I want and everyone’s terrified of me.”

“Everyone’s always terrified of you, May,” Phil stated drily.

“Aw, Phil, you say the sweetest things,” She replied, batting her eyes at him. Fury glanced between the pair of them the tension rolling out of his shoulders as he slumped back in his chair.

“Undersecretary Pierce recommended me for Deputy Director.” Nick stated. Melinda slowly rolled back on to her stomach, her eyes wide and horrified, Phil mirroring her expression.

“He…” Phil’s voice cracked and he blinked at Fury blankly a moment. “How did that happen?”

“The thing in Bogotá,” Nick shrugged fatalistically and Phil winced as May pulled a face. “Turns out one of the hostages was his daughter.”

“No offense, but how are you not dead?” Phil asked seriously.

“How are we all not dead?” Nick questioned with his most philosophical shrug. “Anyway, I’m apparently on the fast track to level 9 and what is it they say; A rising tide lifts all boats?”

“Can I be an Offshore V-Hull?” May asked. Phil shot her a look. “I saw one in a Grand Prix on an opp in Florida once.”

“The point I’m trying to get to here, Phil,” Nick continued. “Is your boy.”

“He’s not,” Phil paused in frustration. “He’s not my boy.”

“He’s interfering with my numbers, Phil,” Nick snapped.
“He’s weeding out the incompetence pretty effectively,” Melinda suggested with a grin. “If you can deal with Barton, global terrorism is a walk in the park.”

“You’re still helping,” Phil pointed out darkly. “Why are you even in here?”

“Medical didn’t want me anymore,” She declared with obvious pride.

“I can’t imagine why,” Phil deadpanned. Nick leaned forward, rubbing his temples.

“Rumor has it that Tucker’s retiring as head of Strategic Analysis next year,” Fury announced, pinning Phil with his gaze. Phil straightened in his chair, his fingers unconsciously adjusting the knot in his tie.

“Ooo Phil, it’s your dream job,” May cooed in delight. “You can pretend every day that you’re Captain America’s girl.”

“Shut up,” Phil hissed.

“I’m not saying anything definitive,” Nick warned, ignoring her. “But the decision about her replacement is probably going to fall on the Deputy Director.”

“Oh look, the tied’s coming in,” Melinda declared delightedly. Furry shot her another look of irritation that she ignored.

“I want the entire Ops Academy running like a well oiled machine in a month,” he declared. “Straighten out the problem child, or he’s out.”

“Difficult to deal with personalities,” Phil began, eying Melinda.

“Dammit, Phil, the kid’s not difficult, he’s impossible!” Nick growled. “He’s sent three field team leaders to psych.”

“If they can’t deal with Barton they don’t belong in…”
“You’re the only one who can deal with Barton!” Nick snapped. “What do you want me to do? Set up a workshop on ‘How Not to Kill Your Snipers’ in the field training program?”

“Oh, Barton’d love that,” Melinda fairly glowed with glee.

“She’s right,” Phil sighed. “That’d only encourage him.”

“It’s not that I don’t like the kid,” Nick amended, for once showing some genuine emotion. Phil wondered if he might be hurting himself just a little. “God knows he deserves a break. But I’ve given him that. He needs to take advantage of it.”

“He is taking advantage of it,” Phil said with a frown. “He’s near the top of his class, his work’s always on time, he’s even the first to turn in his AAR’s after a training mission. He’s jumping through all the hoops.”

“And he’s completely incapable of working with a team,” Nick added. Phil rubbed his eyes in frustration. “Look, Phil, I know you have a ton of cred riding on this kid but a sniper who only flies solo isn’t any use to SHIELD.”

“He’s more than a sniper,” Phil insisted.

“Then prove it,” Fury replied with a shrug. “Or he’s out.”

“Nick,” Phil sighed.

“You’re his SO,” Nick stated flatly. “You broke it, you fix it.” Phil shot him a withering look before standing to his feet with a sharp nod and turning to leave. He’d just closed the door behind him when he heard Melinda’s voice though the thin industrial wood.

“You’re an asshole,” she said. “Phil was right about Rumlow being better off in Strike Command and he’s probably right about Barton too.”
“Who did I piss off in my last life to get stuck with the two of you?” Nick demanded in frustration. Phil let a faint smile tug at his lips and he rolled the tension out of his shoulders, carefully straighten his tie as he nodded to Nick’s assistant who had finally returned to her desk. When he was sure he was once more in perfect order he reached out, his fist banging hard into the side of the metal storage cabinet by the door. There was a muffled yelp and Barton tumbled out onto the floor, his hand over one ear.

“Afternoon Coulson,” Barton was trying for cheerful, but it came off strained. Phil very carefully did not look over at Nick’s assistant who was staring at Barton with shock and horror, no doubt in fear of her job security. Rightly so, Phil thought to himself. She wouldn’t soon overlook security again.

“In my office, Cadet,” Phil stated, eyeing Barton with his most bland expression. Barton gave a rapid nod, peeling himself off the floor in a mass of gangly limbs and falling into step in Phil’s wake as he headed out the door.

Phil concentrated on keeping the bland, disaffected expression on his face as he strode purposefully down the hall. That Barton had managed to hear at least some of his conversation he had no doubt but he had no plans to acknowledge that. Bringing Hawkeye into the SHIELD fold had been an initial feather in his cap. Discovering that the infamous World’s Greatest Marksman had been little more than a boy who wasn’t even old enough to buy a beer, a bit less so. The injury from that op had left him temporarily benched but Phil had seen it as more of an opportunity, a chance to prove he was more than a run of the mill field agent. Thus far his attempts to parlay his stint at the academy into a more permanent position in SHIELD administration hadn’t worked out well and the primary reason was at this moment teetering awkwardly on the threshold of his office.

