The Misadventures of Grumpy Cat and Circus

by page_runner

Summary

Hardison drags the crew to Bed-Stuy to investigate some shady property dealings. Eliot identifies some very distinctive arrows. Parker bugs a puppy.

Notes

Set post-Leverage by about a year, in the middle of the Fraction Hawkeye run (post pizza dog issue-ish). I tweaked a few things: Kate stuck around, no Barney (sorry Barney), and I borrowed Stark Tower from the MCU for...reasons.
Leaving on job. Short notice, going silent, need favor. Check into property deals of Ivan Banionis. 
Friend in trouble. Keep me out of it. -T

“I was shot at Eliot! Shot. At. With an arrow of all things, are you listening to me?” Hardison checked his coat again to be sure the close call hadn’t been closer. He liked this coat, especially here, in an alley in the middle of Bed-Stuy, which hadn’t gotten the memo that it was April dammit, and still insisted on wind chill.

“There are no holes in your coat Hardison,” Eliot growled, driving him forward with a firm hand on his shoulder. “There are no holes in you either. If he’d wanted to hurt you, kill you, or shoot an apple off the top of your head, he’d have done exactly that. Now—”

“You know who shot at me? How?” He tried to twist around, to see over Eliot and nearly tripped over some debris. A used syringe skittered away from his sneaker. Great neighborhood, even without some crazy-ass Robin Hood taking pot shots at them.

“They’re very distinctive arrows. MOVE.” Eliot shoved him around another corner and into an alley that appeared to be identical to the one they’d just left in a hurry. Hardison started to bend over to catch his breath, but Eliot pushed him flat against the wall. “Don’t make yourself a target, man!”

“Hang on, you said whoever was shooting at us wasn’t going to hit us. Which seriously begs the question, who is shooting at us, Eliot?” Since his partner wasn’t actively engaging full mother bear mode, they clearly weren’t about to die, but that didn’t make this situation any less weird.

“First shot was a warning. Telling us to get out of there, but telling us in a quiet way.” Eliot risked a glance around the corner and then pulled his head back. “But he probably spotted us.”

“Ya think?” Hardison couldn’t resist muttering. Eliot still had him pressed against the wall, closer than necessary, and while he certainly wasn’t going to object to a quick make out session as a cover, that didn’t seem to be where this was going.

“No, I mean, he might have recognized us. Me. He might have recognized me.” Eliot backed off a bit, running a hand through his hair, distracted and on edge. People from Eliot’s past were rarely the warm and cuddly type.

“E-Eliot, did you piss off an evil Robin Hood? Cause if I hadn’t nearly been shot back there, I might find that funny.”

“No, I didn’t piss off an evil – look he’s just a guy. With a bit of a grudge.” Eliot risked another quick peak around the corner. “I think he moved.”

“Moved where?” Usually Eliot having an idea of who was attacking them was reassuring. This was not reassuring.

“Probably across the rooftops. He likes rooftops.” Eliot paused and frowned. “Parker! You there?”

Shit, Parker. He hadn’t heard her in his ear since before the whole arrow thing started. “P-Parker, come in girl. There’s a guy with a bow and arrow on the rooftops, I know that sounds crazy, but
you gotta get out of there, Parker?"

“Guys.” Both Eliot and Hardison jumped at Parker dropping out of the sky, one hand occupied with the belay gear, the other with a pizza box? He jumped again at the man sharing her rappel line. He held a clearly custom-built, carbon fiber bow with—Hardison shook himself away from the tech and back towards his anger and mounting confusion. Beside him, Eliot tensed slightly as if preparing for an attack.

Parker unclipped the rappel line and waved. “Guys, this is Clint. He likes high up places and has a dog that loves pizza.” She held up the box, but her grin faded as she assessed their faces. “He came to apologize.” She stepped aside, no longer shielding the archer.

“Hey, sorry I scared ya,” Clint collapsed the bow in what was clearly intended to be a gesture of goodwill. Hardison found himself slightly distracted by the process before forcing his eyes back up. The guy looked rough, like he hadn’t slept properly in a number of days. Two slightly peeling butterfly bandages held one of his eyebrows together and an ace bandage peeked out from the sleeve of the old gray hoodie he wore. If it wasn’t for the caution in Eliot’s stance beside him and the fact that this guy had just shot at him, Hardison wouldn’t have been surprised. Except they clearly weren’t strangers? Another thought hit.

“You meant to scare him, ain’t that right, Hawkeye?” Eliot lifted an eyebrow, tone wary, and the blond man quirked the side of his mouth up in answer. Parker whipped her head around to Eliot, braid flying, her forehead wrinkling in obvious confusion.

