### Finding Nemo

by LinguisticJubilee

**Summary**

Phil Coulson got turned into an octopus, got turned *out of* an octopus, fell in love with Clint Barton, and got stabbed in the heart by a magical space staff. It's been a weird ten years.

It's about to get weirder.

**Notes**

**ETA: THIS MOTHERFUCKER IS FINISHED, COMPLETE, DONE WITH, ALL TOLD. BOOYEAH.**

I started writing this fic a year ago. It's still not finished, both for personal reasons and because the fic keeps getting longer than I'm expecting. But I've been sitting on the first chapter for a year, and you've all been so patient with me, so I wanted to share it with you early. Here's some important things to know:

1. This fic will get finished. Just not, you know, today. I don't know when the next update will come.
2. This chapter ends on a cliffhanger. If that worries you, please don't feel bad about waiting until the fic gets finished.

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**Finding Nemo**

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3. Octo!Phil always has a happy ending.

This fic also carries with it the usual warning of "GRAPHIC DEPICTIONS OF VIOLENCE." People get dead in this fic. And yet I still call it crack. IDK.

I love you all. The support and enthusiasm you give these silly little stories means so much to me, that I wanted to give you something back. Enjoy <3 <3

(If you don't know what Octo!Phil is, [click here](#))

See the end of the work for more [notes](#).
“Phil.” There’s a hand lightly on his shoulder, and Phil is awake in an instant.

“Phil, you gotta come quick, something’s wrong.” Clint is standing by the bed in his pajamas, visibly shaking. Phil leaps out of bed, but Clint grabs his wrist before he can reach for the gun in the nightstand. Clint tugs him out the door and into the light of the living room. “Clint, what’s—”

“There.” Clint parks them in front of the small aquarium. “Look.” He drops Phil’s wrist to point at the tank emphatically.

Phil glances at the tank briefly before turning back to Clint. “What is—”

“Mindy’s eating her eggs.”

Phil stares blearily at the tank, blue-green light harsh in his eyes. “What,” he manages, the adrenaline subsiding finally.

Clint’s standing in nothing but his purple sleep pants, and his arms are hugged tight to his chest. “Mindy’s eating her eggs.”

“What time is it?”

“Three-thirty.” Clint worries his lip. “I couldn’t sleep, too much coffee, you know, so I came out here ‘cause the fish calm me and Mindy was eating her unborn babies.”

Phil peers back into the tank and sees little blue Mindy by her clutch, her stripes shining as she cheerfully gobbles one egg after another. “I’m sorry, Clint,” he says, sighing, “but there’s nothing we can do. It takes angelfish a while to learn how to be good parents. The next time will be better.”

Clint grabs his wrist again. “But can’t you, you know,” he drops his voice conspiratorially, “tell her to stop eating their eggs?”

Phil rubs his forehead with his free hand. “That’s not how it works. And even if it was, angelfish are too stupid to understand anything. If they were smarter, they wouldn’t eat their eggs.”

Clint’s ducks his head to look in the tank. “There were so many,” he says, his voice quiet.

Phil steps closer. “It’ll be okay. Mork and Mindy will—”

“Danny.”

“What?”

“Mindy and Danny, not Mork and Mindy. I keep telling you this.” Clint looks back at Phil and offers him a tiny smile.

Phil stares at him for a stupidly long time. He stares at Clint’s stupid smile and the circles under his eyes and Phil can see beyond him to the kitchen where two coffee mugs sit on the windowsill and a Costco bag of Famous Amos cookies is upended on the counter. It’s three in the morning, and Clint woke him up to try and talk the fish out of eating their own young. “Jesus Christ,” he says finally, “please marry me.”
Clint’s eyes grow huge. He looks behind him, which is ridiculous because it's not like there’s going to be someone else in their apartment Phil’s proposing to. He looks back at Phil, eyebrows knit together and mouth open. “Marry you? Like, marry marry you? Like, wedding marry you?”

“Like, marry marry me. Wedding marry me. For the love of god, please.”

Clint looks at Phil, and Phil has dreamed of this moment so many times, but no fantasies of dreams and beaches could ever be as perfect as this moment. Clint shakes his head. “Why do people always assume you’re the sane one?”

Phil smiles. “No idea.”

Clint laughs. Phil is in love with the sound. “Okay. Okay, you crazy fucker, I’ll marry you.”

“Thank god.” His heart might burst out of his chest in happiness. “Can we go back to sleep now? It’s too early.”

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Phil peeks a look at his phone for the fifth time that day.

CB: ugh i hate this lets just steal nicki and clara and get married by elvis hashtag vegas
Me: You can just type #, you know. It’s available on your keyboard.

CB: ur a eggplant emoji
Me: Again, there’s a button for that. Emojis were in fact created to replace words.

Phil doesn’t know why he’s giggling like a teenager about texting. Clint and Phil spend plenty of missions apart, and Phil has never felt the need to duck into the bathroom and text Clint constantly. Yet on this mission the team has yet to leave the safehouse, and Phil finds himself constantly sneaking his phone out of his pocket to see if he missed a message. It’s just...Clint agreed to marry him. It’s been three weeks and the thought still makes him giddy.

Pham bangs on the bathroom door. “Coulson, for the love of your disgusting Debbie Donuts, will you please get your ass out of the bathroom?”

Shit. Coulson flushes the toilet hurriedly, knowing he’s not fooling anyone. As he steps out of the cramped bathroom, Pham places a hand on his shoulder. “Now,” she says wryly, “I know ya’ll text like twelve-year-olds when you’re away from each other. And I know this mission is a lot of ‘hurry up and wait,’ but give us all a break. The bathroom is not for piddling around on your phone but for actually, you know, piddling?”

Coulson snorts. “Alright, Pham.”

She bows her head theatrically. “We thank you for your sacrifice.”

At that moment, the burner phone Agent Jimenez has been staring at pings loudly. She scrambles out of her chair and checks it. “We have an address!” she shouts.

“Oh, hell no,” Pham swears and rushes into the restroom.

Their destination is a warehouse in a shitty suburb of Sydney where they’ve received reports of someone hiding a few vials of Banner’s blood. No one really expects there to actually be vials, but
there’s some politics between SHIELD and the Australians that need careful handling, so they’re investigating it anyway. It’s dark by the time they drive up to the warehouse lot. Jimenez and Coulson take the upper floor while Romo and Alexander take the ground floor, with Pham watching in the van as always.

The warehouse belongs to a janitorial services contractor, and the shelves were meticulously labeled cleaning supplies. They search for fifteen minutes, unscrewing bottles and rifling through boxes, but absolutely nothing looks out of place, let alone capable of storing blood samples. “I think this is a dud,” Jimenez says, putting a roll of toilet paper up to her eye like a spyglass.

That’s when a shot sounds and Jimenez falls to the ground, dead. Phil ducks to the floor and the power goes out. His comm screeches and goes silent. “Does anyone copy?” He asks.

Gunshots erupt downstairs. Phil unholsters his gun and rises to his knees, careful to remain out of the view of the windows.

A scream pierces the air behind him, and he pivots to face it. It sounds like— but Phil ignores it. Everything sounds like Clint when Phil is anxious.

“Can anyone hear me?” He asks again. The comm is silent, even though shots still ring out from the ground floor.

The person screams again. It’s a masculine, throaty scream, and it seems to be coming from the back of the warehouse. Phil crouches and walks towards it, even as something in the back of his mind tells him he shouldn’t.

“PHIL!”

His heart begins racing, because that’s Clint, he knows it. He runs towards the back.

“Phil! Oh god, oh god, PHIL!”

It sounds like it’s coming from behind a door in the back, but Phil can barely see anything. His eyes itch, and the world around him flattens as it sharpens. Color bleeds away as the light from the windows brightens, and he can see the layout of the floor clearly for the first time since the lights went out. Someone behind the door in the back is using a flashlight, and Phil can track its glow through the crack in the door.

Clint screams again, and Phil can’t stop himself. He kicks down the door, gun held high. The lights surge back on, blinding Phil. Something hits Phil, hard, in the back of the head, and he drops his gun.

“Phil!” Clint cries, voice full of pain, and he sounds so close.

“Clint!” Phil struggles to stand. His arms shake with the effort of pulling himself up. “CLINT!” Phil can hear the scrape of shoes on linoleum, and he rolls out of the way of a kick.

“Phil!” He hears, and where is Clint? “Oh god, oh god, PHIL!”

Phil doesn’t know what to do. His head is foggy from the hit. What should he do? Phil’s eyesight begins to adjust, and he sees a foot fly at his stomach. Phil kicks out with his leg, trying to trip the man, but Phil’s shoe falls off, revealing a socked tentacle. Oh. He wraps the tentacle around the man’s leg, pulling him down to Phil’s level. The man’s head hits the ground with a sickening crack and he goes still.
Phil can hear footsteps of more men approaching. “CLINT!” Phil tries to stand, but both legs are tentacles now. Clint is still screaming. This is not what Phil needs, Phil needs something different, he needs to be bigger or stronger or faster. Someone wrenches his arms out from under him, forcing them behind his back. He feels a ripple of pain through his arms, and they turn into tentacles, too. He twists out of the person’s grip and rolls away.

“PHIL! OH GOD, OH GOD, PHIL!”

This is not what Clint needs, Clint needs something different, something more, and before Phil realizes what is happening his whole body is seizing. “NO!” He shouts, but he can’t stop it. Clint is still screaming when Phil’s hearing fades out.

Phil is an octopus. An octopus on dry land, and he can’t fight back when a grim-faced goon stuffs him into a tight black bag.***

“Clint.” The light in bedroom flicks on and Clint jolts awake. Natasha is standing in the doorway, looking serious.

He glances at the alarm clock, which blinks back 4:22 in a weary green. “What’s wrong?”

“Nick needs to speak to you.”

“What’s wrong?” He repeats, sitting up. Something is always wrong at 4 a.m. (He got engaged at 3:30 a.m. and was sound asleep by four o’clock, thank you very much.)

“Nick will tell you. He’s waiting in the kitchen.”

Clint rubs a hand over his face, disguising how alert he is. His SHIELD cell phone hasn’t gone off once. Nick is in his kitchen, and he brought Natasha to run interference. Then is only one possibility that’s both shitty enough AND personal enough to warrant such careful handling: something’s wrong with Phil. Shit. “Why are you even here?” he groans, buying time.

“Because Nick said, and I quote, ‘One of the perks of being Director is not having to see Barton naked.’”

“Hey, I’m not naked,” Clint says, offended. “I’m only naked when Phil’s here.” And oh god, what if Phil’s dead and Clint will never be naked with him again?

“Get your ass up, Barton,” Tasha says. Clint complies, pulling on a pair of clean sweatpants and the hoodie Phil left on a chair. It smells like Phil and what the hell is happening? He follows Nat out the door.

Nick is standing in the kitchen with his back to them, peering down to look in the aquarium. “I thought your fish had eggs.”

“Mindy ate them all,” Clint says acidly. “What’s going on?”

“Sit down, Barton.” The three of them sit at Clint and Phil’s rickety kitchen table. Clint drums his fingers on the table until he freezes under Nick’s stare. “I’m going to tell you a story, Barton, and you’re not going to ask me any questions until I’m finished.”

“What kind of story?” Clint asks, because he’s a dick.
Nick just stares at him, unimpressed. “An hour ago Coulson and his team were ambushed during a routine pickup at a warehouse. After the dust settled, Coulson was missing and another agent was dead.”

Clint sucks in a breath. “Did—”

“Not done. Agent Romo reports that Coulson and another agent were on the upper floor of the warehouse when they were attacked. Coulson and Jimenez stopped answering their comms during the fight. About fifteen minutes later the assailants retreated. When Romo and the others went upstairs, Jimenez was dead and Coulson was missing. The tracker in his comm had been disabled.”

Clint nods, trying to remain calm. “So then—”

“Not done.”

“Goddammit!” Clint punches the table, hiding his face in his other hand. “Okay.”

“When the team did a sweep of the building, they found a tracker on the floor of a backroom of the warehouse. They couldn’t identify it, so they began running tests on it and set it off. That’s when I was brought in, because that is a tracker I implanted in Coulson the last time he almost died.”

Clint brought his head up. “Phil had a tracker?”

“No, uh-uh, you answer me this. Phil had a tracker?”

“Yes. It was no way connected with SHIELD.”

Clint’s eyes narrow. “Did Phil know he had a tracker?”

Nick shrugs. “I care about him.” Like that’s a fucking answer.

“Do I have a tracker?”

“Phil cares about you.”

Clint turns to Nat. “Do you have a tracker?”

Nat smiles ruthlessly. “Not anymore.”

“What the fuck,” Clint says, looking from Nat to Nick. He is surrounded by crazy people with no concept of boundaries. He rubs at his temples. “So this tracker, the bad guys cut it out or what?”

Nick shakes his head. “The tracker they found was completely devoid of organic material. No blood, no skin, not a single cell. The only stuff on it was dust from the floor and a clothing fiber.”

Not a single cell. “Oh, shit.” Clint looks over at the aquarium. “They turned him into an octopus.”

“It’s a good plan. Turn him helpless, take his clothes and all evidence of him. You confuse the hell out of the guys that would be searching for him, and now you’ve got a senior SHIELD agent completely dependent on you. They didn’t know about the tracker—”

“Nobody knew about the tracker,” Clint grumbles.

“—so it got left on the ground when Coulson’s freaky transformation popped it out clean as a
whistle. This means we’re looking for people with a lot of brainpower behind them to pull something like this off. Phil’s alive,” Nick adds, an emotional note in his voice. “No one goes to this kind of effort to kill someone.”

“Right,” Clint whispers. Phil is alive. He’s a red and white octopus in the clutches of unknown baddies and god knows what they want from him, but he’s alive.

“The guys on the ground in Australia are trying to track the goons who took him. I sent Maria down there with special instructions to watch for anything suspicious from the team. We three need to figure out the bigger picture. These guys need inside knowledge of Coulson’s file, a stationary base to hide a functioning tank, and access to Tesseract energy to turn him.”

“Actually,” Natasha says idly, “that last one is not necessarily true.”

Both Nick and Clint turn to look at her.

She smiles grimly. “Coulson’s ‘condition’ has flared up five times since Barton first found him. Tesseract energy was only involved in two of those incidents.”

Nick shakes his head. “There’s a holdover, sometimes, Phil told me that.”

“Did you ever question what provokes that holdover?” Natasha raises an eyebrow. “Coulson freely admits himself that he doesn’t have control over it. What does he say whenever someone asks him to change on command?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Clint repeats, a bitter taste in his mouth.

Natasha nods. “So how does it work? What causes these incidents?” She waits a beat, and the silence is damning. “I have a theory, no more than that.”

Nick snorts. “A theory you didn’t feel like sharing?”

“I shared it with the one person who needed to know. I’m not responsible for what he did with the information after that.” She sighs. “The three incidents are isolated from each other and varied in the type of characteristic Coulson exhibited. But all were reactions to a real or perceived threat. Not a threat to himself, because I think we’ve all seen Coulson put himself in danger several times throughout the years with no supernatural side effects.” Natasha looks Clint in the eyes. “All three incidents involved a threat to you, Clint.”

Clint looks into Natasha’s serious eyes. His knee-jerk reaction is to shout no, but. Clint can still see it, just like it was yesterday: the large, bright eye of a humpback whale floating just above the water, come to deliver his ship-wrecked ass to Phil. He can hear Natasha, her voice steady as she tells him she saw a color-changing Coulson in the middle of a HYDRA base. And he can see Phil, embarrassed and ink-smudged, saying it was just instincts. “No, no that’s not right.” Clint says, shaking himself out of his brain. “That one time in the HYDRA cell, maybe, and the whales, but. When he suddenly grew an ink sac and emptied it, that was just a mess-up in R&D, that didn’t have anything to do with me.”

Nick points a finger at Clint. “Fuck, it did. They were experimenting with arrow tips that explode mid-air and their prototype set the bow on fire. It scared the shit out of Phil, that’s why he was so shaken up.”

“But, but tonight. I was here. I wasn’t in danger, I was in bed.”

Natasha leans forward. “If they faked it, if they could make Phil believe they got to you, his body
could respond automatically. They could turn him without Tesseract energy.”

Clint’s eyes prick dangerously. “He never told me.”