“I didn’t shoot anyone this time!” Barton declared as soon as the door shut behind him. “Well, no one I wasn’t supposed to!”

“It terrifies me that you think that should somehow make me feel better,” Phil admitted, unbuttoning his jacket and sliding into the chair behind his desk with a sigh. Barton hovered in the middle of the room, looking both angry and distressed, his eyes darting to Phil’s face and then quickly away as if he were trying to work out how best to escape the notice of a dangerous predator.

“Why don’t you just say it?” Barton huffed sullenly, his shoulders sagging as if in defeat.

“Say what?” Phil asked, genuinely curious. Barton opened his mouth to answer but hastily shut it, looking away as he folded his arms over his chest. Phil frowned, there was a Barton shaped headache forming behind his eyes. It felt like a very small, very angry arrow.
“These are your colleagues, Barton,” Phil began, deciding it was best to let it slide. “And don’t misunderstand, I’m not saying you have to like them, god knows this line of work isn’t one that generally attracts likable people. But you do need to get along with them at least some of the time.” Barton made a frustrated face but didn’t reply.

“You’re a bright kid,” Phil remarked, wincing internally almost immediately at his choice of words. “You’re smart enough to realize why it’s valuable to cultivate good relationships with the people responsible for watching your back.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Barton half muttered defiantly, his shoulders hunched up around his ears as he glared murderously at the carpet.

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter?”

“Nothing,” Barton growled, his eyes narrowing as his jaw tightened in obvious anger. Phil bit back a huff of frustration. To say that every conversation with Barton was like this would be untrue. Phil himself had bantered with him about movies and TV, the finer points of weapons construction, the best place to buy double cheeseburgers. The kid could be downright charming when he tried. But anything work related and his patience and demeanor seemed to break down. He was surly in mission briefings, churlish in the field and his After Action Reports, while always meticulously complete and on time, walked a razor line into downright contemptible.

“Being civil to your coworkers is a job requirement, Barton,” Phil snapped irritably. “No one’s going to hand hold you.”

“Of course no one’s going to hand hold me!” Barton fairly shouted back, Phil blinked at him in surprise but the outburst was far from over. “I’m not stupid! I know SHIELD’s only keeping me on because I’m useful! But that’s going to change, some mission’s going to go belly up and when the team has to cut and run it’s pretty obvious who they’re going to leave behind to take the fall!”

“Barton!” Phil barked at him, a wave of shock sending him back on his heels. “SHIELD is not in the business of leaving its people behind.”

“That’s great for you,” Barton replied, bitterness dripping from his voice. “Except you’re forgetting I’m not really SHIELD, am I?”
“What in the world are you talking about?” Phil demanded, stunned. “Your employment contract—”
Barton cut him off before he could go any further.

“I’m talking about your recruitment speech,” Clint, and it was clearly Clint now, his cheeks
flushed and his eyes wide, he suddenly looked so much younger and so vulnerable, scared in a way
that was unsettling juxtaposed against his perfectly maintained uniform. “I get it, It was either
SHIELD or jail, I get it. But I’m not dumb, I know what that means. You’re only going to keep me
as long as you can use me and then you’re going to cut me loose and I’m going to end up dead or in
jail or worse.”

“Clint,” Phil gaped at him breathlessly. “I wasn’t threatening you, it was never my intention to turn
you over to the authorities. You’re a young man and you were on a dangerous path, I was just
trying to talk you off of it.”

“Right,” Barton growled, his teeth clenched but his eyes damp as if he were blinking back tears.

“You are as much a member of SHIELD as I am,” Phil insisted. “You’re not wrong about missions
going to hell, it happens. It’s happened to me, but the one thing that will not happen is that you will
not be tossed aside for simple convenience.”

“Then how come Rumlow left me in my nest when our op in Lima went off the rails?” Clint
demanded with genuine hurt in his eyes. He squared his narrow shoulders, balling his hands into
fists as he looked Phil in the eye. “How come Garret told me I had to get out of Athens and to the
extraction point on my own? He just left me behind and I actually liked him!”

“Rumlow made some mistakes,” Phil countered. “He made a lot of mistakes.”

“I’m not stupid,” Clint repeated, the faintest tremor in his voice. His eyes were watering properly
now and he blinked them angrily as he glared back at Phil. “I know what’s going to happen. Not
one person I’ve been on an op with is going to come back for the ignorant, white trash, assassin.”

“Clint,” Phil protested again. Barton drew in a deep breath, holding it just a moment before he let it
out, his whole body coiling in tension.

“Am I dismissed, sir?” he demanded through gritted teeth. Phil hadn’t meant to nod, he wasn’t
even aware he had until Barton was spinning on his heel, Phil’s office door slamming shut behind
him.
Phil stared at the blotter on his desk for long minutes, his brain trying to process the conversation he’d just had. Damn, it had been one hell of a morning.

Twenty minutes later he finally moved, picking up his phone.

“Fury,” Nick’s voice declared gruffly.

“I want to take that opening in field operations management,” Phil stated, his tone completely even. His declaration was met with utter silence for a long moment.

“I’m half tempted to be a selfish asshole and not even ask why,” Nick admitted.

“I think it’s where I belong,” Phil answered simply. “I’d do the job right. As Deputy Director you’re going to need someone you can completely rely on to take care of the high profile cases.”

“Do you know why you’re such a good liar?” Fury asked irritably. “It’s because you never actually lie, you just trim the truth down until there’s nothing left to question.”

“Wonder where I learned that,” Phil said without emotion.

“Stop being a dick,” Nick snapped. “You take this position and that’s your career track, Phil, that’s where you’re going to be five years from now, thirty years from now. No one’s ever going to approve pulling a Senior Field Agent out of the field to jockey a desk in Analysis.”