“Actually using my codename now? Instead that stupid ‘Circus’ crap?” While his voice was light, the guy shifted on the balls of his feet, eyes flicking rapidly around the alley, before coming back to rest on Eliot. If they started circling each other like strange dogs, Hardison wouldn’t have been surprised. Except they clearly weren’t strangers? Another thought hit.

“You’re the Avenger…and SHIELD agent,” he breathed. Way back when, he’d hacked SHIELD for funsies, managed to snag some personnel files and duck out before the hyper-intelligent system caught up to him. The file of Clint Barton aka Hawkeye, still sat, now completely outdated, on an encrypted server somewhere. He’d read it once, gleaned some ideas from those trick arrows it documented, and mostly forgot about it after the thrill of the hack had passed.

“Gee, thanks for blowing my cover, Spencer. Uh…yeah. To both. I just wanted to get you away from that strip club. I’ve been monitoring it for days, I know something is going down soon and I’m gonna get the guys. You,” he nodded at Hardison, “were gonna blow my shot.”

“I was not! Babe, tell the cocky archer man about how hard I have worked on my sneaking skills. All I was doing was patching into their security feed so we’d have eyes in there, and Parker was going to plant bugs.”

Parker snort-laughed. “Pshhh, going to? I did plant the bugs. And a few extra cameras. What?” She shrugged as all three men stared at her. “Oh, right.” She dug an earbud out of her pocket. “I think this one’s busted, Alec, shorted out after I was in position, so I went for it.” She handed Hardison the earbud and he gave it a cursory once over, before sticking it in his pocket. He’d need take it apart to see where the mechanism failed. And then redesign to eliminate the weakness. No way was he letting Parker and Eliot go in anywhere without comms, even if this was only recon.

“Parker. I never gave the signal!” Eliot’s exasperation was evident, as usual.

“The signal I couldn’t hear? Good to know.” She opened the pizza box, snagged a slice, and took a bite before continuing, mouth full. “And the guy in the white with the mask thingy – he was going to come back at any minute. I took the chance. Anyway, after getting out through the vents it was
all on rooftops and then I found him,” she jerked her head at Clint, “shooting at you and being attacked by pigeons after his dog’s pizza.”

“And you were okay with the shooting at me?” Hardison demanded, willfully ignoring the pigeons, pizza, and dog part of that sentence.

Parker shot a glance at Eliot for help, but received none; he was still watching Clint. “No, I yelled at him when I realized what he was doing.”

“You only realized what I was doing because you were stealing and eating my pizza, so it came out kinda garbled.” Clint pointed out. He turned from Parker to Eliot, losing the amused quirk in his lips. “Spencer, what are you doing in my neighborhood?” He gestured vaguely at the trash cans in the alley, then winced and let his arm drop.

Hardison gave up waiting for context. “Hold up, how do you know Eliot?” Between Parker’s relaxed banter and Eliot standing there with his hackles up, he had no idea what to make of the guy.

Eliot didn’t say anything. He stood quiet and wary at Hardison’s side, eyes steady on Clint’s face.

“Your past, not mine.” Clint told him, voice low and clipped. His eyes never stopped roving over the alley, looking for some threat Hardison wasn’t aware of. The restlessness disquieted him. Eliot, and most fighters Eliot introduced him to, kept their movements minimal and purposeful. Clint was built like a fighter, powerful arms and shoulders visible even under the shabby hoodie, but he moved more like Parker, all nervous energy with little apparent control.

Eliot finally looked away from Clint and dropped his folded arms. “We…we trained together. At SHIELD. Long time ago.”
Eliot pushed open the heavy door and cautiously entered a room resembling a warehouse. Maybe it had been at some point. Metal shelving units lined the walls, climbing to the exposed beams and duct work of the ceiling. His first encounters with SHIELD, as he’d cleared the hurdles of interviews and pre-screenings, had taken place in high-tech buildings with key codes and fingerprint scanners. Now he was in, and after getting cleared by this compound’s gate guard, security no longer seemed a priority. Or it's just less visible.

He inhaled and exhaled carefully through his nose and gave the space and its inhabitants a sweeping survey, noting everything from blind corners, to people’s stances, and the way they milled about talking to each other. He’d memorized faces at the hokey welcome function the night before, where his attempts to present himself as friendly had mostly fallen flat. Secret agents in training tended to be a suspicious bunch and he was willing to bet they were forming cliques based on their former agencies. FBI crowd there, CIA in the corner, NSA up near the front. He wasn’t any of those, or the smaller gaggles which formed in between. A few people nodded to him but no one approached. Nothing was ever that easy. People were never that easy.

He tucked his hands into his pockets, mostly to give them something to do. Leave them to their own devices and his arms liked to fold over themselves. Vance always said it upped his intimidation factor and would leer in approval. It had made Eliot’s breath hitch every time he did it, turning his crossed arms into a defense as he regulated his thoughts and breathing.