“Yeah, and I can see why,” Nick says, rubbing his forehead. “Don’t tell me you wouldn’t have run for the hills the moment you found out you could be a danger to Phil. And I never would have let the two of you work together in the field. He probably knew for years and never said anything.”

Fuck you, Phil. “Why didn’t I figure it out?”

Nick grimaces. “It would appear that you and I have the same weakness, Clint. We both believe Phil when he says he has something under control.”

God, Phil, fuck you twice. Clint stands up and moves to the aquarium. He watches Mindy and Danny swim around each other happily. Nothing good ever happens at four a.m.

“Our job just got simpler,” Nick says, because Nick Fucking Fury can get his head back on track after his mind got blown a hell of alot faster than Clint can. “Or really fucking harder, depending on how you look at it. We’re not just trying to find someone with access to Coulson’s file. We’re looking for someone who knows the situation so well they can draw the same conclusion as Romanov. We’re looking for a mole among our own.”

Clint stares at the fish. Mindy poops mid-swim. “I feel you, Mindy,” Clint murmurs, watching the turd float to the surface. “I feel you.”
Chapter Summary

“It is ass o’clock in the morning,” Melinda May says at the other end of the conference table, “so you better have a good reason for why I’m here instead of at home in my bunny slippers.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil opens his eyes and immediately knows something is wrong. Instead of blinking his eyelids he widens his pupils because octopuses do not have eyelids and Phil is an octopus. Again. He’s held captive. Again.

Phil is getting really tired of these--what did Clint call them? Octopus occasions? Or was it cephalopod circumstances?

*Clint.* Phil shoots up, whirling around the room. A quick overview says it’s a research lab, white and shiny, with nothing to suggest where a kidnapped archer may be hidden. Phil can still hear his screams, *Phil, oh god, oh god, Phil…* Phil runs a tentacle on the side of the glass, thinking.

A side-effect of Phil’s transformation is the complete erasure of any physical injuries, like a reset button on the cellular level. This means Phil is free from his concussion and can review his memories with clarity. He doesn’t remember Clint saying anything *but* those words, over and over again, *Phil, oh god, oh god, Phil.* Why wouldn’t Clint say something else when Phil barged into the room? For that matter, did Phil even see Clint?

Was Clint there, in the warehouse? Or was it just a room full of goons with a recorded message, waiting to take Phil down?

Phil has always known he runs the risk of turning tentacled when someone he loves is in danger. But the way he sees it, it’s not any different for him than it would be for anybody else. Everyone Phil loves has risked their lives for him at one point or another. Yeah, Phil runs the added risk of gaining six extra legs and gills, but that’s no excuse to shirk his duty. But the idea that someone knew about it, and exploited it? That chafes. That is unacceptable.

His anger is calming, in a strange sort of way. It gives him a purpose: get out of here, and get to Clint. Then drag Clint to an altar before another mission or kidnapper or whatever can interrupt their wedding. That’s the end goal. Clint. Altar. In order to get to that altar, he needs to start at Step One: surveying his surroundings.

He’s in a tank with a base that measures about four feet by two feet. It’s barely enough for Phil to stretch out in, and his tentacles brush up against the glass unless he curls them in. The bottom of the tank is covered with standard black aquarium rocks, all polished and about uniform sized. There’s a few strands of kelp growing out from the bottom, and some snails along the floor that Phil presumes is a snack. He swims upward, guessing the tank to be about five feet high, with a dark lid fitting over the last six inches. He reaches a tentacle up to attach to the top of the lid…and slides off.
Phil shakes his tentacle, confused. He reaches up again. The lid of the tank is coated with some sort of fiber, slick and uniform to the touch. He can’t sucker onto it, no matter how hard he tries. He sticks a tentacle to the glass wall, just to make sure the problem isn’t him. But no, Phil can stick just fine to everything except those strange fibers. He floats back down, and is able to immediately identify his nemesis.

The floor around his tank is surrounded by Astroturf. Barf-green, sickly shiny, fake grass. Phil was right in his initial assessment that his tank is in a research lab. Men and women in sharp lab coats sit in front of science equipment, and all that equipment sits on carpeting made entirely of Astroturf. There’s a tank to his right with scallops and snails, and a tank to his left with a black-and-white striped sea snake, and the lids to both of them have been entirely covered with green astroturf. If Phil would guess, the outside of his lid is carpeted as well. He reaches up to touch his furry ceiling, but there’s something about the slick and rubbery nature of Astroturf that sends his leg slipping away from the surface.

Phil’s in hell. Green, fuzzy, plastic hell. He bangs his head against the glass.

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“It is ass o’clock in the morning,” Melinda May says at the other end of the conference table, “so you better have a good reason for why I’m here instead of at home in my bunny slippers.” She says bunny slippers with the same disgust Clint might say tax season.

“Someone took Phil,” Clint says before Nat and Nick can, since he’s trying to show emotional control or some shit, “and we need to find who outed him as part cephalopod.”

Long before Clint had ever met Phil, the Captain America dork turned aquarium exhibit, he had heard the rumors about Agent Coulson, the hero gone tragically missing in action. Coulson was a mythic hero constructed of tall tales, like Johnny Appleseed or Mick Jagger, and Clint had been delighted to learn that most of the legends were true, including: Phil Coulson discovered a double agent by the way he filled out Form 23-D. “Everyone messes up,” Phil had said when Clint asked about it. “One little detail can unravel someone’s cover, even if it’s a suspiciously clean browser history. The bastard always gets caught.”

Now there’s another double agent, someone who sold Phil’s cephalopod secrets to the bad guys, and Clint’s really fucking hoping this particular bastard has left their own dirty digital fingerprints all over this mess. Back at Clint’s apartment, Nick and Nat had yelled at each other like extremely deadly fishwives, with Nick saying things like I would rather have Tony Stark marry my grandmother than get his hands on SHIELD files, and Nat saying things like Stark works faster than six agents, and we don’t have six agents we trust right now. It took Clint, ever the child of marital strife, to remind them of a compromise: an absolutely faithful agent who has been doing nothing these last five years except getting really fucking good at processing paperwork.

When Melinda murmurs, “Phil’s a good reason,” Clint knows he chose right.

Nick leaves them after an hour to go Director-ing, mumbling about protecting the free world and seeming angry about it. Melinda and Natasha have split the “O-Files,” all the digital records of Phil’s tentacle tendencies in the database. Clint throws a tennis ball at the ceiling and makes dirty jokes. It used to be funny how notoriously bad Clint’s paperwork skills, but it stings now. All Clint can do is flip through his memory like a photo album and hope to find details he didn’t notice when they were in front of him.

After two hours, Melinda asks, “What do we know about Victoria Pham?”
Clint pictures it immediately: Phil, tentacles sticking out the arms of his suit, trying to stop Tori from bleeding out from a bullet wound in the back of their van. He shakes his head. “A world in which Pham is evil is no world I want to live in.” When Melinda raises an eyebrow, Clint shrugs defensively. “Look, there’s a finite amount of goodness and light in this universe, and about eighty percent of it is wrapped up in that woman and her weird Southern accent.”

Natasha looks up. “Agent Pham took two bullets in the firefight in Sydney. She’s still in surgery. Traitors usually choose not to get shot during ambushes they plan, and never twice.”

It says something sad about the state of the world when that convinces Melinda more than Clint’s character reference.

Clint adds Pham to his mental list titled, “Please Jesus Not These Ones.” It’s a short list, especially compared to the other two, “Lacks the Ambition to Turn Traitor” and “Eh? Who the Fuck Knows.”

It’s just beginning to be normal people work hours when Natasha says, “Who is Olivia Miller and why don’t I know who she is?”, and Clint misses catching the tennis ball, because holy fuck is he stupid.

His brain creates a new list: “Ding Ding Ding Ding Ding.”

***

Phil is driven out of his planning by a dull thud thud thud of a finger hitting glass. Phil instantly turns angry. There is a special circle in hell reserved for two types of people: idiots who drive slowly in the passing lane and jerks who tap on aquarium tanks. Phil swoops up to glare his captor in the face.

He’s an older man, with gray hair cut carelessly and wrinkles behind his glasses. He’s wearing a labcoat and a bowtie, like the whimsical fashion choice can disguise the fact that he participated in an abduction. (Bill Noosh the Science Douche, says the part of Phil’s brain that has copied Clint’s speech patterns.)

“Good morning, Phil!” Bill Noosh says, Phil reading his lips. The scientist’s smile is wide and expressive as he speaks; he probably sounds loud on the other side of the glass. “My name is (Ted? Ed? Greg?). Welcome to our lab!”

Phil taps a right tentacle against the tip of his left, trying to mime tapping a watch.

Bill Noosh just smiles. “You’re going to be here for a long time. Think of this as your new home!” Phil had actually wanted to ask what time it was, but sure, he’ll take that information. “All right, Mr. Phil,” the scientist says, “time for your blood sample.” He moves his gloved hand from behind his back to show that he’s holding a long syringe. He flips open a hinged door in the top of the Phil’s tank and reaches the syringe in.

Phil launches himself at the man’s hand. He wraps one tentacle around the scientist’s wrist, pinning him to the wall of the tank. He wrenches the syringe from the man’s grasp and stabs him in the forearm with it. Ted/Ed/Greg screams, and Phil can see his knees buckle. Phil climbs the man’s arm like a ladder out of the tank. He clambers on top of Bill Noosh’s head and reaches a tentacle around to cover the man’s nose and mouth.

Multiple sets of hands grab Phil and pry him off the scientist’s head. He leaves angry welts on their skin, but there are too many people for Phil to fight off. He wrestles away for a moment, but his head is plunged back into the tank, and as his gills take a desperate breath of water he recognizes the bitter, earthy taste of clove oil, marine biologists’ favorite anesthetic.
Phil struggles, but the hands holding him down don’t let up, and soon his limbs grow heavy and his mind drifts away from him into black.

***

It’s seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit when Clint lands the Quinjet on the Siberia base’s tarmac, and there’s not a snowflake in sight. *Fine*, Clint huffs to himself, *ruin the stereotype, why don’t you.* The base is a small building with a landing strip, flanked all around by green trees and silence.

The base commander is waiting for them on the runway. “Good evening, Agents—*Holy shit,*” he says, jaw dropping. “You’re—”

“Agents Romanov and Barton, yes,” Natasha says curtly, walking toward the building. She’s got a folder tucked under her arm, her Coulson School of Scary Competence persona fully engaged.

“But—you’re sure *you* need to meet with Miller?” he says, rushing to keep up.

“Yes, Agent Stephens, I am sure. Is she already in the conference room?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Then please show us the way.”

The poor guy looks gobsmacked. “Right. Right. This way.” He opens a door and leads them down a hallway lined with floral wallpaper and checkered linoleum that screams the 80s called, *they want their depressing corporatism back.*

They reach a wooden door and Stephens hesitates over the doorknob. Natasha stares him down until he backs away and all but runs down the hall. Once he’s gone, Nat opens the door.

Olivia Miller stands up from behind a table, and you can see her mouth curl with disgust when she recognizes who’s behind the door. “Oh, fuck,” she says, drawing it out, “how are you going to ruin my life this time, Barton?”

It’s been fifteen years since Clint was recruited and placed under the supervision of Olivia Miller, then a young, rising star in SHIELD ranks. He can still perfectly remember her sneer as she called him an idiot, overly dramatic and careless with his missions. It wasn’t exactly a wrong characterization, and Clint didn’t blame her when she ignored his gut instinct that something was wrong at the local aquarium. Nick and Phil, however, had no problem blaming Miller. Miller got assigned to a temporary job in Siberia to get her out of the leadership chain.

*Temporary job, my ass,* Clint thinks, because she’s still here in the cold armpit of Russia, glaring at Clint from behind a table.

Natasha slides into the room smoothly, sitting in a chair opposite Miller. Clint moves to the corner of the room and stands, watching Miller closely. The brown hair is a dye job, but so expertly done it could be natural. She’s taken good care of her skin, so she doesn’t have very many new wrinkles. To tell the truth, she doesn’t look any different than she did a decade ago.

Clint wonders what differences she sees while looking at him.

“Agent Miller,” Natasha says, opening her folder on the table, “I understand you’ve put in a request for transfer?”

Miller pulls her gaze from Clint to Natasha. “Yes,” she says, sitting down. “That’s correct.”
“And I understand you’ve put in a request for transfer—” Natasha looks at her folder “—seven times over the past ten years?”

Miller’s mouth twitches. “Whenever the opportunity came up.”

“Mmm,” Natasha says, keeping her tone disinterested, “and why, would you say, those requests have been denied?”

Miller glances at Clint. “I wouldn’t know. Wish that I did.”

“But if you had to hazard a guess?”

Miller pauses. Clint can imagine that because my black heart is frozen cold is not going to be her answer. “This base has been used as a punishment for decades. Our entire personnel is made up of people who don’t want to be here. It’s hard to distinguish oneself when one’s colleagues and superiors are not disposed to notice accomplishments.”

“Do you feel you were assigned to the Siberia base as a punishment?”

Miller grits her teeth. “I believe SHIELD was looking for a scapegoat. It was a ‘heads must roll’ situation, and my head was closest.”

“So the person who assigned you here,” Natasha looks down at the paper, “Phil Coulson, you think he was looking for a scapegoat?”

“Cut the shit,” Miller shouts, slamming her hand on the table. “Everyone in SHIELD knows the three of you are fucking buddy-buddy, so let’s stop pretending you didn’t fly all the way out here to antagonize me on the orders of his freak of nature boyfriend, okay?”

Clint is seething silently in his corner, but Natasha just closes her folder calmly. “Someone betrayed Agent Coulson. He’s now missing, presumed dead.” Clint hisses in a breath; he knows Nat is lying, but it still hurts to hear. “Was it you?”

Miller scoffs. “No, but thanks for thinking of me. It’s nice to have confirmation how hated I still am.”

“There are fourteen people who know that when Coulson went MIA, he spent that time as an octopus in an aquarium.” Natasha shrugs. “The other thirteen like him.”

Miller raises her eyebrows. “So now I’m in trouble because he treated me like an asshole? Amazing.”

“You have motive,” Natasha says, mildly.

“What exactly could I have done way out in bum-fuck Egypt?”

“A lot, Agent Miller. Playing dumb doesn’t become you.”

Miller throws up her hands. “At any point is this interrogation going to turn productive?”

Natasha continues, unperturbed. “Did you tell any of your coworkers that you believed you were sent here as a scapegoat?”

Miller laughs. “Why? It’s just like prison. Everyone is innocent when you hear them tell it.”

“Did you tell anyone about the aquarium case?”
“There was no aquarium case,” Miller spits out. “I was charged with taking down an arms dealer. I did that. The Frankenstein shit, that was fucking incidental.”

“I’ll amend my question. Did you tell anyone that Agent Coulson was kept as an octopus for over eighteen months?”

Miller opens her mouth and closes it. “No,” she says shortly.

Clint keeps his face impassive, but mentally he’s raising his eyebrows.

Natasha leans forward. “Who was it?” she says forcefully.

“I didn’t—”


“It was nothing! It has nothing to do with this—”

“That information was classified. You knew that. You can be brought up on charges, and if you think Siberia is bad, then—”

“Okay. Okay, okay.” Miller takes a deep breath. She glances quickly up at Clint, then looks away. “There is a town about a hundred and fifty miles south of here. I drive down there on my leave, rent a cheap room. There’s a...a bar.” Her cheeks turn pink with shame. “It’s full of sad fucks like me, people who found themselves in Siberia and really don’t want to be here. One time, about six months ago, I see a new guy, and we just get to talking.”

Natasha blinks. “So you just...mentioned it? The ‘Frankenstein shit’?”

“No,” Miller bites out, “we were talking about how we wound up there. He was a software developer performing audits for a Russian tech company.” Miller turns to Clint and says, “I told him I got sent out here because a little bitch who hated me started sleeping with the boss.”


Miller shrugs. “We kept drinking, and talking. And he was so...nice, and a good listener, and all the old anger came out and I just kept talking.” Miller shakes her head, and...are those tears? “And eventually he had to stop me and say, ‘I don’t get it, I think I’m missing something,’ and I said, ‘yeah, you’re missing the fact that the bastard was a fucking octopus.’”