“I’m aware,” Phil stated, picking at the corner of his blotter absently.

“You’re aware?” Nick half growled. “You’re fucking aware? Let me tell you what I’m aware of, Coulson, I have spent the last three years trying to get you to take a promotion to Senior Field Agent and every time you shot me down because you wanted to work your way into Analysis.”

“I can change my mind,” Phil remarked. Nick was silent again.
“I ought to shoot you,” he grumbled.

“Who’d work field opps management?” Phil asked with just a touch of amusement. The other end of the line was muffled but Phil wasn’t entirely sure that Nick wasn’t swearing and throwing pens at his wall.

“There’s one condition,” Phil added.

“Of course there is,” Nick answered drily.

“I want Barton promoted to level 1 and assigned to my team.”

Phil closed his eyes, straining to hear but there was no response.

“Phil,” Nick began, for once sounding hesitant. It was a little unsettling.

“I broke it,” Phil said with a shrug. “I fix it.” There was another long pause as if Fury were coming to a decision, but Phil didn’t think for a moment the decision hadn’t already been made.

“I’ll get the paperwork started and it’ll be processed by the end of the week,” Nick confirmed.

“Thank you.”

“You’re not going to want Mel too, are you?” Fury demanded irritably.

“Well, not for three months,” Phil answered hesitantly.

“Fuck you,” Nick snapped, hanging up with a click. Phil allowed himself a small smile as he returned his phone to its cradle. He drew in a deep breath, staring back down at his hands, folded neatly on his blotter.
“Shit,” he sighed.

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*Manhattan: 13 years later*

The heart monitor beat out a strong, steady rhythm at odds with the shaky breath Phil drew into his lungs as he watched the slow rise and fall of Clint’s chest. Natasha had stationed herself on the opposite side of the bed, her face impassive as she watched the monitors that hovered against the wall. Across the recovery room Bucky and Steve were talking in hushed tones, Barnes’ face nearly white as a sheet. Phil didn’t expect he looked much better himself but he’d had the good sense not to look in a mirror since the procedure had ended.

“He’ll be coming out of it any moment,” Betty said, her eyes trained on the monitors Natasha was watching. She and the rest of their science team looked harried and drawn but otherwise positive. “If it’s worked we should see instant memory improvement.”

“Don’t be surprised if he doesn’t remember everything,” Bruce added with a frown, holding his tablet out to Tony who stared down at it silently. “We put him to sleep to help reintegrate his memories but six hours probably wasn’t sufficient for full processing.”

“The subconscious synaptic readings look good though,” Tony nodded, motioning to Jane who leaned over his shoulder to study the data.

“But he’s okay?” Phil asked, flinching at the slight warble in his voice. If anyone else noticed they didn’t acknowledge it.

“Pretty sure,” Tony said, nodding.

“Clint?” Natasha said softly, leaning closer to him as his eyes shifted beneath his closed lids.

“That’s it,” Jane said, nodding at the monitors.
“Sit Rep, Barton,” Phil said gently. Clint’s eyes peeled slowly open, barely more than slits as they peered blearily up at Natasha before shifting to Phil.

“Wow, am I on the good drugs?” He slurred, licking his lips. “Did we win?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Natasha asked, unable to keep the traces of worry from her face. Clint seemed to fish sluggishly for the memories a moment, the muscles in his face flexing as if he were unsure exactly which ones he should be using.

“Shit, Cap! Is he okay?” he asked finally, awareness cutting through the haze of medication. “I felt my perch go out did-“ a moment later Steve was at the foot of his bed, his expression hopeful and Clint’s face sagged in relief. Bucky slipped up behind him, giving Clint a wide grin.

“Can’t you ever be where you’re supposed to?” Steve asked, his voice unsteady. Clint managed a lopsided smile in reply. He winced almost immediately, reaching up to rub his eyes with one shaking hand.

“Jeeze, my head hurts,” he complained, turning to Phil. “Did I get a concussion, Coulson?” Phil stared back at him for only a beat, the barest hint of emotion in his eyes.

“Something like that,” Phil said stoically.

“That’s all you remember?” Natasha prompted. Clint’s hazy eyes narrowed at her.

“Well I remember that I’m not going to let you pour on poker night any more,” he said drily. “and Barnes owes me forty bucks for hotdogs.”

“Hey!” Bucky protested.

“Seriously, how does anyone eat that many hotdogs?” Clint asked him, but there was amusement on his face. “I must have really rang my bell if you guys are this twitchy. How long was I out?” The last question he directed at Phil whose chest rose and fell in a slow even breath, his only tell.
“The debrief,” he said. “Is probably going to be very interesting.”
“How’s our patient?”

Bruce never looked up from his microscope, but his lips twitched up in a barely there smile that Betty seemed to take as an invitation. She glided effortlessly into his lab with an answering smile, circling around the lab bench until she was in his line of sight.

“He got all red faced in the middle of this morning’s scan,” Bruce replied, scratching a few notes on the pad beside him. “Unhooked himself and went down to the range. He’s been down there two hours so I think it’s safe to say he’s getting back some of his memories from the last couple of weeks.”

“Sounds like he’s coping fine with near death and even closer humiliation,” She observed her smile widening as she leaned into the lab bench behind her.

“Yeah, he’s probably the most well adjusted one here.” Bruce observed, he let out a soft groan, stretching out his back and pausing to rub at tired eyes.

“How delightfully alarming,” Betty said in her most cheerful tone. Bruce gave a snort of amused assent in reply. He pushed his chair back from the lab bench, turning it to face her.

“How was your whirlwind tour of Stark Industries Atlanta?” he asked, watching her carefully.