Clint doesn’t know what to feel. Rage, he’s experiencing a metric fuck-ton of rage, yeah, but also Miller is over there shame-crying and while Clint has spent the past ten years being kind of deliriously happy, Miller has been out in almost isolation. Clint is confused and angry and pitying but mostly he misses Phil, and that ache is drowning out whatever voice should tell him how to hate Miller.

Natasha is still playing it indifferent. “What did he look like? Did you get his name?”

“Greg, no last name, probably fake anyways. American accent, West Coast, maybe. White guy. Blue eyes. Brown hair, crew cut. Probably forty-five or fifty. He was short, shorter than me, but had a presence that made him seem taller.” Miller pauses. “This isn’t what you’re looking for. I didn’t tell him I was SHIELD, I didn’t tell him Coulson’s name. He was nobody, okay?”

Natasha stands up. “We’ll find out.” She stands up and walks out. Clint moves to follow her, but
looks behind him.

Miller looks up wearily from the table, her eyes red and wet. “The fuck do you want, Barton?”

Clint shrugs. “Happy Solstice, Miller.” He walks out the door.

***

Phil hates clove oil. It leaves him groggy long after he should have been able to shake it off. He’s blearily watching the scientists scuttle away at their lab tables, rolling a rock around in his tentacle.

All at once, everyone looks up at and stares at the door. They must be hearing a loud sound, and sure enough, the door is flung open and an angry woman pushes herself through. Bill Noosh stands up to greet her, but she pushes him aside, speaking so quickly all Phil can lip-read are the expletives. She walks directly up to his tank and place her hands on her hips.

*Olivia Miller,* Phil realizes with a shock. She smirks. “Clint Barton came to see me.” She enunciates clearly, letting him catch every word. “He says you died, and they’re looking for the traitor who gave you up. All it took was some fake tears and a description of Tom Cruise to send him packing.” She leans down so that her face is level with Phil’s. “I want you to know that I’m the reason you’re stuck here, and that your boytoy is still the biggest idiot I’ve met in my life.”

Phil smacks his rock against the glass, and Miller jumps back in shock. She shakes her head and laughs, standing up. “Bang away, Coulson. If it makes you feel better about being absolutely *fucked,* then by all means, bang a rock against the glass.”

She turns on her heel and walks away.

Chapter End Notes

This will probably be the last you hear from me until finals are over. Thank you very much for sticking around! <3

A HUGE thanks goes out to snowytumble/bagfullofcats for sharing the beautiful *octopus-repellant nature of astroturf* with us all. You have done the world a good service.
Little Fishes in a Big-Ass Pond

Chapter Summary

It's been twenty-four hours since Phil was fishnapped and Clint hasn’t gotten him back yet.

He's trying not to see that as a personal failure.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So what you’re saying is, we’ve got nothing.” Fury glares at them from the head of the conference table. Melinda, Natasha, and Clint are scattered around it surrounded by computers, with Maria calling in from Australia on some video-conferencing platform Clint is not allowed to call “Skype.”

Clint is really digging this conference table vibe. A little bit Council of Elrond, a little bit League of Extraordinary Gentlemen. Makes him feel less like they’re chickens running around with their heads cut off. The furniture-provided boost of confidence is really the only good news Clint can see, because it’s been twenty-four hours since Phil was fishnapped and Clint hasn’t gotten him back yet.

Clint’s trying not to see that as a personal failure.

“What I’m saying is,” Natasha says, crossing her arms, “Miller doesn’t have enough puzzle pieces to be useful under interrogation. Even if her sob story about this guy is somehow connected, it can’t explain the entire information leak.”

Melinda nods her head. “If Miller was interrogated, it means we have to widen our search parameters. We’re not just looking for people who might have turned traitor, we’re looking for people who might be willing to blab about the weirdest thing they’ve ever seen at work.”

“So instead of having nothing,” Clint ponders, “we have even more somethings than we did before. A variety of shitty and open-ended somethings.”

“Constructive, Barton,” Nick snaps.

Clint grins tiredly. “Hey, you—”

“I have...a constructive piece of information,” Maria says from the screen, her voice weirdly stilted. “Someone on my team just gave me...material concerning the dead assailant.”

Clint snorts. “It took you a lot of effort not to say the word ‘something,’ didn’t it, Hill?”

“I’m trying to be productive, Barton, you might try it someday. Anyways, we’ve finally got a positive ID for our dead guy. His prints and DNA scan were missing from the system, and believe me, I’m going to find out why. We got him through face recognition on his wife’s Facebook photos. His name is Justin Ullman, Private first class, U.S. Army. Went missing three years ago while on home leave in Ohio. Everyone presumed he was dead, until he wound up our problem.”

“Actionable intelligence,” Nick grins, “it’s almost like we’re spies. Barton, Romanov, get yourselves
to Ohio, find out how a missing private becomes masked muscle on the dirty end of an abduction. Hill, keep digging like you have been. May, broaden your search parameters and find us our blabbers. This place is falling to shit without Phil, let’s go get him back.”

***

There is no one in the lab right now, and most of the lights are turned off, leaving just enough for Phil to see clearly. Phil assumes that it is some sort of mandated break, but what time is it exactly? Is it night according to the local timezone? Would the workers even follow a traditional schedule? Phil doesn’t even know how long he’s been held for, whether it’s been days or just hours.

This operation is too complex to just be for Phil. No, it’s clear he’s just one unethical science experiment among many in this lab of horrors. At least he understands, finally, how he wound up in their grasp — Olivia Miller, taking her revenge.

Siberia was always meant to be a temporary assignment. Miller was the one who chose to prolong her position. Every time she sent a transfer request, her paperwork got reviewed by HR and found deficient, for completely legitimate reasons. Every time, Phil extended a personal invitation to Miller, saying that he would waive the formal transfer requirements in exchange for one thing. And every time, Miller ignored him.

To get out of Siberia, all Olivia Miller needed to do was apologize to Clint Barton. Instead, she joined a team of evil scientists and sold Phil down the river.

Phil didn’t see this coming. How did he not see this coming?

He spots movement out of the corner of his eye, and he turns to the left. There’s a red and white striped octopus in the tank next to him, and it’s waving furiously.

Phil stares. Other cephalopods in the aquarium never communicated with Phil, somehow sensing him as other. On the few occasions they did, they spoke by flashing patterns in their skin pigments. Waving is a distinctly human activity. Furthermore, that tank held a sea snake when he arrived, Phil is sure of it. He raises a tentacle and waves tentatively, unsure how to communicate What exactly are you?

The octopus seems to understand anyway, and in a flurry of motion it curls up six of its tentacles and its head into a tight ball, leaving one to slither ahead and another to sliver behind. The disguise clicks in, and all of Phil’s senses tell him he’s looking at a black and white sea snake. It curls a different way, and this time it tricks Phil into seeing a blue-gray cuttlefish. It unfurls its tentacles and sheds its disguise, once again presenting itself as a striped octopus. It does a barrel roll, the closest thing to a bow one can accomplish underwater.

Phil claps with his front two tentacles. A mimic octopus, then — Michael Goodwin’s aquarium didn't have that species. The mimic octopus darts down to the bottom of its tank and begins digging through the rocks. Phil presses closer to his glass wall, trying to see what it is doing. It wraps a tentacle around something and drags it up.

It’s a watch, a red and gold watch, and Phil has a moment of utter disbelief as the mimic octopus presses the watch’s face against the glass and the Iron Man helmet stares out at Phil. Phil Coulson is an octopus trapped in a science lab in the belly of an evil lair, and even here he cannot escape Tony Stark. Phil supposes he must be grateful, because Stark is vain enough to ensure a digital watch with his face on it is completely waterproof. The mimic octopus shows him the time (11:00 pm) and the date (the day after Phil’s abduction) and scurries back to hide the watch.
You are delightful, he thinks to it. Phil has a friend. A friend on the inside and a Clint on the outside. It feels a little bit like hope.

***

Clint feels a little nervous as Natasha rings the doorbell. He’s never been the bearer of bad news before. Well. He’s been the bearer of bad news in the Bruce Willis, yippie-kay-yay you’re about to be dead kind of way, but nothing like this. He’s never had to tell a good person that their life just went tits-up awful without their consent.

The door opens, and Clint’s stomach knots get worse. Ullman’s wife--his widow, fuck, his widow--is wrapped in a bathrobe to combat the early morning cold, her blonde hair in a messy bun. “Can I help you?” She asks shorty, and fuck but she looks so young.

“Good morning, Mrs. Ullman,” Natasha says in her I’m kind and female, sympathize with me cover, “I’m Agent Natasha Romanov and this is my partner, Agent Clint Barton, from SHIELD.” They hold their badges out. “Could we come inside? We’d like to talk to you about your husband.”


Natasha smiles sadly. “Mrs. Ullman, if we—”

“Nope, something brought you assholes back, so tell me now and then I’ll decide if I’ll let you in.”

Natasha pauses, then nods. “Mrs. Ullman, your husband died yesterday.”

Mrs. Ullman sags against the door frame. “Oh, thank fuck.” She closes her eyes and breathes deeply.

Clint looks at Natasha, then back at Mrs. Ullman. Uh.

“Uh,” Mrs. Ullman says, opening her eyes. “That’s probably not the right response to have in front of law enforcement, is it.”

Clint shakes his head mutely.

“Right.” She lifts herself up off the wall. “Come in, agents. Would you like some coffee?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clint says brightly. Natasha shoots him a look, but Clint shrugs. It’s fucking coffee, he’s not about to turn that down.

Mrs. Ullman has them sit on the couch while she busies herself in the kitchen, probably to give herself a moment to adjust to a world where her husband is definitively dead, and not just probably dead. Clint takes the time to look around the tiny living room. Every available surface is covered with knick knacks, making this look like the house of an old lady and not a twenty-six-year-old in the prime of her life. That either makes Mrs. Ullman really fucking weird, or Clint’s favorite person ever.

Mrs. Ullman walks back in with a tray of coffee cups. She offers one to Clint and Natasha, then sits down with her own. “I’m sorry that I reacted the way I did,” she says, wrapping her fingers around the cup. “It’s awful, obviously, that Justin ended up dead after all, and I think that at some point it’s going to hit me and I’m going to burst out sobbing. But. I’ve had people think I was a murderer for three years. There are stores I can’t walk into anymore. The police were hounding me everywhere I turned, there was even some tabloid asshole who tried to write a story about me.” She laughs bitterly. “Now you’re telling me he died yesterday, not three years ago, and you’re going to find out why and it’s not going to be me. Maybe that makes me a bad person, I don’t know, but right now I am
relieved, so relieved to be finally free.” She shrugs, looking embarrassed, and takes a sip of her coffee.

Natasha leans forward. “We’re very sorry for all the stress this has put you through, ma’am.”

Mrs. Ullman shakes her head. “Wasn’t you. Almost every other acronym has put their nose in my business, but you’re the first time I’ve seen SHIELD. So tell me, what does SHIELD want from me?”

“Mrs. Ullman—”

“Lauren, please.” She smiles wryly. “I have a complicated relationship with my surname.”

“Lauren,” Natasha says gently, “this is going to be hard to hear, but your husband was killed during a firefight against SHIELD yesterday. He was part of a group that killed one SHIELD agent and abducted another.”

Lauren covers her mouth with her hand. “God, Justin,” she whispers, “what the fuck.”

“We’re hoping you can shed some light on who these people might be, and why Justin might have wanted to join them.”

“I have got no idea,” she says, shaking her head. “He just went out one night and didn’t come back.”

“Had his behavior changed at all?”

“He was on home leave from war, of course his behavior was changed,” Lauren snaps. She looks up and grimaces. “God, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it’s just--I’ve answered all these questions before. Yes, he was distant. Yes, he was on the phone all the time. No, I don’t know who he was calling. He was unhappy, but I was unhappy too, and I didn’t drop off the face of the earth.” She sighs. “Sorry.”

Natasha opens her mouth, but Clint leans forward to cut her off. “Was money important to your husband?” he asks, because Clint gets it. Lauren’s not being difficult; she’s frustrated and doesn’t want to waste her time.

So let’s ask her questions that don’t waste her time.

Lauren blinks. “No,” she says slowly, “he drove a twenty-year-old pickup his dad gave him second-hand. Didn’t need nice clothes, didn’t need a nice house. We fought a lot about that, actually, because I wanted to be respectable, and he didn’t see the point.”

Bingo. “If it wasn’t for the paycheck, then, why did Justin join the military?”

“He liked history,” she says, eyes going soft. “That was his favorite subject in high school, you know. He liked the idea of individuals coming together to be a part of something bigger. He thought he could find that in the military.”

“Do you think he did? Was the military what he wanted?”

She shrugs. “In the beginning, yeah. But after a while he started saying that what he was doing didn’t mean anything, that it was all bullshit. I think that’s part of why he was so unhappy, you know?”

Clint nods. “Now, let me ask you a question,” he says, and Tasha’s gonna kill him for this, oops, “in your opinion, what would an organization need to offer Justin to make deserting the military worthwhile? Could money convince him to go after SHIELD agents?”
“Absolutely not.” Lauren shakes her head. “I’m telling you, the guy lived in his own head. Money would not have occurred to him.”

“So how would they convince him? Would it have to be an intellectual argument? Could they make him believe in something?”

“Holy shit,” Lauren says, slowly, and Clint decides he loves her, this sarcastic bathrobed woman, who has too many knick knacks and got married at eighteen only to be widowed at twenty-six. “Holy shit,” she says again, “I think Justin joined a cult.”

Chapter End Notes

I am constantly blown away by the support and kindness you all have given me while writing this fic. Thank you very much. All my love and a happy new year.
Chapter Summary

He grins excitedly. He can do cults. You just figure out their particular brand of crazy and all their secrets fall in line.

Chapter Notes

this update is SUPER OVERDUE and i have five million comments and messages from ya'll that need answering but right now I think we can all use a little happy. I love you!

Natasha might murder him. “You had no right to pull that shit,” she says angrily, throwing the car into gear and driving away. “You endangered that civilian just by putting those ideas into her head.”

“That civilian wants to be endangered!” Clint says, gesturing wildly from the passenger’s seat. “She’s spent the past three years feeling goddamn helpless, and now she got to help find a missing agent! She feels important!”

“She’ll continue to feel important right up until she gets killed by this organization because she knows too much.”

Clint can’t stop grinning. “So you agree it’s a cult, then.”

Natasha glances over at him. “I agree that Justin Ullman fits the profile of a person who would join a cult.”

Oh, fuck yeah, Natasha thinks he’s right. After Clint’s super enlightening and helpful conversation with Lauren, she let them browse through Ullman’s old things. He had books on religion and philosophy, even conspiracy theories, but according to Lauren, Justin never felt satisfied with any explanation offered. It turned out that only half the weird knick-knacks cluttering up the house belonged to Lauren: if it was of a DC comic book hero or a tiny child with a sheep, it was hers, but if it was ancient-looking, like cheap travel knock-offs of Greek statues or Chinese buddhas, it was Justin’s.

Totally a cult member. Totally a cult.

“Can we conference call?” Clint asks excitedly. “Please can we conference call?”

Natasha sighs. “Fine.”

Within minutes they’ve got Nick, Melinda, and Maria on the line. “It’s a cult!” Clint shouts into the speakerphone, and explains what they learned about Justin.

When Clint is finished, Nick sighs deeply. “It sounds plausible, Barton. Good work.”

Clint may blush a little bit; even after all these years and Phil’s careful nurturing, praise is still
something he’s never going to understand. Nat pinches his cheek because she’s an asshole.

“Ullman’s widow said something that got me thinking,” Natasha says, pulling her hand back from where it was molesting Clint’s face. “She said that a tabloid journalist ‘tried’ to write a story, but it never got published. We already know Ullman’s DNA and fingerprints were wiped from databases. If the story was suppressed, we’re talking about influence over several fields and geographic locations.”

“That would explain what we’re seeing,” Maria sighs. “I’ve been keeping it quiet from my team—since, you know, we don’t know if they’re traitors—but this is looking less and less like someone hacked into our SHIELD communications, and more and more like we were fed bad intelligence to begin with.”

“Can you explore that idea without alerting your team?” Nick asks.

“I’ve got a meeting with an old buddy in the Australian intelligence ladder today. I’m going to see what he can scrounge up for us.”

“Good. Keep it up, guys. We’re getting closer and closer, here.” Nick terminates the conference calls.

Clint holds the phone in the air. "It's a cult!" He grins excitedly. He can do cults. You just figure out their particular brand of crazy and all their secrets fall in line. "A cult!"

"A secret society," Tasha disagrees, but she can't quite suppress a smile. "A shadow organization."

"Also called cults!" Clint slams his hands against the dashboard and begins to sing, to the tune of the fun part of "Stars and Stripes Forever," also referred to as "Be Kind to Your Webfooted Friends":

“It's a cult, it's a cult, it's a cult
Phil got kidnapped by demented assholes
The answer is always a cult
Because fate likes to shit on my life.”

***

Phil watches one of the scientists’ computer screens as it flashes blue, then red, then blue again. The computer is hooked up to a microscope, which is pointed at a petri dish of blood. Phil’s blood, turning from iron-rich red to copper blue every time a scientist pokes it with a slim metal rod. Phil, for hopefully self-explanatory reasons, has never seen his transformation, only felt it. It’s disconcerting, watching how easily his cells bend and stretch into an entirely different species. Phil hates it.

The day the SHIELD doctors cleared Phil’s recently restored human body for processing alcohol, Nick took him to a bar and got him roaring drunk. Around Beer Number 7, Phil dropped his poker face and sloppily told Nick every detail he’d been keeping in about living in the aquarium. “Don’t let me become a science experiment,” Phil had begged. “Don’t lock me up in a lab again.”

Nick promised him that night he would do all he could to keep Phil away from SHIELD scientists. He was good to his word. No one ever ran experiments on his blood; the details of Phil’s transformations were kept strictly need-to-know. It’s why SHIELD still used Leweski’s clunky
radiation machine to de-octopus Phil. It’s why no one cracked the pattern of Phil’s re-octopusing.

Phil ended up a lab experiment anyways. Doesn’t that fucking chafe?

It’s clear that kidnapping and studying Phil was only a small part of this lab’s larger operations. There’s the mimic octopus next door, for one. (It’s currently floating upside down in the tank, but as no one is alarmed Phil is guessing it’s played dead many times before). The lab holds fifteen scientists in total, spread out along lab tables and poking expensive-looking equipment. Someone in the far corner is titrating a purple liquid, while a scientist close to the tanks —

Oh, she’s good. She’s very good. The young woman is a picture of studiousness, red hair pulled tight into a bun and her pale face trained on the computer screen. But every few minutes, her left hand creeps down into a desk drawer while her right hand taps the screen to look busy. She has positioned her work station in such a way that the other scientists are all to her right, with only Phil and the aquarium tanks on her left.

She’s good, but Phil is better, and she’s just shown a desperate octopus that there is something in that drawer worth hiding.

***

“You need to sleep.”

Clint opens his eyes to stare at Natasha standing over him. “Excuse you, I was sleeping,” he says, gesturing to himself. He’s reclining in a conference room chair with his feet up on the table. “This is a perfectly acceptable sleeping position.”

“There is a difference,” Natasha says, “between assuming a sleeping position and actually sleeping.”

Clint shrugs. “Well, I was sleeping.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“How do you know? Did you perform a brain scan? Were you measuring my breaths? Did you—”

Clint’s phone rings, cutting him off. He sticks his tongue out at Tasha and answers it. “Cash For Gold, Anaheim Strip Mall and Emporium, this is Clint speaking.”

“WHICH ONE OF YOU MOTHERFUCKERS LET MARIA GET SHOT?” A voice screams out of the phone.

“The hell?” Clint holds the phone away from his ear so he can check the caller ID. “Jasper, what the fuck? Where are you? What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that Maria got shot, you motherfuckers.”

“Jasper, calm down what — when did Maria get shot? And how do you know about it before Natasha?” Natasha raises an eyebrow at him, and Clint shrugs. Natasha always knows shit before Clint does.

At that moment, Nick bursts into the conference room, coat billowing around him. Melinda follows at his heels. “Hill got shot.”

Clint gestures to the phone and puts it on speaker. “We know. Can someone please give us an explanation that’s longer than three words?”
“MARIA’S OLD DRINKING BUDDY PROBABLY BELONGS TO WHATEVER SHIT-LICKING SOCIETY TOOK PHIL, AND WE KNOW THIS BECAUSE HE SHOT HER.”

Clint looks at Nick. Nick nods. “Sitwell was already on assignment in Indonesia, so I gave Hill the go-ahead to take him out whenever she needed back-up in Australia. She pulled him before her meeting, said something didn’t feel right and she wanted him with her in Sydney.”

“AND I WAS JUST LANDING WHEN SHE CALLED ME A SECOND TIME TELLING ME SHE GOT FUCKING SHOT.”

“What did Maria say to you?” Natasha asks, frowning.

“She said, ‘DON’T YOU FUCKING CODDLE ME, YOU SON OF A BITCH, GET YOUR ASS DOWN TO THIS HANDJOB’S HOUSE BEFORE THE AUSTRALIANS CLEAN IT OF ANY USEFUL INFORMATION.’”

“Wiser words,” Melinda murmurs, smirking.

The next five minutes are a terrible, profanity-laced audio commentary as Jasper keeps the on speaker as he weaves through Sydney traffic, which gets abruptly cut off with, “at the fucker’s house, gotta get my patsy on.”

“Well,” Natasha says into the silence, “does anyone want to play scrabble?”

Clint’s phone pings. *time to play everyone’s favorite game, bored american who texts too much.*

“Oh, good,” Natasha says over his shoulder, “we get the livestream.”

At some point, the other three trail off to go get important stuff done, presumably because their work-life balance hasn’t been obliterated like Clint’s has. Clint, though, he has literally nothing to accomplish but stare at at his phone and wait for Jasper’s increasingly sarcastic texts.

*maria’s drinking buddy slash attempted murderer has got a THING for weird renaissance art*

  *mustachioed aussie keeps getting pissed at me. i love it. keep the evil stares coming. i feed off of animosity.*

*how many antique busts of handsome hot men can u collect b4 it stops being an appreciation of the arts and starts being a fetish*

*no1 is removing wiretaps or finding hidden skeletons. im disappointed*

*oh a library of rare books. how original u rich white man*

*what do u call a trident with 4 prongs. is this poseiden wielding a fork*

Clint scrambles upright. His fingers are shaking as he slides them across his phone’s screen. *TAKE PICTURES OF ANY AND ALL ART YOU SEE,* he texts back.

*jfc barton just because u live in nyc doesnt mean u have 2 stick the met up ur asshole*

*JUST DO IT SITWELL!!!!*

Clint changes screens and dials quickly.

“Hello?” Lauren Ullman answers.
“Hi, Lauren? It’s me, Clint.”

“What’s going on?” Lauren’s voice goes sharp.

“Listen, Lauren, your husband’s little history statues. Most of them are Greek or Roman, yeah?”

There’s a shuffling noise. “I mean, I’m not sure I can tell, but a lot of them look like cheap Made in China models of something you’d find in a European museum, sure.”

“You know the one in the bathroom? Holding out a trident?”

“How the hell should I — okay, this one. It’s got a tiny angry face and it’s pointing a trident at me like it’s trying to get my eye. Only, aren’t tridents supposed to have three pointy things? This guy’s got a four-pointed sucker.”

_Holy hell._ “Listen, Lauren stay right there. Don’t lose that statue, I’ll be right there.” Clint hangs up and runs out the door, looking for Natasha.

_It’s a cult, it’s a cult, it’s a cult..._
“How much SHIELD business do you think Akron, Ohio sees?” Clint asks from the passenger seat, looking out the window at the sleepy nighttime streets. “Like, I think the past twenty-four hours have doubled their yearly average.”

“Small industrial cities are the heart of American culture,” Natasha says, changing lanes.

“That was a joke, right?” Clint’s phone rings, and he fishes around in his pocket. “Right?”

Natasha says nothing.

Clint checks the caller ID. “Hey, Lauren, we’re almost there.”

“Someone’s in my house,” Lauren whispers. There’s a weird echo in the line--she may be calling from the bathroom. “Oh god, Clint, what’s happening?”

“Shit. It’s okay, Lauren, we’re gonna be there, we’re gonna help you.” Clint turns to Natasha. “How far away are we?”

“Six minutes,” Natasha says, shaking her head. “Wait.” She presses a button on the dashboard, and all the streetlights in front of them flick green. “Three.”

“We’re gonna be there in three minutes, okay, Lauren? Just stay still, we’ll take care of him.”

“I think he’s getting closer,” she whispers. “He’s not taking my stuff, Clint, I think, I think—”

“We’re gonna be there,” Clint swears, hand clutching the side of his seat. “I’m not gonna let him—”

“GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY HOUSE, YOU UGLY PIECE OF SHIT!”

Clint hears a scuffle and a hiss and a deep yell. Lauren screams, sounding more like a war cry. “Lauren?”

“I’m out of the bathroom, I pepper sprayed him in the fucking face and he dropped but what do I, where do I—”

“Get outside,” Clint commands. “Get outside, make as much noise as you can, make as big a stir as you can, get your neighbors to come outside, go outside, outside now—”

Natasha whips the car around the corner just as Lauren barrels out of her house, screaming at the top of her fucking lungs. Natasha throws the car in park, and she and Clint scramble into action wordlessly, the way you only can after years of working and bleeding and being shot at together. Natasha rushes to the doorway, just as a very red-faced goon steps out. Clint runs to Lauren, grabbing her into a hug that also conveniently places his body between her and her kidnapper.

Natasha shoves an icer in the guy’s neck and brings him down in less than eight seconds. Lauren
cries quietly on Clint’s shoulder.

“Pepper spray?” Clint asks quietly.

She laughs wetly. “I saw it on CNN.”

“Well.” Clint watches Natasha efficiently strip the unconscious man of weapons. “Thank fuck for CNN.”

***

Phil does not have to wait long to discover what secrets the young scientist is hiding. The lab shuts down every night - or rather, Phil tells himself, the lab shuts down every ten hours in a twenty-four hour cycle. The lights are turned off and the scientists leave, but for all Phil knows they could be in a subterranean cavern or the Arctic Circle where the traditional night/day distinction does not apply.

In this liminal time, then, between the end of one period of activity and the beginning of another, the curly-haired scientist walks into the lab with a clipboard and her head held high. She sits down at her station and fiddles importantly with the computer screen in front of her. After a couple minutes, she reaches into the drawer and closes it again. Clint would be impressed - nothing appears to be in her hand or up her sleeves. The woman then stands and takes two steps backward and three steps to the left.

She pulls a smartphone out of her sleeve. She presses the screen and puts it up to her ear, turning so that her mouth faces Phil ever-so-conveniently.

“Hi, Mom.” Phil was not expecting that one. “No, I’m good. Eating three square meals. How’s (Jack/Zach)?”

The scientist listens, not saying anything. Phil is perplexed. Based on her precise movements earlier, he’s guessing she has calculated the exact position she needs to stand in to hide in the security cameras’ blind spot. The premeditation and creativity it must have taken to smuggle in a contraband cellphone and devise a way to contact the outside without getting caught...and she uses it to combat homesickness?

Phil waits her out to see if the conversation touches anything more interesting, but it doesn’t. The scientist just keeps asking questions about Jack/Zach. After a few brief minutes, she hangs up with an I love you and walks back - three steps to the right, two steps forward - and slips the cell phone back in the drawer. She types on her computer for a while longer to keep up the illusion, then walks out the door as assertively as she walked in.

Phil would cry if his eyes retained the ability to self-moisturize. He turns to his friend excitedly. He holds a tentacle up to his eyeball and wiggles it, trying to convey the universal sign for holy crap a phone the best way he knows how. To his dismay, the other octopus just shrugs its tentacles slowly, clearly not excited about the news. Except, Phil realizes, that the phone really isn’t news. The scientist must creep in here to make calls all the time. The mimic octopus has always known there was a phone in the drawer. It just didn’t have anybody to call.

That’s about to change.

***

The plane ride back to HQ is not as awkward as it could be, considering one guest had to be kept unconscious and the other was just recovering from attempted murder. Clint finds the snacks he had hidden away on the Quinjet, so he and Lauren munch on Chili Cheese Fritos while Natasha flies the
plane. Normally, they’d take over an interrogation room in the local FBI office and bring in some more SHIELD agents, but when high level Australians start shooting at Assistant Directors, it’s time to re-evaluate SHIELD policy. The phone call with Fury had lasted all of thirty seconds, ending with an exasperated, “Stop bringing home strays, Barton.” Clint had only grinned.

“I’m sorry,” Lauren says, hugging her shoulders.

“Why?” Clint asks, stuffing his mouth with Fritos.

“Your boss? He told you to stop bringing home strays. I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me.”

Clint shakes his head, swallowing. “No, no, Fury’s telling me everything is good. We at SHIELD have a long and proud history of stray-collecting.”

Lauren raises her eyebrows. “What does that mean?”

Clint shrugs. “I was a stray.” He takes another handful of Fritos. “I, uh, I wasn’t such a good guy, back in the day. I would take a lot of robbery jobs, some hit man stuff, and I knew in a way it was wrong. But I thought, since only bad guys got dead, who cared? But then the boss I was working for gave me an assassination target, and it was—he was a kid. A goddamned child.” Lauren puts a hand over her mouth. “I wouldn’t do it. I ran, and the boss sent guys after me to try and kill me. Fury found me in a bar. Told me that if I worked for SHIELD, I’d be safe — not just from the bad guys, but safe from the kind of jobs that wreck your soul.”

Lauren looks sad, so Clint holds the Frito bag out to her. “We’ll keep you safe,” Clint promises. “That’s what Fury was telling me.”

“Okay, Clint,” Lauren smiles, and takes a chip.

When they land, Fury has already arranged for Lauren to be watched over by Dina from Accounting. Dina is eighty-five and by all rights should have retired before Clint even got to SHIELD, but she refuses to leave because, and Clint quotes, “Mr. Nick needs me.” Nick would probably agree. In fact, Clint would bet good money that Dina’s got a secret tracker of her own.

After leaving Lauren lying on the couch in the bubbly sanctuary of Dina’s office, Clint goes up to the interrogation room and stands with Melinda behind a one-way mirror as they watch Nick and Natasha start interrogating the would-be assassin.

The kid lounging at the table is really that: a kid, pale, freckly, and really fucking young. His fingerprints and DNA don’t show up in any registry, like Justin’s didn’t, but just looking at the kid, he can’t be more than twenty-three. He’s still got baby fat in his cheeks, and he’s got a cocky grin that says he’d be leaning back in his chair if it weren’t bolted to the ground.

“So tell me,” Nick opens, leaning against the door, “why haven’t you killed yourself yet?”

The kid’s grin slips, and he looks from Nick to Natasha, who’s sitting in a chair across from him. “Huh?”

“The big people who have sat in this room, terrorists, HYDRA agents, et cetera, they usually have cyanide pills embedded in their teeth. We’ve had a couple exploding brain implants, those have been fun. But you didn’t have anything. No contingency plan for if you got caught. Which tells me that either you’re not devoted enough to your cause to die for it — or your cause isn’t devoted enough to you to tell you anything worth killing you for. So I wanna know, which idiot are you?”
The kid laughs. “We’re the truth. We don’t need barbaric scare tactics to provoke loyalty.”

Nick raises an eyebrow. “‘Barbaric’? So, you’re, what, a gentleman killer of widows in their bathrobes?”

“Sometimes losses can be efficient,” the kid shrugs. “But we take care of our own.”

“Murdering each other’s family, that makes you feel taken care of?”

“They’re not our family!” He yells, making Clint jump with how not-called-for it was. Nick’s found a hot button. “Your old people keep you down. We build you up.”

“Thanks for the tip, kid,” Melinda smirks. She moves towards a computer and begins typing frantically.

Inside the interrogation room, Nick laughs. “They really got you to swallow that crap, huh?”

The kid straightens. “Plebes don’t understand.”

“Oh, yeah? An what’s a plebe? What separates me from you?”

Back inside, Melinda sits up. “Bingo,” she says. “You can erase all the official records you want, but it doesn’t mean shit when you leave MySpace up.”

She swivels the screen towards Clint. !!! HELP !!!! MY BROTHER RAN AWAY IF YOU SEE THIS BOY PLEASE CALL 911 PLSSSSS !!!!!!!