“Busy,” Betty said her fingertips trailing absently over the edge of the bench. “It’s a nice facility.”

“Only the best,” he replied, glancing around his own lab with a rueful smile. “I’m surprised you’re back so soon, really, the work they’re doing down there in prosthetics neural integration has to be fascinating.”

“I could be happy there,” Betty nodded in agreement. “I wanted to explore the offer here before I really made up my mind.” A flicker of a frown crossed Bruce’s face but he seemed to brush it aside.
“It’s a tough decision to make,” Bruce allowed, turning thoughtful. “It’s not every day you get your choice of career tracks in your field. I thought you’d already ruled out Newark though.”

“Not Newark,” Betty replied hesitantly, biting her lip. “The one here.”

“Here.”

Betty pointed at the floor, hardly meeting his gaze and Bruce froze, staring back at her mutely.

“Tony called yesterday,” She explained. “He said, well, he said I was the missing piece to the puzzle of get Clint’s brain rebooted.”

“That sounds exactly like something he’d say,” Bruce replied emotionlessly.

“And he was just selfish enough to make a bid to hang on to me if he could,” Betty continued, her smile turning strained. “He offered to set me up with a private lab on one of the lower floors with a staff of minions and carte blanche to work on whatever researcher I thought I could use to keep all of the teams’ insides on their inside.”

“That’s a direct quote, isn’t it?” Bruce asked. Betty nodded and he let out a breath. “So. Atlanta or New York.”

“Like you said, it’s a tough choice.”

“Which one are you planning to pick?” he asked softly.

“Which one should I pick?” she asked, turning to look at him.

“You can’t ask me that,” he shook his head, wrapping his arms around his chest. “You can never ask me that.”

“Because you respect me too much as a fellow scientist to try to influence my career choices?” Betty asked. He flinched, looking away.
“Tell me which one not to pick,” she suggested. Bruce shook his head, drawing in a shaky breath.

“Tell me you don’t want me in your life any more,” Betty said, her voice unimaginably gentle as she stepped closer to him. “Bruce, tell me what we had is over, tell me you don’t care for me the way you once did.” Bruce swallowed thickly but he didn’t move, didn’t turn to face her.

“You should choose what you want,” he said finally, the faintest tremor in his voice. “This isn’t about me.”

“What I want,” Betty replied, her hand resting softly on his arm. “Is more of this, more of the Stark expo of inadvisable innovation. More of a world we only dreamed could be possible. Do you remember when I was finishing up my thesis and you were doing post doctoral work in radiophysics and we’d pull all nighters in the lab?”

“And we got drunk one night and tried to come up with the most outlandishly impossible scientific advancements we could think of.” Bruce said with a flicker of a smile.

“I’ve been here less than two weeks and I’ve seen three of them,” Betty said. “I want to see more. Bruce, I want to see them with you, if you’ll let me. I can have Tony set me up with a lab downstairs and I can be here doing the work I want to do, and you can close that door behind you. You’d only have to see me in passing. But what I want is to be here, in this lab with my old lab partner. With the dearest friend I’ve ever had, the love of my life.”

“Betty.” her name was a pained murmur on his lips and she leaned into his side, her fingertips brushing his cheek, turning his eyes to meet hers.

“Tell me,” she whispered.

“You could always tell when I was lying,” he replied helplessly.

“And I will call you on it this time,” She said with a teasing smile. “I might let you get away with it once in a while, but this is not one of those times. Tell me.” Bruce shook his head, looking away.

“Then let me in,” Betty pleaded. “If we were ever going to make this work-” She waved a hand
around the lab and Bruce let out a choked laugh.

“I’m still dangerous.”

“So am I,” she replied. “You might have broken Harlem but I tore up part of Brooklyn.”

“I took out more blocks,” he said, but there was a ghost of a smile on his lips.

“Is this a contest now?” She asked, unamused.

“If anything happened to you-”

“Do you honestly think I don’t feel the same way?” Tears stung her eyes and she drew in a shuddering breath. “There’s a whole universe of unknowns out there. There’s no way to predict what could happen.”

“Maybe when it comes to me, it’s better to let it happen,” Bruce replied, pulling away from her and leaning into the lab bench. “I understand why Clint made the choice he did, I even respect it. But the truth is, there are things that have happened to him in the time I’ve known him, things before that. Real horrors no one should have to face. He could have erased it all, he could have started out with a clean slate and instead he chose to embrace it. The one thing I’ve wanted-”

“If it were you,” Betty said. “if you could get rid of the Hulk but you lost all the memories since then, would you really choose that?”

“I want to say I would, without hesitation.” Bruce said with a sigh. “I want to do anything it takes to make sure he never hurts anyone ever again. But, who I was then, that guy was just as responsible as anyone for what happened.”

“My father lied to you.” Betty pointed out gently. “Bruce, he falsified your data.” Bruce nodded slowly.

“And I trusted him. I trusted him even when I knew you didn’t. I made excuses to myself not to take you seriously. Excuses about needing to prove yourself, to get out of the shadow of a powerful
parent. I never stopped to listen when you tried to tell me you didn’t trust him because you knew he was capable of betrayal.”

“Bruce.”

“If I’d forget everything, that person I used to be, he’d make the same mistakes again. And maybe it wouldn’t end in gamma irradiation, but it would likely be something equally as dangerous. I can’t let that happen.” he let out a shaky breath.

“Clint couldn’t let the people he loves fight alone,” Betty said. “And neither can I.”

“What if I hurt you?”

“If you want to hurt me, tell me you won’t try at all,” she said stubbornly. Bruce let out a hollow laugh, reaching out blindly for her hand and she took it, reeling him in until they were tangled in each other’s arms.

“This is a terrible idea,” he insisted, burying his face in her neck.