The kid is grinning. “A plebe thinks he knows how power is wielded on this earth. And we know the truth.”

Melinda taps a mic on the table and speaks into it. “His name is Aaron Coleman, he’s eighteen, he ran away from his parents’ home when he was fifteen. He’s got a little sister, her name is Janet.”

Natasha sits forward at the table. “And Janet? Is she a plebe?”

The kid turns white as a sheet.

“She’s doing well, in case you were wondering. She’s enrolled at Franklin High now,” Natasha repeats after May. “She’s getting straight B’s, except for English, there she’s got an A-. Benny Johnson asked her out last week, she’s pretty excited. Oh, and she misses you. Makes a Facebook post on your birthday every year.”

Aaron looks from Natasha to Nick and back. “I--they said no one could ever find me.”

“That’s my question answered, then,” Nick says, shrugging. “You’re the idiot your cause doesn’t care about.”

“No, no, that’s not true. They’re gonna watch out for me. They’re my family.”

Nick laughs. “Kid, you’re in SHIELD custody. We know your name, your history. Do you really think they haven’t already written you off as a, what did you call it, ‘efficient loss’?”

“You’re wrong,” Aaron says, his voice wet. “They were gonna take me. Just one more mission, and they were gonna take me.”

“Where? You gonna Jonestown your way to the mothership?”
Aaron laughs. “You’re such a goddamn plebe, you don’t even know, no one knows—”

“Knows that you’re a gullible sucker? Because—”

“We found it! We stole it right under your noses! You’re so proud of yourselves with your Tesseract and your super-soldiers, but we’ve been guarding it for millennia and you’ve never figured it out! You’re idiots, all of you, SHIELDs and militaries and fucking United Nations.” He spreads his arms wide, magnanimous. “We have Atlantis, and that’s exactly where I’m going when I get out of this mess.”

Back behind the mirror, Clint exchanges glances with Melinda. “Woah,” he says.

“The poor fucker,” Melinda agrees.
Blood in the Water

Chapter Summary

“Yeah, but, I mean, you can’t have a cult about something that’s true, can you?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well, the kid’s right about one thing,” Melinda sighs over the conference table. “We really don’t know who this group is. Aaron’s description doesn’t fit the profile of any documented organization. The Atlantis story makes it sound like a textbook destructive cult, but their level of sophistication and influence seems almost para-military.”

“Hey guys,” Clint says from his spinny chair, “what if it’s not a cult?”

“I will end you, Barton,” Natasha growls.

“No, I’m serious!”

“You sang a song about how it had to be cult.”

“Yeah, but, I mean, you can’t have a cult about something that’s true, can you?”

“It’s not true,” Nick says mildly from the head of the table.

“How do you know? What if it’s all real, and there’s really some deep-sea Da Vinci Code fuckers hiding Atlantis in, like, Greek statue butts?”

“It’s not true,” Nick repeats, looking annoyed.

Clint’s phone rings. It’s Lauren. “Hi. Did you run out of Fritos?”

“Can you come down here?” Lauren sounds worried, and Clint sits up sharply.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Well, something. But not an emergency like that. Dina’s upset. Just, can you come down to Dina’s office? Just you and Mr. Fury?”

Clint stands up. “Yeah, we’ll be there.” He hangs up. “Something happened to Dina, Nick.” Nick nods and leaves out the door, Clint following.

When they get to Dina’s office, Lauren rushes up to Clint, her hands wringing. Nick sweeps past them to sit next to Dina, who is weeping on the couch. “I’m sorry,” Lauren bursts out, “I’m really sorry, we were just chatting and gossiping, and I started telling her what I heard from you and Natasha on the plane, and —”

“Is she right?” Dina asks, lifting her face to stare at Nick. “Is the mole really from Siberia? It’s Miller, isn’t it?”
“Why do you think it’s Miller?” Nick asks softly.

Dina’s wrinkled face crumples with new tears. “Because I told her. I told her everything. I process the Siberia bases paperwork, and Miller was my main point of contact. I’d call her and she’d ask after you all, but especially after Mr. Phil on account of how she led the mission to save him.”

“And you told her,” Nick said kindly, “Why wouldn’t you?”

“She was so nice. Always remembered my grandchildren’s names. I told her about every injury Mr. Phil and Mr. Clint got, even those ones. She told me the talking-to-whales story was sweet.” Dina puts her head in her hands. “She was my friend.” Nick wraps Dina up in a hug.

Clint feels lost, like an untethered balloon in a hurricane. He walks numbly out of the office, forgetting to say goodbye to Lauren. He finds himself back in the conference room where Natasha and Melinda are still sitting. “Miller,” he says to them, swallowing hard. “She conned information about Phil from Dina. Miller had it all, every puzzle piece she needed to pull something like this off.”

Melinda pulls her phone out and calls Siberia. Clint turns to Natasha, who is staring at the wall. “She played me,” she says.

“How could she have played me?” Natasha asks the wall.

Clint loses it. He walks out the door, slamming the door behind him. He storms the hallways, but there’s nowhere to go. Clint reaches a dead-end, and in frustration he does something he hasn’t done in ten years, not since Phil Coulson first promised to keep Clint safe:

Clint climbs into the vents.

***

When he was an octopus, Phil had a favorite rock.

This story is important. Maybe to some people it sounds like the boring ramblings of a tottering old man, but some people like to hang upside down in a tree for twelve hours straight staring at bumblebees and are therefore not good judges of what "boring" means.

Phil’s rock meant the world to him in that gangster’s aquarium. Phil had been stripped of control over his surroundings and his own body, but he could control this rock. It was a striped gray, smooth and rounded on one side and jagged on the other. It fit in his tentacle like it was a part of him. With this rock as a tool, he could pry open any lid, cut at any fabric, and poke holes in plastic to squeeze through. To Phil, his rock meant freedom. Ten years later, that rock is sitting on his nightstand by the bed he shares with the man he loves, proof that hope is never useless.

Ten years later, Phil is an octopus again. And what do you know, this tank is full of rocks.

He works through the night, striking rocks against each other until one cracks into a sharp edge. He hides it under the others at the bottom of his tank, and waits through another work cycle. When the lab gets dark, he draws it out again and floats to the top of his tank. He reaches up, and touches the familiar slippery texture of Astroturf. Sure enough, his tentacle slides right off.
Then he brings up the sharp edge of the rock, and cuts a ragged slice through the Astroturf. He reaches again with another tentacle, and wiggles in between until he can sucker onto the surface underneath. He does this a second time, a third, a fourth, until seven of his legs are attached to the surface of the lid. With an internal grunt, he forces the lid up and over, so that an inch gap is revealed. Phil forces himself through that gap, climbing up until he is outside of his tank, body hanging suspended by a tentacle.

His lungs burn at the lack of water, but he ignores it. He drops to the floor and feels the rubbery Astroturf all around him. He reaches forward with the tentacle that holds the rock and cuts a slice into the Astroturf, then uses another tentacle to sucker onto the floor below and pull his body forward. He propels himself like this, little by little, until he’s past the Astroturf and onto the linoleum.

After that, it’s quick work to slide to the scientist’s lab table and open her drawer. He folds himself into the drawer and stares at her phone. He can feel his hearts pumping, and hopes to god his cold-blooded veins have warmed him enough for the touchscreen to respond to his tentacles.

***

The vent Clint is lying down in rattles sharply. “Come out, Barton,” Clint hears Nick call.

Clint panics. He remembers the way Maria and Nick talked about him when he first came to SHIELD - *The only one of us who could ever have controlled Barton was Coulson.* He doesn’t want to be treated like a live bomb again. He kicks out a vent cover and scrambles down into the room.

Nick is staring at him, expression hard.

“Sorry, sorry,” Clint says, wiping his hand along his nose to get the snot out. “This is nothing, I’m okay. I promise, sir, I won’t let my emotions get in the way of the job.”

Nick steps close to Clint, gets right in his face. “Let your emotions get in the way, Clint.”

Clint blinks. “I--what?”

“I said, get emotional.” He points a finger at Clint’s chest. “Everybody else would treat this like a mission. Phil went missing once before, remember? The team I assembled, they were good agents, and they wanted their records to continue showing that they were good agents, so when that case got tough they jumped ship. They needed a win, and when we weren’t a win they found other missions with a better chance of success. But you,” Nick grins harshly, “you’ve never given a damn about your reputation.”

“Never said I wanted to improve my station,” Clint murmurs.

Nick shakes his head, grin turning sincere. “And that is why I need you, Clint. You’re insubordinate, you’re a fucking prick, and you don’t give a damn if the rest of SHIELD thinks you’re batshit. You’re not here for the glory of solving a missing persons case. You’re here to find Phil. Stay that way. Stay so in love with him it feels like the floor is falling out from under you. I need to know that in five years, when everybody else has given up on him, you and I are coming into work every day hungry to find Phil. You need to run away to cry sometimes? I will give you your own office just so you can lock yourself in it and cry, if that means that one day I get to get drunk on the open bar at your wedding. Get emotional, Clint, because I am convinced that is the only way we will find him.”

Nick turns to walk out the door, leather coat billowing behind him.

And that’s when Clint’s phone dings with a text message. Nick sighs and stops. “Ruining my
dramatic moment, kid.”

“Sorry,” Clint shrugs, and fishes his phone out of his pocket.

**Blocked:** 🚫🚫🚫

“Motherfucker ,” Clint whispers.

Nick turns around. “I beg your pardon?”

“Motherfucking asshole goddamn fucker.” He types furiously, his hands shaking.

**Me:** ur the hashtag worst

Clint grips the edges of his phone so hard his knuckles turn white.  *You goddamn beautiful bastard.*

**Blocked:** still octopus in lab idk where stole phone from scientist

**Blocked:** olivia miller involved she’s here no more details yet

**Blocked:** □

**Blocked:** alarm tripped gtg

**Blocked:** i love you

---

**Chapter End Notes**

I love you all. I hope you have an absolutely wonderful end of the year after all this shit we’ve gone through.

I posted three chapters because it's been literal months and these were supposed to be posted a long time ago. This is the end of my "in order" writing, which means I have no idea when I'll be able to string the pieces together, write the gaps, and post the next chapter.

Let me know if the texts at the end of the chapter don't load for you/if there's anything I can do to make them easier for text-to-speech or things like that. (PS: the box is supposed to be a box. Phil is sneaky like that.)
Whale of a Story

Chapter Summary

If Phil didn't love Nick so much, Clint would kill him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Clint thinks *alarm tripped gtg i love you* are the second greatest words ever uttered in the English language (with *jesus christ please marry me* taking home the gold). Surrendering his phone to Mel had felt impossible until Mel’s cry of *holy fucking shit we can get you a screenshot* had knocked some sense back into him. Rescue Phil first; make googly eyes later.

Now Clint’s watching Mel type ferociously on a computer, the phone hooked up to a set of complicated-looking wires. “The fuck kind of phone did you steal, Phil?” She mutters under her breath.

Nat is sitting at the conference table next to Clint. Nick is pacing up and down the floor. Clint imagines this would normally be the time for peak Nick badassery, with lots of phone calls and yelling and organizing and strategizing. Problem is, with the possibility of traitors everywhere, there’s no one to call and yell at and organize. It looks like it’s grating on Nick.

“What the — oh.” Mel swivels in her chair to look at Nick. “Motherfucker dropped a pin.”

“Excuse me?” Clint asks politely.

“You know how one message was just a box? The box you get instead of characters when you try and load a Chinese website on an old American computer? It’s your system’s way of telling you it doesn’t have that image in its files. Which makes sense here, of course, because this isn’t an image at all. It’s an encrypted, confusing, motherfucking *pin.*” She turns the computer screen towards Clint. It’s displaying a map of the world, and in the middle of the Indian Ocean, sure enough, is a bright red pin.

*Holy shit.* “And that’s where Phil is?”

“Looks that way.” She does something complicated with the keyboard, and a satellite image of open ocean pops up. “This is where the coordinates lead.” There’s absolutely nothing on screen but endless blue.

Clint looks at Nick triumphantly. “See? It’s fucking *Atlantis.*”

Nick shakes his head. “It’s not Atlantis.”

“What makes you so goddamned sure?”

Nick looks at his watch and stands up. “I have a meeting to attend. Barton, with me.” He walks out the door, coat billowing behind him.

Clint looks at Natasha. She makes a shooing motion. He rushes to catch up with Nick down the
hall. “What’s going on?”

“I told you, I have a meeting.”

“Yeah, but like, can it wait? Now with the whole, we-know-where-Phil-is thing, can we postpone it?”

“Nope.”

“Why? And why do I have to go?”

“Because, Barton,” Nick flashes him a deadly smile, “it’s with the King of Atlantis.”

***

Phil has just enough time to tap out a frantic *i love you* and smash the phone to pieces on the desk before security rushes in. He could have spent those few seconds devising an attack plan instead of destroying the phone, but he has nowhere to go and besides, he figures he owes it to the redheaded woman and her mother to try and protect them from the goons as best he can. When the black-suited guards grab him, he puts up just enough of a fight to be believable, and they plop him back in his tank. Clove-oil flavored, as usual.

When Phil's consciousness resurfaces, his mimic octopus friend helpfully flashes its Tony Stark watch to let him know that hours have passed. Three half-thawed shrimp float along the top of the tank, and Phil hungrily scarfs them down.

_Clint is coming_, he tells himself. _He'll get me out of here_. And when the logical/pessimistic voice in his head starts counting all the ways this could go sideways, Phil settles for a smaller, truer comfort: _Clint knows I love him._

The doors to the empty lab slam open as two guards walk in. One pushes a rolling cart with a small tank on top into the lab and Phil is unceremoniously grabbed from his tank and thrust into the other one.

_That’s dangerous_, Phil thinks angrily, remembering those fish parenting books Clint had made him read before they brought Mindy and Danny home. _You can send a fish into shock like that._

The guards, indifferent, throw thick, black fabric over his tank to cover the walls, and he’s wheeled out in darkness. Phil memorizes the pattern of turns — at one point they ride an elevator — and then they stop and tear the fabric away with an unnecessary flourish.

Phil is in a large, oak-paneled room, his tank standing before a wide, imposing desk. Behind it, a white-haired man in a well-tailored suit and horn-rimmed glasses sits with a wide smile. “Ah, Mr. Coulson,” he says, enunciating clearly. “I thought it time we meet at last.”

On the wall directly behind him hung a painting so large it takes up almost the entire wall — Poseidon, drawing himself up from the depths of the sea, legs like a kraken’s curling out of the churning waves. His trident has four tines.

“I’m Mr. Bell,” the man says. “Welcome to the Four.”

***

They drive one of Nick’s endless supply of black armored Humvees out of the city.
"So," Clint says after a long period of silence, "the Sub-Mariner is real."

"Yes."

"And he's the King of Atlantis."

"Yes."

"What's the King of Atlantis doing in Long Island?"

"On Long Island," Nick corrects him. "And if you needed to construct an underwater base near New York City, where would you build it?"

"Yonkers?" Clint guesses.

Nick snorts.

"Hey," Clint says defensively. "I like Yonkers."

"So do lots of people. Didn't stop them from using the Hudson as a toilet since the Revolutionary War."

They lapse back into silence until they arrive at a hidden bluff way out in North Bumfuck. Nick drives down the bluff and onto the dunes, which Clint is pretty sure violates environmental laws, and parks right on the edge of the water. They get out, and Clint looks around. "Nice beach. Who owns it?"

"You really want me to explain the paper trail?"

"Eh, not really."

Nick smirks and leans against the side of the Humvee. "Alright, Barton, let him know you're here."

Clint stares at him suspiciously, bullshit senses tingling. "How exactly am I supposed to do that?"

"Put a drop of blood in the water. Word'll get to him."

"You fucking with me, sir?"

"No, Barton, I'm not fucking with you."

"Then why don't you do it?"

"For the same reason you call me 'sir'. Now get going."

Feeling immensely silly, Clint fishes a knife out from one of his pockets and cuts a small, clean line into his calf muscle. (Movies always make their heroes slice their palms, which is extraordinarily dumb because humans have approximately one gazillion nerve endings in their palms, and as a sharpshooter Clint needs every single one). Clint stands far enough in that the waves crash over his boots, and he shakes his leg awkwardly until one tiny drop of blood drips off and plops into the water.

"Satisfied?" Clint turns to ask Nick as he retrieves a Band-Aid from another pocket.

"Extremely."
"Please stop doing this, Fury," a low voice drawls. Clint whips around to see an extremely beefy white man standing waist deep in the water. "It is unsanitary, and it stopped being funny a long time ago."

Nick chuckles deeply. "Not for me it hasn't."

If Phil didn't love Nick so much, Clint would kill him.

"Tell me, Fury. What mess have you created up here that requires our help to fix it?"

"It's a funny thing, Namor," Nick says, still maintaining a relaxed position. "We got a killer in our holding cell saying he's on orders from Atlantis, and a missing agent held captive in the middle of the Indian Ocean."

The King — Namor — raises an eyebrow. "Am I supposed to reassure you it's not us?"

"Nah, I know it's not you. But it is someone running around, trading off your good name."

"Every false rumor that springs up on land only helps us. When humans don't believe in us, they don't go around asking favors."

Nick raises his hands. "Who said anything about a favor? I'm just passing along information."

*I would very much like a favor*, Clint thinks stupidly. He feels like a little kid playing monkey in the middle, watching Nick and Namor throw thinly veiled barbs back and forth while he's standing awkwardly between them, ankle deep in the ocean with one pant leg hiked up.

"Thank you for that information. It was useless. Maybe next time our conversation will be more productive."

"They're in your territory, killing in your name, and you are just, what? Gonna leave them be?"

"When humans do stupid things in the water, they're still just humans. Goodbye, Fury."

Clint turns his swivel head back to Nick, but he just stares at the sky impassively. *Hold up*, Clint thinks in a panic, *is that all? Did we drive the Long Island Expressway for nothing?*

"Wait," Clint calls out, turning to see Namor's feet slide under the water. "Hey, wait! Please!" Clint kicks at the water, splashing desperately.

Namor resurfaces, glaring hard at Clint. "You should train your dogs better, Fury."

"Please," Clint ignores the jibe. "Nam — Your Majesty. If there's anything you can do, please. They've got my partner. Not like, an agent partner — we're engaged. That kind of partner. And I'm just trying to find him, so I can marry him," he finishes lamely.

Namor observes him intently, like how Clint imagines he'd stare at a fish that started reciting poetry. "Why would they want your partner?"

"He turns into an octopus sometimes. Can talk to fish, too. It's a whole," Clint waggles his hand, "thing."

"I see. What is his name?"

"Phil."
"Phil Coulson," Nick adds. "Don't pretend like you met him, though. He never worked an ocean job. Said he was more of a people person."

"Sounds like a waste of an asset."

Nick shrugs. "Tell me about it."

Namor turns back to look at Clint. "I cannot help you." He pauses, then says, "The people holding your man call themselves the Four. They started invading our seas about two hundred years ago. The location in the Indian Ocean is their latest underwater base. They claim to have built it on the ruins of Atlantis, but then they said that about their last headquarters, too. Their leadership is centralized and knowledge within the Four is tightly controlled; you take out that base and the organization will not survive." He looks Clint dead in the eye. "I cannot help you. He is but one human, and Atlantis does not risk its lives for humans' affairs."

Clint nods, afraid he can't speak without breaking down in tears in front of the king of the fish-men.

Namor turns toward Nick. "I suppose it is futile to ask that any technology I lend you not be taken apart and analyzed for any advantage it may give SHIELD against your enemies."

Nick shrugs again. "I don't make promises I can't keep."

Namor snorts softly and nods. "I will lend you five small battleships. Their hulls refract light and sound as they travel through the water, and as such are invisible to all visual and radar surveillance. Except ours, of course," he adds meaningfully.

Namor looks at Clint once again. "This is a favor, Phil Coulson's partner, and not one I make lightly. You will be called upon to repay it sooner or later."

"Yeah," Clint says hurriedly. "Yeah, I can do that."

Without another word, Namor disappears into the water.

"Nice work, Barton," Nick says softly.

"Nice wo—? Oh, you bastard, you played me."

Nick smiles. "Namor is a fucking ruthless leader," he says, getting into the car. "But he's an alright person. I only ever talk to the leader, but today your sob story reached the person."

Clint scrambles out of the water and around to the passenger side of the car. "You could have at least told me the plan," he grumbles.

"No, I couldn't have," Nick says reasonably. "You're a terrible diplomat, and an even worse actor."

"I hate you, Nick."

"No, you don't."

Clint sighs. "No, I don't."

***

Bell sends the guards away with a flick of his hand. For all the casualness of the gesture, Phil can pick up on the underlying dangerousness of the man. The guards instantly obey, leaving them alone.
“I know that we are far from the first sea-bound followers of the occult you’ve met in your time, Mr. Coulson.” Bell offers him another smile. “Your Michael Goodwin, of course, the fellow who gave you your remarkable abilities. He worshipped the sea, believed it to be the source of fearsome powers evolution stole from land-walking creatures. There is a group in California who believe that their land will at any moment fall into the ocean, and so are training themselves to live in their future home. These are, of course, parlor tricks. Gene-splicing and other techno-babble are no substitute for history. The Four are the owners of history, Mr. Coulson.”

He pauses to reach into his desk and pull out a decanter of brandy. “I’d offer you some,” he says, pouring himself a glass, “but under the circumstances you must forgive my rudeness.” He takes a sip. “When Atlantis fell into the sea, it quickly became myth. By the time of Plato it had been reduced to metaphor. Atlantis was lost to all but a few brave souls who knew the truth — why it sank, how to reach it, how to make it rise again. They passed the secret down in code through their art and writing. Generation to generation, these faithful guardians worked tirelessly towards their goal of resurrecting the city. It is thanks to their sacrifice that you have the honor of being one of the few human beings — well,” Bell smirks, “one of the few beings, at least, to step inside Atlantis.” He takes another sip and lifts the glass to the light, admiring the color. “Of course,” he says, setting the glass down, “that is utter horseshit.

“My men underestimated you, Mr. Coulson, and I sincerely apologize for that. You have managed in a very short period of time to upend our facility. You clearly have extraordinary talents, and I know better than to waste yours and mine on a ruse you would never believe.” He stands up and crosses to a bookshelf, where he lifts up a silver frame. He courteously turns back so Phil can still read his lips. “This is my great-great-great-great grandfather, William Ogden Bell. He owned one of the first cotton mills constructed in England. He, like many of his brethren at the cusp of the Industrial Revolution, did not study economics. There was nothing to study. He lived economics, Mr. Coulson, and through his experience he discovered what academics would later spend their lives trying to prove — that the most expensive part of any endeavor is never equipment or raw materials or taxes, but people. Labor costs will make or break a man's fortunes. Wages will save or ruin a worker's life. Every war, riot, and political squabble for the past three hundred years has been fought over that tension.

“William Ogden Bell foresaw it all. Unlike other businessmen, he never bought into the comforting lie that today's strike would be the last. He knew he would spend the rest of his life fighting to stop wages from eating into his profits — unless he could change the rules of the game.”

Bell picks up a small marble statue from the bookshelf and walks over to Phil's tank so Phil can see it clearly. It's a figure of a winged cherub covering its eyes with its hands. Each hand only had four fingers.

“My great-great-great-great grandfather created The Four,” Bell said, leaning a hip against his desk. "Businessmen, after all, are really just storytellers. He invented the myth out of whole cloth and sold it. No longer was he haggling over wages and safety standards. Instead, common folk were begging him to work for free, to be a part of the grand search for Atlantis.” Bell spread his hands, smiling wide. "Just like they're begging me.”

Phil stares at him with growing horror, even as he thinks, Clint is gonna love this.

***

“Okay,” Mel says over the speakerphone, “we’re storming an underwater stronghold we know absolutely nothing about, combating a force we know nothing about. Namor gave us ships but no fighters. Miller could have poisoned anyone in SHIELD. And Maria’s shot. Does this sound like a
“I’ve been in worse,” Natasha says mildly.

“I’m coming,” Maria pipes up.

Nick clenches the steering wheel. “You’re not coming,” he says firmly. “You’re shot.”

“Sir, we’re closer to the Indian Ocean than you are. You can’t stop me.”

“Sitwell can stop you.”

Sitwell coughs. “Sir, in all honesty, I can’t.”

Nick clenches the wheel harder.

Clint raises his hand, then lowers it when he realizes this isn’t a real meeting. “I know people we can call.”

Nick glances at him from the driver’s seat. “Barton, if you’re talking about the Avengers —”

“No, I’m talking about my friends.”

There’s a pause as everyone presumably stares dumbfounded at their phones.

“My friends just happen to also be Avengers.”

Nick sighs. “Clint—”

“No. We’re in this mess because we don’t know who might be secretly nutting it to aquatic mythology. Well, I know people we can trust. I have friends. I have —” Clint pauses to count on his fingers “— four friends.”

After a beat, Sitwell says softly, “I hope you know you have more than four.”

And fuck it, Clint knows he should say something witty, but his throat closes up with some hot and unexpected emotion. “Yeah,” he just says instead, feeling like he’s speaking around marbles. “Yeah.”

It all happens very quickly from there. Everyone answers Clint’s call, because as much as they talk shit, at the end of the day they’re all PTSD-riddled conspiracists constantly on watch for the next catastrophe. By the time Fury and Clint get back from their field trip, Stark, Rogers, Banner and Thor have joined the meeting room chaos. The Avengers have assembled, pretty much. Go team.

Natasha leads the debrief, for lots of good reasons but mostly because Tony Stark still gets a scared look in his eye whenever she walks into a room. When she finishes talking, the room is silent.

"Phil disappeared days ago,” Steve says, a hard look in his eyes. "And you're just telling us now?"

"We thought we could handle it in-house,” Nick says smoothly.

“Oh, sure,” Tony throws up his hands. "You got cuckoo cult spies coming out of your ass, but let's —"

"I told him we could trust you,” Clint interrupts. “I said you guys would do anything to help us get Phil back. Was I wrong?"
Tony looks chastened, but it's actually Bruce who speaks up first. “Of course, Clint. Whatever you need.”

Clint breathes out a sign of relief he wasn't aware he was holding.

“Yes!” Thor yells triumphantly. "Let's get her done!"

Everyone stares at him.

“Is that not a saying in this country? Friend Alexa said it was a saying in this country.”

Chapter End Notes

I TOLD Y'ALL THIS WASN'T ABANDONED. I WOULD NEVER LIE TO YOU.

I'm still on hiatus and I still have no idea when this will get finished, but I have 3k of words ready so here we gooooooo.

This update is dedicated to my company's unlimited sick leave policy, and to my coworker who graciously agreed to file all my court docs for me. It figure it's only right to use my flu recovery time to post this, since octophil started as a nyquil fever dream anyways.

Thanks so much for your love and your patience <3333333
Rock the Boat

Chapter Summary

And thus, Operation: Shotgun Wedding was born.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bell smiles down at Phil, managing to look menacing despite his Oxford professor outfit. "I want there to be a perfect understanding between us, Mr. Coulson. You could be very useful to The Four. I mean, look at you, you're practically a god incarnate! Your body contains the secrets to superhuman strength, heightened senses, immortality — secrets that followers of The Four will be desperate to get their hands on. You could help cement The Four's position as one of the most powerful, wealthiest enterprises the world has ever seen.

"Or," Bell says, smile falling from his face, "you don't cooperate, and instead of sharing the good fortune, I stuff you back into that tank where you'll be probed and dissected until I've milked every last cent from your broken, mutilated corpse." Bell takes a sip from his glass, never breaking eye contact.

Once, to win a bet during SHIELD orientation, Coulson had pretended to suffer a mysterious ankle injury. He'd gotten as far as the doors of the operating room before he had cried uncle and hopped off the gurney. Sitwell had won that bet, and has the appendectomy scar to prove it. Phil doesn't have the natural chameleon charm Sitwell does, but he thinks he can play cult leader for as long as it takes to find an escape.

Before Phil can figure out how to signal his acquiescence, a shockwave hits the room, sloshing the water in the top of the tank. Bell frowns and hits the intercom oh his desk, turning his face away so Phil can’t read his lips. Another shockwave hits, and Phil sees Bell gesture wildly behind him. Phil looks behind and sees a brief flash of the security guards before the black cloth gets thrown over the tank.

Phil counts the hallways in reverse. As they wheel him through the doors of the lab, Phil yanks the cover off one of the filtration tubes and flattens himself to squeeze inside it. Then, he pulls with all his strength, popping the tube out of its place and spilling both Phil and water onto the floor.

Phil grabs the ankle of the nearest guard and sends him crashing to the floor.

The second guard jumps in the air like Phil is a disease-riddled subway rat instead of a prisoner. Phil slams the cart into his stomach as the second guy sits up and lunges at Phil with his bare hands. Phil easily dodges him. Neither man has reached for his gun yet, which means they don’t yet realize what kind of fight they’re in. Phil almost pities them.

Phil launches himself at the prone man’s face, and while the man is struggling for air Phil reaches two tentacles down and nimbly removes the man’s gun from his holster. Two clean shots, and the men lie motionless on the floor.

Phil hauls himself back up into the tank to take a desperate breath of water. He resurfaces, looking
for his mimic octopus friend. A flurry of motion in its tank gets his attention. It’s waving its tentacles frantically at Phil, then points down at its tank bottom. At first, all Phil sees is rocks, and then it hits – the mimic octopus has crafted a rock formation to look exactly like itself when pretending to be rocks. Another flurry of motion, and Phil sees the mimic octopus transform until it looks exactly like Phil. It reaches up to yank the lid of its tank ajar, and it squeezes from its tank into Phil’s tank.

The mimic octopus is acting as cover. If anyone were to come in here, they’d see their two captive octopuses safe in their respective tanks.

Phil shakes an arm back and forth, trying to signal NO as obviously as he can. Clint can get them both out, Phil knows he can. The mimic octopus shouldn’t sacrifice itself like this.

The mimic octopus puts two tentacles up to its head, looking for all the world like a child clamping their hands over their ears. It isn’t going to listen to Phil.

Phil stares, at a loss for how to convey with his gestures just how grateful he is. The mimic octopus makes a shooing motion, and with a nod Phil pushes off the ground and swings into the tank as it rolls out the door.

***

“Barton, if you don’t stop humming that cult song, I will kill you before the Branch Oceanians get the chance,” Tony warns over the intercom.

Clint just grins. “How long have you been sitting on that one, Stark?”

Back in New York, Tony had casually mentioned that he owns an entire uninhabited island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, yes a whole island, no I don’t understand the neocolonial implications of that sentence, and thus Operation: Shotgun Wedding was born. When the North American contingent had landed on Isle Stark, Sitwell and a pale-faced Maria were waiting for them, along with one of Namor’s people and what looked like five giant soap bubbles floating off the dock.

Tony and Nick had looked equally likely to nut at the sight of the warships, their shiny metallic hulls glinting in the sun. Namor’s lackey, looking bored, had given them a crash course on how to control these things and sent them off without so much as a good luck. However sleek and sexily technological they may be, however, the warships couldn’t actually get them into the evil underwater lair.

Hence, their situation now: Clint humming his new favorite tune as Stark steered their cute little bubble right on top of a Four submarine.

A barely perceptible shudder runs through both ships as they connect. A tube-like appendage extends from the bubble and fastens onto the submarine, creating an airtight seal. A pump whisks all the water out of the tube, and Natasha climbs inside with a steel-cutting blowtorch like a goddamn badass. She cuts a hole in the submarine’s hull large enough for her and Clint to squeeze through, then passes the metal circle back to Clint and they climb in noiselessly.

Taking out the three cult members onboard would be a hell of a lot easier with bullets or arrows, but since they don’t want to risk, you know, accidentally puncturing the hull and sending them hurtling towards the depths of the ocean to face a slow and agonizing death by drowning, they resort to ninja tricks.

“Does this make us pirates?” Clint asks as he settles at the submarine’s controls while Natasha
patches up the whole in the hull using some fancy Starktech polymer.

“Yes,” Natasha says solemnly.

“Have fun storming the castle!” Tony says cheerily through the intercom and disconnects the bubble from the submarine, and they’re off.

When the mauled submarine gets within radar range, a sleepy voice crackles over the radio. “Identify yourself.”

“The kraken bides its time,” Clint says, repeating the password Natasha interrogated out of the submarine’s captain.