“Oh and I don’t know anything about that,” she said, the dry tone spoiled by her tearstained voice. Bruce kissed her cheek, holding on to her for dear life.

“So,” he said, his voice wavering slightly. “New York.”

“New York,” She agreed, holding him tighter.
“Agent Coulson,” JARVIS’ voice murmured into the stillness of Phil’s bedroom. “You have a guest, sir.” Phil let out a groan, pushing himself up on his elbow and blinking to clear his vision. He started at the shadowy figure hovering in the doorway, his brain stumbling clumsily over what he was seeing.

“Lights,” he grumbled roughly. The light in the room increased just enough to reveal Clint, standing on the threshold in a pair of plaid pajama pants and a t-shirt, his hair tousled.

“Hey,” Clint said, glancing around the room awkwardly.

“Barton?” Phil asked in confusion, his brow knitting.

“So,” Clint declared uncomfortably, drawing the word out. “You said we could still have sleepovers?” Phil blinked back at him, stunned. His eye strayed to the clock on the nightstand and he squinted at it, his brain sluggish.

“It’s three in the morning.”

“Unless my memories are really off, I didn’t let that stop me last week,” Clint said, looking chagrined. Phil blinked back at him a moment shaking his head as he heaved himself upright. He dragged a hand over his face, stifling a yawn as Clint crept cautiously into the room. He stopped just a handful of paces from the bed, staring at Phil with an unreadable expression.

“I take it this is important,” Phil said finally. Clint gave a half aborted laugh closing the distance to cautiously sink down on the foot of Phil’s bed.

“I need to tell you,” he paused, biting his lip before looking up to meet Phil’s gaze. “I don’t really like banana pancakes,” Phil gaped at him a moment before letting a chuckle slip past, shaking his head as Clint joined in.

“You got up at three in the morning to tell me that?” Phil asked fondness and exasperation in his tone. Clint’s shoulders slumped and he turned his eyes back toward the floor.

“No, I ah, I got up because I’m still getting memories back when I sleep and um-”
“Whatever it is,” Phil interrupted him, he drew in a steadying breath. “It’s like that time in Detroit, I was bleeding out and delirious and it was a couple of days before I even remembered everything from that mission. You never once brought it up. Don’t think for a moment I wouldn’t do the same for you. I owe you at least that much.” Clint nodded slowly, running his fingers through his hair.

“When you told me you felt guilty about how you recruited me, what did I say?” he asked. Phil winced, hesitating. “Did I tell you it was the best thing that ever happened to me? Did I tell you I wouldn’t trade my life for anything and I wouldn’t have this life without you?” Phil only stared back at him as if unsure how to reply.

“Did I tell you that even when I was angry enough to punch you, I never hated you for any of it?”

“You told me you were glad,” Phil said softly. Clint smiled, nodding. “I’m sorry, Clint, for San Diego, for Budapest, for Providence. For last week. For all of it.”

“I’m not,” Clint said. “Nobody’s perfect, Phil, not even the great Agent Coulson. You made some bad calls, you know I did too. And I was a little shit to you, don’t look like that, I was.”

“You were a kid,” Phil sighed, rubbing the exasperated expression from his face.

“And an asshole,” Clint added with a grin. “But you kept sticking your neck out for me. No matter what I did. Made myself crazy trying to figure out why. And then about an hour ago I woke up, and I remembered being in your room the night before the procedure.” Phil blanched, looking away.

“Some of the last three weeks, some of its still pretty hazy, but,” Clint turned to face him, his expression pinched. “Phil, am I remembering more from you than was actually there?”

“You were horribly injured,” Phil drew in a deep breath before plowing ahead. “You were vulnerable and you came to me for help. For all the times you’ve saved my life the least I could do was help you through a tough time.” Clint stared at him for a long moment, searching eyes reading him.

“Aw, Phil.” He said finally. Phil let out a sigh, tossing aside the blankets and swinging his feet down to the floor so that he and Clint were shoulder to shoulder. “How long?”

“Sarasota,” Phil replied, resigned.
“That was ten years ago.”

“Eleven.” Phil let out a huff of a breath, staring at his bare feet as Clint let out a mumbled curse.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was your SO, your Senior Agent for hundreds of missions, your handler for nearly as many solo operations, and for Strike Team Delta,” Phil replied. “It wouldn’t have been appropriate.”

“Okay,” Clint nodded, accepting, “But that doesn’t explain now.”

“What would have been the point?” Phil gave a tired sigh. “All those missions, around the world and back. It took me all that time to earn your respect, your friendship. All those weeks spent living out of each other’s pockets. You’ve been the very best friend I’ve ever had, but in all that time I never once saw a glimmer of anything more.”

“I guess neither one of us had a clear read on things,” Clint huffed, shaking his head with a hollow laugh. Phil turned to look at him, his brow knitted in confusion. Clint glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, bemusement in the lines on his face. “These last few weeks have been… I lost everything. My career, my memories, my sense of self. It was horrible and terrifying and—" Clint drew in a deep breath.

“I ran to you,” He admitted. “Not Natasha, not Bucky. Not even Tony and I think of him as a brother even more than the one I had. I trust these people in a way I’ve never trusted anyone in my life. And still I ran to you. I crawled into your bed in the middle of the night and I clung to you like a scared kid. Didn’t you stop, even once, to think why?”

“You needed someone who could give you direction,” Phil insisted. “Someone whose guidance you trusted. Who else were you going to look to for that? I was honored. That you’d trust me that much, that even after everything between us you’d still have that much faith in me.”

“I came to you,” Clint confessed softly, shifting closer until his head nearly rested on Phil’s shoulder. “Because you were the one I wanted to be near. I was afraid and when I was with you I wasn’t. I didn’t see it before because I wasn’t looking for it.”
“I don’t understand,” Phil said, turning his head to meet Clint’s gaze, their foreheads nearly touching.

“I always said I see better from a distance,” Clint smiled back at him. “I had to back up a whole decade to get a clear view of what I was feeling.”

“You don’t date men,” Phil blurted out.

“Probably why I didn’t put it together,” Clint replied with a self depreciating grin. “You know, the circus for its faults, is a pretty live and let live kind of place. If I’d been attracted to a guy when I was a kid I wouldn’t have thought anything of it. You get older, you get used to things, you just assume.”

“Clint,” Phil choked out as Clint’s fingers tangled with his, his other hand reaching up hesitantly to cup Phil’s cheek.

“Phil, I’m going to kiss you know,” Clint said, a hint of humor in his tone. “And when I’m done, you’re going to be the one who decides if I ever get to kiss you again.”

Phil couldn’t breathe, his vision swimming and his head light as tender lips caressed his own, a tingle shooting up his spine. He surged up into the kiss before he could stop himself and he dearly hoped the pathetic whine he’d just heard had come from Clint. His hand was in Clint’s hair, pulling him into the kiss, his other hand slipping across Clint’s long torso, his palm grazing tight muscle beneath soft cotton. Clint’s stomach tightened under his touch and he shivered. Alarm bells went off inside Phil’s head, too much, too fast, and he scrambled back, tearing himself away.

“I’m sorry,” Phil gasped out, his heart racing as he shifted back, distancing himself. “I didn’t mean…” he choked on the words, his heart sinking into his stomach like a lead brick.

“Don’t,” Clint’s voice trembled and Phil winced.

“I shouldn’t have,” Phil began again.

“No,” Clint’s tone was fierce and Phil forced himself to meet his eye. He looked almost angry and Phil tamped down the urge to be sick. “Don’t you ever say that again.”
Phil stared back at him a long, silent moment, his face etched with befuddlement. Clint was breathing so hard his shoulders shifted with each inhale. His pale, soft lips parted and his blue eyes dark.

“I,” Phil began, his brain short circuiting as he watched Barton slowly swallow.

“Remember when I said you could decide if I ever got to kiss you again?” Clint asked hoarsely. Phil nodded.

“I totally lied,” Clint declared. In the next moment Phil was tumbling back onto the bed, lips drinking from his greedily like a man in the desert. He floundered a moment waffling between terror and desire so quickly he felt seasick and then calloused fingertips caressed his ribs, rucking up his t-shirt and Phil completely lost the ability to think at all.

This kiss was more sure, more confident, Clint’s chapped lips exploring, coaxing, his fingertips dancing feather light over any patch of bare skin within reach. Clint ducked his head to nip at Phil’s jaw and Phil sucked in a breath, his hands fisting in Clint’s shirt.

“Clint?” he gasped out, giving a sharp tug. Clint let out a little moan, pressing his lips to Phil’s throat.

“Too… too fast,” Phil murmured as Clint dove back in to taste his mouth again.

“Love fast,” Clint murmured against his lips.

“No, I,” Phil let out a whimper as Clint left a sharp bite behind his ear. “Clint.” He gave another rough tug to the t-shirt and Clint pulled back reluctantly, his pupils blown wide as he looked into Phil’s eyes.

“I want to do this right,” Phil whispered. “I want to take you to dinner and steal kisses in the elevator when no one’s looking and… I want you to stay. If that isn’t what this is, I need to know now.” Clint stared back at him breathlessly a moment, finally his head bent, his forehead resting on Phil’s chest.
“Phil,” he whispered. Phil’s hand was not shaking as it carded gently though Clint’s hair. “You’re an idiot sometimes.” Phil’s hand stilled and Clint raised his head, a gentle smile on his face as he stretched up, brushing a tender kiss on Phil’s forehead.

“Nobody’s ever kissed me like that before,” he murmured, shifting to let his lips flutter softly over Phil’s eyelids, first one then the other.

“Like?” Phil looked up at him his brow furrowed. Clint met his gaze with a smile that was at once both joyful and sad.

“Like I matter,” Clint admitted.

“You’ve always mattered,” Phil confessed, his expression pained. “Always.” Clint slowly slumped down on the bed, curling into Phil, their legs tangling together.

“Oh god I missed this so much,” Clint murmured into Phil’s neck. “I don’t think I realized how much until…” Phil pulled him closer, hugging him fiercely.

“Me too,” Phil choked out.

“What if we pretended that all the awkwardness and stupidity and stuff didn’t happen,” Clint asked softly. “and instead we’ll pretend that I was really suave and I came in here and swept you off your feet because I finally realized that you felt the same way I did?”

“Have you been watching Hallmark movies again?” Phil asked, tamping down his smile as Clint giggled into his neck.

“Judging my garbage TV is cold, man, and you have no room to talk,” Clint replied his tone so dry it made Phil chuckle. “But I’d agree to give them up if you let me kiss you again.” Phil was silent in consideration for a moment.

“No,” he said finally.

“No?” There was a touch of hurt in Clint’s tone and Phil drew in a deep breath. In the next moment
he executed a roll, pinning Clint beneath him and kissing him fiercely.

“I think it’s my turn,” Phil teased gently.

“Hell yes!” Clint gasped out, an obscene giggle leaving his lips as Phil dove back in.

“Stay for breakfast?” Phil asked, his hands moving under Clint’s t-shirt.

“No banana pancakes,” Clint nodded eagerly, his hands fisting in Phil’s T-shirt.
“How do you know if the Waffle’s done?” Clint’s arm was braced on the counter, his head resting on it as he eyed the waffle iron from the side. A tiny dollop of batter had overrun the edge and was slowly crisping on the case.