“Cool,” the voice replies. “Heads up, the octopus tried to escape again, so everyone’s a little on edge.”

“Thanks bud,” Clint says, heart beating wildly in his chest.

The Four’s underground base is exactly what you’d imagine it to be — a several-story dome stuck to the bottom of the sea, metal glinting dully in the submarine’s lights. Clint imagines the architect wanted the viewer to be impressed by its size and imperious facade, but really Clint thinks it just looks like a giant boob.

A side panel to the giant boob slides open, and Clint guides the submarine in. The panel slams shut behind them, and Clint can hear gurgling and clanking as the dry dock sucks all the water out and pressurizes the chamber. When the clanking stops, they hear a fist bang on the hatch at the top of the submarine. Natasha nods at Clint, and she climbs up the ladder while Clint waits at the bottom, quiver slung across his shoulder.

The hatch opens, and Natasha begins shooting. Worrying about being cornered or having the high ground is for people who aren’t badasses trained in fighting from the time they could walk. She vaults out, Clint scrambling up the ladder behind her.

They secure the dry dock in seconds, but they barely have time to lower their weapons before the ground shakes with a sudden boom.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry!” Tony cries over the intercom.

“What the fuck was that, Stark?” Natasha hisses, running to a computer console.

“Uh…I pressed the wrong button.”

“Yes!” Thor crows. “The battle has begun!”

A second shockwave rattles the base.

“You idiots!” Maria yells, “You were supposed to wait until after we got our people out!”

“Too late for that,” Steve says grimly. “Barton, Romanov, are you okay? This extraction needs to happen fast.”


“Great. Get Phil and get out. We’ll try to distract their forces without doing too much damage.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” she mutters to herself.
They split up, Natasha heading for a room labeled *Containment Unit* while Clint goes in the opposite direction to check out *Exogenetics Laboratory*. He travels through the air vents, noting every time there’s a trap door ready to spring closed should one section of the boob flood.

When he’s right above the lab, he peers through an opening in the vent. The room is empty except for two bodies lying crumpled on the ground…and a red-and-white octopus floating in a tank.

Clint drops to the ground and rushes to the tank. “Phil, holy shit, you have no idea the bullshit you’ve put me through —” He pulls up short, staring at the octopus. “You’re not Phil,” he says accusatorily, not sure why he knows this.

The octopus deflates, dropping its red coloring and turning black and white instead. It points a tentacle at him. “Uh, me?” Clint says, caught off-guard by the deja vu. “I’m Clint.”

The octopus nods excitedly, and starts waving its tentacles so frantically Clint can’t keep up. “Hold on, hold on, hold on,” he begs it. “Do you know who I am?”

The octopus nods.

“Okay, great. Phil made an octofriend. That cuts down on a lot of exposition. Do you know where he is?”

The octopus points to the door and then crooks its tentacle to the left.

“Oh, great. Great great great great.” Clint stares at the octopus, suddenly hit by a horrible thought. “You’re like Phil, aren’t you? Like, human in a fishy body? Victim of unethical mad scientist lab experiments?”

Slowly, like it’s nervous about this conversation, the octopus nods.

“Ah, fucking shit, dude. I’m sorry.” Clint glances at the door. “Okay, I’m gonna get you out of here, but we gotta make this quick.” Clint shucks his backpack off, and the octopus recoils. “Oh, I’m not gonna stuff you in a backpack, I promise. Look.” He holds the backpack up to the tank so it can see inside, then moves his head so it can still read his lips. “This is a specially-designed octopus-holding enclosure. It’s got a lightweight water filtration system, it’s completely bulletproof and airtight. It’s gonna be dark and cramped, especially when I put Phil in there too, but it’s safe, I promise.” When the octopus doesn’t relax any further, Clint grows desperate. “Look, do you know who Tony Stark is? Cuz he built this, and actually now that I say that I don’t know if that’s more or less reassuring —”

The octopus starts frantically digging around in the rocks at the bottom of the tank, and drags out a hidden watch. With Iron Man’s faceplate on it.

“Oh, cool,” Clint says dumbly. “You’re a fan.”

With the Tony Stark seal of approval, the octopus acquiesces. Clint scoops it up and fills the rest of the bag with water from its tank. He takes off running in the direction the octopus pointed, silently apologizing to it for the rough fucking ride it must be having back there.

***

Phil speeds down the hallways, using his tentacles to push off against walls and corners like a game of pinball. He’s not entirely sure where he’s going, but he knows where he can’t be: sitting stationary in a tank where someone can find him and drug him. Phil needs control.
Another shockwave hits the station, and Phil’s cart almost topples over. Phil is almost certain those blasts mean the base is under attack, and he speculates (hopes, prays, gambles) that they’re here for him. Clint got his messages and came for him. All he needs to do is keep himself safe until Clint comes.

Three men dressed in head-to-toe riot gear come hurtling down the hallway. They stop in their tracks, the sight of an octopus in an aquarium tank on wheels hurtling towards them apparently not what they were searching for. Phil takes advantage of their shock and leaps out of the tank, hurtling himself to the floor.

One guard shoots at the tank, which does nothing but spray glass and water everywhere. Phil scrambles for an air vent low on the floor, but before he can reach it a guard surges forward and roughly kicks him in the head.

Pain nearly blinds him, but Phil tucks himself into a ball and uses the momentum to roll himself forward towards the men. One man drops roughly next to him, and Phil realizes one of the other idiots shot him in the foot while aiming for Phil.

Phil rushes the man, forcing his helmet off his head and swinging his body into it. Phil can feel the helmet reverberate as bullets ping off its protective shell. Phil’s hearts begin beating rapidly with panic. This is worse than being trapped inside a tank. Phil is exhausted, malnourished, and an octopus.

The helmet flies rapidly through the air and Phil drops out of it right before one of the men turns it upside down and unloads a chamber of bullets into it. Phil lands beside the cart, now in bullet-ridden pieces, and spots a metal rod that used to be a leg. Ignoring the bite of the glass, Phil reaches for it with two tentacles and swings it roughly into the shin of the man in front of him. The man drops, and Phil hits him, again and again and again.

Phil feels a hand grab him roughly, and he twists his slippery body as he slashes the attached wrist with a long shard of glass he kept hidden in another tentacle. Phil drops, erupting in anger as pain racks his body once again.

This is stupid, he can’t help thinking as he dodges and weaves, attacks then retreats. He is a SHIELD agent, one of the first and one of the best, and he is always — always — in control. But he’s going to die here. He’s going to die like this, twenty pounds of nothing with no voice and no agency. Three incompetent goons are going to kill him, and it’s so fucking stupid.

Phil narrowly dodges a steel-toed boot, and he screams internally. FUCK. THIS.

Something snaps. The rubber band that has been tightly squeezing Phil’s mind for the past ten years breaks and Phil explodes in freedom. His fingers curl around the pipe in his hand and slam it into an opponent’s neck. His other hand wrestles the gun away and he pulls the trigger with a satisfying pop. pop. pop.

His attackers fall, and Phil falls with them. They are dead. Phil is alive.

He brings the hand holding the gun up to his face to inspect it. It’s human, a splotchy pink. It shakes slightly with the effort to hold it up.

Phil knows the biological theory behind his transformation. His bruises and cuts will have healed. From a technical, cellular standpoint, Phil is uninjured. But his mind feels foggy, depleted. Since Einstein we’ve known that energy cannot be created nor destroyed, only changed. Phil took his life back, took control of his body back, but it cost him nearly everything he had.
He did it. He is done. Phil closes his eyes.

***

“Coulson isn’t in the Containment Unit,” Natasha says over the intercom. “It’s like a brig. Coulson isn’t locked up here, but I found a captive — Trish, the owner of the contraband phone.”

“Cool,” Clint whispers back. “So did I. Another octopus.”

At the end of the hallway, Clint reaches a door and cautiously cracks it open. From the other side, he hears scuffling, then shouts, then three quick gunshots from a silencer. Clint’s heart jumps in his throat as he raises his weapon. Please, he begs silently, trying not to think about what this could mean. Please please please please please.

***

Phil hears faint footsteps coming down the hallway, unnoticeable to anyone whose ear hasn’t been trained by Natasha Romanov. He staggers to his feet. The gun is out of bullets, but the attacker won’t know that.

Clint turns the corner. Phil almost drops the pipe, and thanks whatever lucky star he was born under that he doesn’t. The sound of it hitting the floor would have destroyed whatever composure he had left. Clint’s tac suit is covered in blood and he’s got his bow in his hand and his hair is impossibly disheveled. Phil, deep down in his soul, had been preparing himself to never see this sight again. Now Clint is here, and Phil’s body is done. His knees are protesting, like they’ve grown sentience and don’t understand why they just can’t buckle to the ground. A haze over his eyes makes the surroundings look a couple shades lighter, and he blinks to stave off fainting. He can’t even summon the energy to cry.

And then, Clint smiles nervously. “I wrote you a song about cults, do you want to hear it?”

Just like that, Phil’s vision clears. Passively, he can analyze his reaction — a sudden release of dopamine in the frontal cortex increasing executive functions, motor control, and motivation — but mainly he thinks, I can’t wait to marry you. “Another time, Barton,” he says gratefully, “but right now we have more important business to attend to.”

Clint’s grin grows. “Lead the way, sir.”

Phil can’t give up. He won’t. Clint is too cute to let go.

***

Clint turns the corner, and Phil is standing there, naked. Presumably dead bodies lie all around him, and he’s holding a gun in one hand and a pipe in another, and he’s an actual bipedal human with a spinal column and an external nose and Clint can see all this because Phil is naked - and Clint doesn’t know what to say. Clint, for the first time since walking into this nonsense, looks, he means really looks at Phil’s face. His eyes seem huge and small at the same time, like he can’t decide whether to wrench them shut or never close them again. Phil looks lost, Clint realizes, and he never wants Phil to look like that again. So he says the only thing he knows how to say:

“I wrote you a song about cults, do you want to hear it?”

Phil’s nose twitches, just once, and then his back straightens and his head tilts up. “Another time, Barton,” he says in his best Agent Coulson voice, “but right now we have more important business to attend to.”
You’re the best thing to ever happen to me, Clint thinks. “Lead the way, sir.”

Chapter End Notes

I CAN DO THIS I CAN DO THIS I CAN DO THIS I CAN DO THIS
Phil’s mouth quirks up briefly. “Mission objectives, sir?”

“Now that we’ve retaken our asset? Agent extraction.”

Phil can’t stop looking at Clint as they run through the base to meet up with Natasha and her charge. It’s okay though, because whenever Phil glances over, Clint is looking back.

“Hey, so —” Clint barely starts talking into his comm before he gets cut off. “Yeah, but — yes. Yes, yes, yes. Yeah, will you just — for fuck’s sake, shut up a minute.” Rolling his eyes, Clint reaches into one of his many pockets and pulls out a second comm.

Phil takes it, feeling a heady spark of electricity when his fingers brush Clint’s glove, and places it in his ear. He immediately wants to pull it out again, wincing at the loud and indecipherable crosstalk.

“I just heard eight simultaneous violations of mission intercommunications protocol,” Phil says disapprovingly.

Everyone falls silent.

“Good to have you back, Agent,” Nick says, a hint of warmth in his businesslike tone.

Phil’s mouth quirks up briefly. “Mission objectives, sir?”

“Now that we’ve retaken our asset? Agent extraction.”

Stark cuts in. “We can’t just leave without —”

“With a second objective,” Fury continues smoothly, “of neutralizing the top leadership of the Four. As long as it won’t cause friendly casualties.”

“Leadership is one man, William Ogden Bell,” Phil says. “Bell might have underlings, but they’re true subordinates. He’d be the only one calling the shots.”

“You know where he is?”

“I know where he was. No guarantee he’d stay there once the base got attacked.”

The shouting begins again, with Stark loudly saying, “I said I’m sorry already!”

“Sir,” Mel’s voice cuts in, and Phil can’t suppress a little hitch in his breath — *Melinda May got back into the field for me.* “I’ve spotted a small ship leaving the dock, probably an escape pod.”

“Is it hostile?”

“Trish says not to attack it,” Natasha cuts in. “She says lots of people have been trying to find an
opportunity to escape for months, and this is probably them taking it.”

“Banner and I can track them from the island to ensure it isn’t Bell,” Hill offers, her voice sounding distant and tinny, “since we weren’t allowed in on the action.”

“Speak for yourself,” Banner mutters at the same time that Sitwell yells, “You got shot!”

Phil and Clint turn a corner at the same time Natasha and Trish arrive at the opposite end of the hallway. Suddenly, sirens start wailing as a creaking, groaning sound can be heard from inside the walls.

“Trap doors,” Clint mutters to himself.

“They’ve activated the watertight bulkheads,” Natasha says, looking down at a screen. “The way to the submarine has been cut off.”

“There’s no escape pod in this section,” Trish says, eyes wild. “They limited them on purpose. It disincentivized rebellion.”

“You still have that hullcutter, Nat?” Steve asks over the intercom.

“Yes,” she says, eyes locking with Phil. “But only one extra pressurized suit.”

Phil had already noticed that Clint was not wearing his ordinary tac suit; a quick glance confirms that he’s wearing SHIELD’s state of the art diving suit. Pull up the hood and attach the mask, and you’ve got a watertight, pressurized ecosystem. And they only have one.

Phil turns to Clint. “How were you planning on getting me out of here if I was an octopus?”

Clint points to his backpack. “I have a tank back here. Though it’s ocupado, your friend is already hanging out.”

Phil stares at Clint, everything else momentarily forgotten. “I love you.” Clint grins wildly, and Natasha groans. Phil shakes his head to concentrate. “Can you fit a second octopus in there?”

“Yeah?” Clint asks, confused. “Wait, does this mean...how?”

Phil smirks. “I thought the word fuck really, really loudly.”

Clint’s jaw falls open. “I love you.”

“I hate both of you,” Natasha moans.

Phil closes his eyes and thinks back to that moment when something inside him snapped and his consciousness expanded outwards. Then he takes the edges of his consciousness and carefully folds it back in again.

He’s staring up at Clint from down on the floor, an octopus.

“Holy fucking shit,” Clint mouths.

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Clint gingerly scoops up his fiance and puts him into his backpack as Natasha helps a scared ex-cultist into a pressurized suit so they can cut a hole in an underground lair and swim out the other
side. This is his life.

Clint can remember ten years ago when a moment made him step back and take stock of his life the same way. Back then, Clint thought the weirdest thing that could ever happen to him was assassinating a dolphin-lover in an aquarium. This is so, so, so much weirder than that.

And to be honest, Clint wouldn’t have it any other way.

Natasha cuts a giant hole into the hull of the boob, and they step back as water rushes through. Once their section of boob is entirely flooded, they swim out into the dark sea and Tony scoops them back up through the same tubal appendage/giant twizzler they had exited less than an hour ago. It drains itself of liquid, and they clamber back up it into the sphere.

“Uber passengers have been picked up,” Tony declares. “So are we blowing this shit up or what?”

“There may still be people trapped in the base trying to get out,” Steve says. “I think we should wait.”

“Yeah and one of them, in particular, needs to die,” Sitwell says, voice reasonable. “I say we tear it apart.”

On the viewscreen, the dome-boob implodes, entirely of its own volition.

“Okay,” Clint says, blinking, “so that saves us a moral dilemma.”

“Holy fuck,” Trish breathes behind him, shoving at her mask and hood until her red curls spring free. “Holy fuck, it’s gone, it’s done, holy fuck, I’m free.”

Clint pats her on the back, grinning wildly. “Hell yeah.” He slings his backpack off and opens it up. “How we doing?” He asks when Phil peers up at him. “Ready to come out?” Phil reaches up a tentacle, and Clint grabs him and sets him on the ground. In the space of a blink, Phil is human again, sprawled on his belly and naked as a jaybird. “You should work on making that more badass,” Clint says offhand, like it wasn’t the coolest shit he’d ever seen. “Loses some of the dignity in the execution.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Phil says hoarsely, accepting a pile of clothes from Natasha.

“What about you, little dude?” Clint asks the octopus in the bag. It shakes its head. “Bummer. We’ll figure it out, don’t worry.”

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Phil flickers in and out of awareness. He knows instinctively that the conversations happening around him are important, but any time he tries to focus on them, the words float away from him.