“We wait until it beeps,” Phil replied, the faintest twitch of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“But how does the iron know?” Clint demanded. Phil ducked his head, hiding his smile and Clint grinned back at him smugly before rolling up into a languid stretch, raising his arms until the hem of his t-shirt tugged up over his abs. Phil let his gaze linger until the waffle iron let out a sad, plaintive tone. Clint held the stretch a moment more, a smirk curling his lips and he shifted closer. When he lowered his arms they were very conveniently draped over Phil’s shoulders.

“Comfortable?” Phil asked, amusement in his arid tone as he refilled the waffle iron. Clint let out a hum of assent, tucking his head next to Phil’s and turning his gaze toward the breakfast bar.

“We could just as easily make use of the hall here in the tower,” Thor was suggesting, his brow furrowed.

“No, I think you’re right about the private island,” Jane replied pausing to sip her coffee. “It’s a bit of a chore to pack up and get there, but it’s more of a horror to deal with the paparazzi here in the city. If we pick something small and remote we won’t have to deal with them until after the honeymoon.”

“I shall take you to honeymoon on Asgard and then you may avoid them entirely.” Thor said with a warm smile. Jane let out a soft laugh before leaning up to kiss him.

“Well damn,” the sound of Tony’s voice from the doorway made Clint tense but almost instantly Phil’s fingertips lightly brushed his wrist in a comforting gesture and he settled, turning his attention back to Phil who was making a show of watching the waffle iron.

“Told you,” Darcy hitched her way around Tony in the doorway, snapping her fingers twice as she held out her hand.
“Ms. Lewis, would you please refrain from betting Tony on your coworkers romantic lives?” Phil asked drily as Tony extracted his money clip from his pocket and peeled two hundred dollar bills from the roll, handing them to Darcy without his eyes ever leaving Phil and Clint.

“I’m up almost ten grand!” Darcy replied pitifully, clutching the bills to her heart as if they were a dowager’s pearls. “Can’t I at least keep betting him until I have enough for a down payment on a condo?”

“You don’t need a condo,” Tony turned to her, looking hurt.

“I don’t need it now,” she huffed, flouncing toward the k cup machine. “I’m not retiring in this funny farm. I don’t even want to consider the possibility of rattling around her at 92 with my walker, toting a fire extinguisher while I follow after you.”

“As much as it pains me to say it, I’m not going to be here when you’re 92,” Tony said, looking as if the mere thought were horrifying.

“A hundred bucks says you think of some way to download your brain directly into the suit,” Darcy stated, pointing at him.

“Darcy!” Phill snapped.

“I’m going to need that money when I’m 92!” She protested, Clint let out a snort of a laugh, stifling it in Phil’s neck.

“Oh you’ve got to be kidding me,” Sam said, coming in the opposite doorway, fresh from his morning run. Steve offered him a sympathetic pat on the back as Sam glared at Clint and Phil.


“I do this for a living,” Sam snapped as he handed a twenty to Steve. “How did you pick up on this and I didn’t?”
“Everyone always assumes I’m the clueless idiot,” Steve shrugged, pocketing his money as he made his way toward the fridge.

“Pay up Barnes,” Natasha announced as she glided regally into the room in her pajama pants and tank top, her hair in a mussy ponytail.

“Oh you’re shitting me!” Bucky leaned in through the kitchen doorway, his own hair askew. He gaped at Clint still half wrapped around Phil for a moment before letting a string of expletives out under his breath. Steve turned to Sam before pointing at his best friend wordlessly.

“I do suppose a score of attendants is a bit excessive,” Thor was saying pensively. “I would have liked to have Sif stand with me, she has been my dearest friend since childhood, but she would never agree to be constrained in the formal wear of Midgard, it would inhibit her ability to fight. I am not sure how else to settle on just one without undue hurt.”

“I’ve seen Sif’s fashion sense, tell her she can wear whatever she likes,” Jane said practically.

“Oh, oh, oh,” Darcy bounded up to them, her coffee clutched in both hands as she leaned over the breakfast bar, vibrating with excitement. “Please tell me Sif and I can go bridesmaid shopping on Asgard! Please, please, please, please, please!”

“Fine with me,” Jane said with a shrug, pointing at her as Darcy bounced with glee. “No plunging necklines, my mom’ll freak. Wish I could get off that easy.”

“Can you not?” Thor asked. Jane seemed to consider this a long moment.

“Can I not.” She said finally with a nod.

“I’m gonna call Sif and we’re Kleinfelding on Asgard!” Darcy raised both hands in the air, her coffee sloshing dangerously.

“That’s not a verb,” Jane sighed.

“You seem… relaxed,” Clint said, giving Natasha an inquisitive look. He glanced over at Bucky
who was lazily eating cheerios out of the box as he slumped against the counter before turning back to her.

“You’re not going to congratulate me?” She asked with a hint of mocking in her tone.

“No, he really doesn’t deserve you,” Clint said with a shrug. “Way to go, Buck!” Bucky gave him a thumbs up in reply as Natasha choked on a snort of laughter.

“Do you feel dumb now for asking me if I was sure I didn’t want to make a grab for Clint instead?” Betty asked impishly over her shoulder as Bruce followed her into the kitchen.

“Not as dumb as I’m going to feel when Pepper collects on our bet,” he muttered rubbing his forehead as he settled at the breakfast bar. Betty brushed a kiss to his temple before shifting around Bucky to put the tea kettle on.

“Shit, if I’d known it would take me nearly dying to dispel all that sexual tension around here I’d have blown myself up a long time ago,” Clint declared, rolling his eyes.

“Too soon,” Phill murmured back, wincing. Clint let out a rough chuckle reaching out to grasp the back of Tony’s shirt and giving it a tug so that he tumbled backward with a startled yelp. Clint caught him around the chest, locking his arm so that Tony was effectively trapped.

“What the hell, Barton?”

“You were the one all uppity because you were left out of the last round of team building debauchery,” Clint replied, hugging him tighter as the others pretended not to laugh.

“And Steve wonders why I don’t want to live here,” Sam said to no one in particular. Pepper swept in from the rec room, pausing to pat his arm consolingly. She stopped at the edge of the breakfast bar, carefully considering the tangle of human limbs at the waffle iron.

“Does this confirm or negate our bet?” She asked Bruce curiously as he resignedly handed her a ten.
“I think they're just dallying with him,” Bruce replied as she tucked the bill away with a nod.

“If you’re going to borrow my things, Phil, make sure I get them back in one piece.”

“Will do,” Phil answered with a nod as Tony gave her a horrified look.

“A little help here?” he demanded.

“No,” Pepper replied with her most evil smile, kissing his cheek. Tony fumed only a moment longer before Clint shifted his hold, kissing his other cheek before letting him slip away.

“You seem to be doing well,” Betty observed, leaning into the counter beside Clint and Phil with a smile as she sipped her coffee.

“Not bad,” Clint nodded, his ears turning pink. “There’s a couple of gaps in some of my memories of the more eventful missions and that’s a little disconcerting, I have a really good memory. We haven’t met, by the way, I’m Clint.”

“No, I don’t suppose we have,” she replied with a bright smile, shaking his hand. “By eventful do you mean traumatic?”

“Sure, let’s go with that,” Clint nodded. “They’re not big gaps, I know there’s something there, it’s just hazy. It’s kind of hard to explain.”

“One hundred percent success was never a goal,” she said gently. “But if you feel like you have fairly solid memories from the last decade that’s the best we could hope for. Hopefully most of the memories you lost were ones you’d be okay forgetting?” Clint nodded in reply.

“I don’t remember the procedure,” Clint said tentatively.

“Oh thank god,” Tony declared, leaning into the counter on both hands as if he were struggling to keep his legs under him. Steve reached over to grip his shoulder reassuringly but he looked relieved as well. Clint gave Phil a one armed squeeze before peeling himself free.
“Tony, I know this is going to make you uncomfortable as hell, but thanks,” he said. “Thanks for saving my life and thanks for everything you did to screw my head back on straight. All of you, really, thank you.” He gave Betty, Bruce, Jane, and Darcy his best grin and Darcy returned it with a thumbs up. He drew in a deep breath, his eye sweeping the room and he gave Natasha a fond smile before turning to Bucky.

“Thanks for letting me be a screwup,” Clint said, his grin widening when Bucky only shrugged in reply. Clint reached out to pull him into a rough hug and Bucky went without protest.

“Any time, man,” he said, patting Clint on the back. He turned thoughtful a moment as he stepped back. “No shovel speech?”

“If you screw it up, she’ll kill you,” Clint said with a shrug.

“Good speech,” Bucky nodded.

“Phil.”

Phil’s shoulders stiffened and he turned slowly, facing Clint across the kitchen.

“Thanks for letting me choose,” Clint said, his voice going rough. “I want to believe I was never going to choose anything different. But thanks for letting me. You guys are the best and I wouldn’t trade this for anything, but it means the world that I have backup for out of the field too.” Phil gave him a watery smile that Clint returned as Steve edged up beside him, draping his arm over Clint’s shoulders.

“So, you’re going to want back on the roster then?” he asked, trying to sound neutral and failing miserably.

“Yes I want back on the damn roster, Cap,” Clint replied, exasperated. He turned to Bucky with a frown. “And don’t think you’re getting off it, I’ve been bitching about a backup sniper for ages.”

“Me, the backup sniper?” Barns replied with an affronted look as Steve choked on a laugh.
“Hurts to be second best,” Clint acknowledged, loping easily back across the kitchen to Phil.

“Second best my ass,” Bucky grumbled, swearing violently half under his breath as Clint tangled his arms around Phil’s waist with a contented hum. Phil shook his head, leaning back into the embrace.

“You made the right call when you brought me in,” he said softly against Phil’s ear.

“I.”

“I was never going to cooperate,” Clint interrupted him. “I was angry and distrusting and barely house broken and still wet behind the ears and I was never going to sign on to a federal contract without duress. If you’d given me a plea deal I’d have just ended up back in trouble, not because I wanted to be there but because I didn’t know how to stay out.”

“You were a good kid with no opportunities,” Phil insisted. “I could have given you one.”

“You did,” Clint nodded. “The very best one you could have given me.” Phil turned in his arms, brushing a gentle kiss on his lips.

“Aw for chrissakes,” Tony grumbled, extracting another hundred from his money clip and handing it to a squealing Darcy who was clapping like a seal as she bounced on her toes.

“Darcy!” Phil snapped as he pulled back from the kiss.

“Retirement condo!” She insisted, stuffing the bill into her bra and sticking out her tongue.

“I am never living in this nut house,” Sam said to Steve, shaking his head. “Don’t even ask.”
And that's all she wrote. (finally)

I've got a couple of projects in my other Avengers universe that I want to work on before I come back to this one. There are two chapter stories outlined for this universe: One story before this one, and one after When the Bough Breaks. The one before is more finished, the one after is more Jamie so I am, understandably, completely confused as to what I should be writing when I come back to it. But that's a ways off. If you bookmark the series you should find out what's going on though. For now, it's back to Coulson Lives.

End Notes

Feeling confused? Emotionally mistreated? Frustrated with the update schedule? Me too... gee, it's like we're twins or something, tell me all about it on Tumblr: niennanir.tumblr.com

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