When their little sphere (on loan from Namor, which is such a crazy impossibility Phil is sure he’s heard it wrong) slows to a halt, Clint helps him shuffle out of it and onto dry land. “Where are we?” Phil asks, looking around.

“Love Island,” Natasha replies. Phil squints at her, unsure if that was a joke.

In the distance, someone is listening the radio: Breaking News update on the developing humanitarian crisis in the Indian Ocean. The World Security Council is refusing to comment on its prior knowledge of the Four, even as it coordinates with governments to develop a process for sorting perpetrators from victims as hundreds of survivors of the underwater base’s collapse.
Phil should care about this. Phil does care about this, and he is going to get right on solving it as soon as possible. He starts drafting memo outlines in his head as Clint guides him inside a Quinjet. As soon as they sit down, Phil’s eyes sneak closed of their own volition, and before he knows it he’s asleep.

***

Clint wakes up when the Quinjet touches ground in New York. Phil is still sound asleep, drooling slightly on Clint’s tac vest. “Come on, sleepy head,” he says, running a hand through Phil’s hair. “Time to get up.”

Phil groans softly but raises his head and lets Clint help him up. Two medical technicians are waiting outside the Quinjet with a wheelchair, and it’s a sad sign of how exhausted Phil is that he sinks into the chair without protesting.

Clint begins to follow them when Natasha calls out, “Where are you going?”

Clint stops and turns around. “Uh, medical?”

Natasha raises an eyebrow. “Voluntarily?”

Instead of responding, he looks back at Phil and the med techs, making sure they haven’t gone too far.

“Clint,” Natasha says softly, and when he faces her again her eyes are filled with rare sincerity. “He’s safe. You saved him. You can turn it off now. I promise you, nothing bad is going to happen in medical. It’s time to take care of yourself now, okay? You need to sleep, and you need to shower. And Clint,” she says earnestly, “you smell so bad right now.”

Clint’s throat feels tight, and he swallows to keep from crying. “I can shower with Phil later,” he says hoarsely.

“Gross.”

“Clint?” Phil calls. “Where did you go?”

Clint shrugs at Natasha. “Duty calls.” He turns and jogs towards Phil, nudging the techs out of the way until he’s pushing the wheelchair. “Hey, boss, how fast do you think we can go in this thing?”

“Barton,” Phil says, trying to sound disapproving but failing, “I swear to god --”

Clint takes off running, leaving the med techs behind in their dust.

Dr. Washington is waiting in medical with a disapproving look on her face. “Agent Barton,” she says drily, “thanks for getting Agent Coulson here so quickly.”

“You’re welcome,” Clint says cheerfully, not giving a shit.

Dr. Washington sighs and turns to Phil. “Agent Coulson, we’re going to get you out of here as fast as we can, okay? We have to check to make sure nothing is wrong, but we don’t want you here any longer than you have to be.”

Dr. Washington reaches for the wheelchair handles, but Clint doesn’t let go. “Where to, Doc?” Clint says.
She looks between them. “Agents, I know today has been a rough day. But Agent Barton, you’re not going to be very comfortable back there, okay? And frankly, Agent Coulson would be more comfortable in a calm environment.”

Clint grips the handles more tightly. “I can be calm,” he insists.

“Dr. Washington, I would really rather have Clint with me,” Phil says, his voice weak but firm.

And that seals the issue for Clint. “I’m not going anywhere, Doc. No offense,” he adds quickly. He really does like Doc Wash a lot, actually. She’s a hardass, but she’s fair about it.

Instead of looking angry, Dr. Washington tilts her head at Clint speculatively. “Not going anywhere, huh?” Just then, the two med techs burst through the doors, finally caught up. “Gentlemen,” she calls to them, “Agent Barton has just informed me that under no circumstances will he leave Medical until Agent Coulson does.” She smiles brightly. “He’ll be needing his yearly physical examination, a urine culture, and bloodwork. Please look through his file and see if he’s overdue for any other screenings, or if he’s missing any vaccinations or booster shots.”

Phil chuckles, the traitor.

Halfway through Clint’s poking and prodding, Natasha comes in to check on them. “This is your fault for not taking a shower,” she says mildly. She’s typing furiously on her phone in the way that means she’s working on her high-speed timed crosswords. “You can still leave.”

Clint glances over at Phil, who’s currently hooked up to some high-tech glowing dialysis machine. “No, I think I’ll stick it out.” Phil flashes a brief, grateful smile at him.

Natasha shrugs. “Suit yourself,” she says, still typing, and promptly exits.

An hour and a half later, Clint and Phil walk out of Medical (actually, Phil having recovered enough of his strength to ditch the chair). Natasha is waiting in the chairs, still typing away. “How’d it go?”

“The doctors report no repercussions from my captivity except fatigue and undernourishment,” Phil says.

“And Clint?”

Clint just scowls, but Phil answers. “Clint is free from prostate cancer, lung cancer, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease. He also received a tetanus booster shot and the seasonal flu vaccine.”

“Good boy.”

The door opens, and Nick walks in. “Good news, the doctors just gave you both a clean bill of health.”

“Isn’t that a HIPAA violation?” Clint wonders.

Nick just raises an eyebrow. “We had a whole conversation about clandestine trackers, and you’re still wondering about HIPAA?”

“You gave Clint a tracker?” Phil asks. “Nick, what the hell.”

Clint turns to Phil. “You knew about the trackers?”

“I didn’t know you had one,” he says, frowning.
“Children,” Natasha scoffs.

Nick shakes his head. “Let’s take a walk, Phil, and have a little chat.” When both Phil and Clint move, he holds up a hand. “Just Phil.”

“Nick –”

“Phil, you know how this works. The sooner we get done debriefing, the sooner we can get drunk and forget this ever happened.” Nick glances at Clint. “I promise I’ll return him to you, Barton. Stand down.”

Clint frowns and looks at Nick. Then looks at Natasha, still clacking away on her phone. Then looks at Phil, who glances back at him. Their eyes meet and it’s such a fucking thrill, to look at the love of your life and know with just a glance you’re both thinking the exact same thing.

Phil turns back to Nick and says mildly, “I hope you invited my nieces to the surprise wedding.”

“Of course, we’re not animals,” Nick says reasonably, while Natasha throws her phone to the ground and groans in frustration.

Clint laughs and laughs, so in love he’s giddy with it.

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Clint does finally allow Natasha to push him into a shower. Watching Phil walk out of sight had sent an alarming pulse of panic through his body, but Natasha had clung onto Clint’s arm and walked him away, muttering threats about the bad things that happen to idiots who ruin surprises.

The hot water soothes his aching muscles but does nothing to loosen the knot of anxiety in Clint’s stomach. Clint knows Phil is safe, but his body hasn’t caught on yet, still tensed and twitchy. After long minutes, Clint gives up trying to relax and steps out of the shower. Natasha had stolen the clothes he was wearing, presumably to burn them, and hung a tux on the bathroom door, complete with new boxers. Clint pulls on the boxers, trying not to think about how Natasha knows his size, and stares at himself in the mirror. He looks like hell. His hair is a wet, tangled mess on top of his head. What are you supposed to do with wet hair when you don’t have time for it to dry? Is that what a curling iron is for? Does Clint’s hair even count as curly? He picks a comb up off the counter and starts dragging it through his tangles, grimacing.

Natasha whisks open the door, making Clint yelp. She’s wearing her own tux, tailored so tightly it might have been a second skin.

“You my best man?” Clint asks, raising his eyebrow at their matching outfits.

“No,” Natasha says, coming up close to wrench the comb out of his grasp.

“Oh. Okay.” Clint tries to keep the hurt out of his voice. He must not manage right, because she rolls her eyes and cuffs him over the head.

“Trying to split the guests into groom’s and groom’s got ugly. Phil’s nieces refused to sit on his side, saying they were your family first. Sitwell almost burst into tears at the stress of having to choose. So we abolished sides and wedding parties. Every guest is equal.”

She reaches up to start working on his hair. Clint catches her wrist with his hand. “Some are more equal than others,” he says softly.
“Cool it, Napoleon,” she says, snorting, but Clint thinks he can see her eyes shine suspiciously.

After Natasha fixes his hair (with a blowdryer and like, five different sprays, what the fuck), she stuffs him into his tux and out through the halls. Clint quickly realizes they’re not going to the interfaith chapel (Phil possesses the aversion of all New England ex-Catholics to anything vaguely religious) but instead to Hall H, one of those open, featureless rooms a hotel would call a “ballroom” and an elementary school would call a “multi-purpose room.”

Phil is waiting outside the doors, and Clint’s heart skips a beat. His cheeks are still too gaunt and he’s got large circles under his eyes, but the smile on his face is radiant. He looks perfect.

“Oh,” Phil says softly, and something settles inside Clint he didn’t even realize was adrift. We’re okay, he thinks, and for the first time truly believes it. “Hi,” Clint whispers back.

Phil turns to Natasha. “Mel told me if I moved from this spot without permission she’d amputate one of my balls with a staple remover.”

Natasha grins fiercely and reaches for her phone.

“That’s a little harsh,” Clint says. “Isn’t our wedding supposed to be, you know, for us?”

“What gave you that idea?” Natasha says, and after a final tap on her phone, they hear Canon in D begin to play on a piano inside the hall. “Alright, kids. Showtime.” And with that, she opens the door and pushes them in.

The room is unrecognizable. Fairy lights twinkle across the ceiling, and billowy white curtains have softened the blank walls. Natasha’s even replaced the carpet with hardwood, and Clint has no idea how she’s done that. True to Natasha’s word, there is no aisle splitting the chairs down in the middle. Instead, their guests – no more than twenty, all told – have arranged chairs in a large semi-circle around a flower-covered wedding arch and a piano where Dina sits, playing. It’s tacky in that Southern white girl way, only missing the mason jars. It’s precious as fuck.

Clint grabs Phil’s hand instinctively, and they begin to walk. Nick stands and takes his place as officiant in front of the gazebo. When they walk up to him, he shakes his head softly. “I wouldn’t have been surprised if you two ran away.” Everyone laughs softly. Dina finishes playing, and those who aren’t already sitting in wheelchairs take their seats.

Natasha stands in the back by the doors, guarding and protecting.

Nick clears his throat. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today because these two idiots love each other beyond reason.” The guests laugh, and someone whoops. “The past few days are really just one example of the stupid shit they pull in the name of that love. They have botched mission protocol, provoked diplomatic incidents, and triggered piles of extra paperwork over the years. And while complaining about Barton and Coulson’s antics will always remain a favorite SHIELD pastime, today we should admit the truth.” Nick’s smile softens. “Phil and Clint’s insanity is the best thing that ever happened to us.

“If their compassion were more rational, their hearts more guarded, then not only would we not be here today, most of us would not be anywhere today. Their capacity for empathy, their willingness to ignore risks in the face of what’s right, is what has kept them and us alive. We, the dearly beloved, have come here because we are grateful to be beloved. Each and every one of us is loved by Phil and Clint in some way, and that love has changed us for the better.
“Phil. Clint.” He stares each of them in the eyes. “We love you. God help us, we love you. And we could not be more honored to stand with you as your family as you embark on this new life you are building together. You have been through some serious shit, and yet through perseverance and sheer dumb luck you’ve made it, to this moment. Doubtless some serious shit is gonna come your way after this moment too, but today you pledge to face it together, undivided, for the rest of your days.

“Which reminds me,” Nick says, smacking the pockets of his leather duster, “you have some vows to make today.” He fishes two small silver bands out of his pockets. “Phil, you’re up first,” he says. “Here, Clint, hold this.” He hands Clint one of the rings. It’s heavy in Clint’s palm, simple, but never plain. Clint looks up into Phil’s eyes with wonder.

“Phillip Jay Coulson, do you take Clinton Francis Barton to be your wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

Clint doesn’t breathe.

“I do,” Phil whispers softly, and Clint slides the ring onto Phil’s finger.

“Your turn, Clint,” Nick says, and Clint begins to shake softly when Nick hands the last ring over to Phil. “Clinton Francis Barton, do you take Phillip Jay Coulson to be your wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

“I do,” Clint says, and he has to restrain himself from shouting it over and over again, I do I do I do. Phil slides the ring onto Clint’s finger, warm from Phil’s palm. The weight feels immediately familiar, welcome.

“No takebacks,” Nick says, and Clint can tell from his voice that he’s grinning, but Clint can’t look away from Phil to check. “By the power vested in me by absolutely no one because this wedding is in no way legal and the state of New York does not even know this room exists, I now pronounce you husbands. Kiss!”

Clint rushes forward to meet Phil’s lips. Phil brings his hands up to cup Clint’s face, and Clint can feel the brush of metal along his cheek. Distantly, he can hear cheers of excitement and Dina beginning to play Great Balls of Fire, and Clint knows he’s home.

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**Epilogue: Three Weeks Later**

The lab door swings open. “Good morning, Adelaide!” Fitz sings out loudly.

The mimic octopus, in her large, open-top tank, hits one of three large buttons attached to her tank wall, and “NO” flashes red on a LED sign above her tank.

“Of course that would be a ‘no,’” Simmons says, following through the door with a paper coffee cup in her hand. “It’s a stupid name, isn’t it, Lori?”

The mimic octopus again hits NO.
“Really?” Simmons pouts, setting her coffee down by the tank. “I was up all night thinking about that one.”

The octopus glides to the top of the tank and pushes herself out of the water. She reaches a tentacle down to the coffee cup.

“Hey,” Simmons says, yanking her cup out of the way, “no coffee, you have an operation today.”

“Speaking of, let’s get cracking!” Fitz says, “I think we’ve finally figured out what’s been keeping you in an octopus body all these years. I can’t believe we didn’t about it before, it’s so simple.”

Simmons nods. “It’s like Coulson’s transformation—”

“—Except with no nanoparticles—”

“—Or gamma radiation—”

“—Or genetically-modified man-sharks—”

“So not like Coulson’s transformation at all, actually,” Simmons finishes.

The mimic octopus hits a second button on her tank wall, and “WTF” flashes green on the LED sign.

“Right,” Fitz says. “We deserved that one. Anyways, your cells, like Coulson’s, can switch between human and octopus. However, your ability is native. You were born this way. We were looking for something that causes a transformation, but we should have been looking for something that inhibits your transformation.”

Simmons grins. “And we think we’ve isolated a protein introduced into your bloodstream that is preventing your cells from switching. So, we give you an injection with an enzyme that breaks down the protein, and you should be able to switch yourself on and off.”

“Much like last time, this one involves getting out, so sorry about that.”

Simmons reaches into the tank, and the octopus curls herself gently around Simmons’ wrist. Simmons places her on a lab table, covered with a blanket to help shield her from the cold metal of the table.

“Alright,” Fitz says, coming up with a needle. “We’re ready.”

Simmons bends her head down so the octopus can read her lips. “This is gonna be a sting, okay? In 3...2...1…”

Fitz injects her and steps back. At first, nothing happens, and the octopus lifts her arms in an approximation of a shrug. Then, her muscles freeze, and she begins convulsing.

“Oh god.” Simmons throws her hands over her mouth. Fitz rushes forward, but is thrown back by the force of sudden displaced air.

A woman is sitting on the lab table.

They stare at each other, Fitz and Simmons and this woman.

She has long brown hair, and her eyes are wide, openly telegraphing her fear and shock.
Fitz starts. “Get the fuzzy jumper.”

Simmons rushes to get the sweater and sweatpants at the table, while Fitz reaches for a water bottle to give her. Simmons hands her the clothes, and the woman flashes her a smile and struggles into them. Simmons and Fitz avert their eyes as she changes. Finally she laughs, and they turn around. The smile on her face, Simmons thinks absently, is beautiful.


“Skye.” Her voice is hoarse, and she clears her throat. “My name is Skye.”

fin

Chapter End Notes

holy shit i did this?? did i do this?? i can't believe i did this omg, i can't believe it's done

yo so 2017 sucked right? and then 2018 came and didn't suck less? but somehow we survived it? and we're still here? so like, let's celebrate idk

i'd like to dedicate this fic to: my doctors, for keeping my body alive; my friends, for keeping my soul alive; and you, dear reader, for patiently waiting TWO FUCKING YEARS for an update from me

End Notes

Come scream and throw octopus pictures at me here on tumblr!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!