A shadow up in the rafters shifted slightly, dragging his attention back to the present. Vance wasn’t here and Eliot was on his own. He frowned and positioned himself so he could keep an unobtrusive eye on the figure who had apparently decided to roost up there.

“Listen up people!” An African-American woman strode to the front of the room. Her eyes also swept the group, including the guy in the rafters. “Welcome to SHIELD. All of you have been recruited to this organization based on the skills you already possess. This training and orientation is intended to hone those skills and encourage you to develop in other areas in order to better perform in your future assignments. My name is Maria Hill. I will be in charge of your assessment and placement, should you be determined an appropriate candidate. Are there any questions before we continue?”

Eliot glanced around and weighed his options. With an internal shrug, he raised a hand and pointed upward. “Who’s the guy in the rafters?”

Hill raised an eyebrow and glanced up. “You owe me twenty bucks, Barton.”

“Aww, Maria…” the rafters muttered back.

She turned back to Eliot. “I was about to tell everyone to partner up.” She jerked her head upwards and gave him a mischievous little smile. “Go meet yours.”
Pondering the brief break in her professional demeanor, Eliot glanced up at the man perched on the network of beams. There was nothing precarious about his position; he could probably move across this room faster than anyone on the ground.

The man grinned and waved at him. “Well, are you going to stare all day or are you going to get up here?”

“Why?” He was already regretting speaking up. *You’re here to do a job, Spencer. Not get associated with the company weirdo.*

“Because up here is way more fun, duh.” He leaned back against a crossbeam, stretching out his legs.

Muttering to himself, Eliot clambered up the high shelves, and made his way over to Barton. How the hell had attempting to fit in and not differentiate himself led to being partnered with the weirdest person here? *That was a dumb move, Spencer. A dumb move. This is not what you are here for.*

“Okay. How is this fun, again?” His irritation at himself for misreading how Hill would handle him calling out Barton threatened to overflow. And now he was sitting across from guy, 20 feet off the ground and he still had no read on him. He felt like a cat stuck in a puddle. “What the hell are you doin’ up here, man?”

Barton yawned and stretched. “Watching.” He took another look at Eliot’s unhappy face and sighed. “Great, I get the grumpy babysitter. What’s your name?”

“I am NOT a grumpy babysitter!”

Clint snorted. “Well, you are grumpy. And Hill clearly thinks you can keep track of my whereabouts since you already did. So yeah, grumpy babysitter. Name?”

“Spencer.”

“Barton.” He studied Eliot for a moment, head tilted to the side. “I know what you were trying to do. You were trying to call me out. Fit in better by giving everyone an example of weird. Kinda backfired on you, didn’t it.”

Eliot realized he had nothing to say. Nothing that would make a good cover anyway. “Yeah. Shoulda expected that.”

“Don’t worry, upside is, you wanting to watch everybody is exactly what I am doing.” He nodded toward Hill. “And she knows it and lets me. I’ve been around for a while, in one function or another. You military?”

“Yeah. You aren’t.”

“Nope, I’m from the circus.”

“You serious?” Something about the name was niggling at the back of his mind.

Barton waved a hand and called out in a ringmaster’s patter, “The Amazing Hawkeye, World’s Greatest Marksman!” He looked rather impressed with himself, but then shrugged, dropping the act. “So technically I’m classified as a sharpshooter, but I still get to go through all the rest of this crap, same as you.”
Realization hit Eliot like a semi and he sat up, almost dislodging himself. “You’re the Avenger!”

“Oh man, Eliot, what have you stumbled into now?”

Clint Barton, *aka* Hawkeye, rolled his eyes. “Yeah, guess so.”

“So what are you doing here? You guys don’t really seem like military types.”

“This ain’t normal military, if you haven’t noticed. And some of us do actually have a military background, you know, like Captain-freaking-America.” He glanced out over the crowd. “I *apparently*” he spat the word with considerable venom, “suck at certain aspects of my chosen profession. So I’m here to learn, same as you.”

And with about the same enthusiasm, Eliot noted. “Why’d you want to be a superhero? Always seems like overhyped megalomaniacs to me.” *Yeah, sure, insult the guy, that’ll go well.* But he’d considered the Avengers to be essentially that, with not a ton of sanity to split between them. Barton, though, was beginning to just seem like a regular guy. Weird, perhaps, but not crazy.

Clint grinned and the appearance of sanity vanished. “Sounded like fun!” He suddenly dropped off his perch, caught the bottom of the rafter, flipped, and landed neatly on the ground, which had to be a fifteen foot drop. Looking up, he called out, “C’mon, time for you to beat me up.”

In another nondescript room very much like the first, except the floor was padded with worn mats, Eliot faced Barton. “Can you take a punch?”

The easy smile on his partner’s face froze and almost seemed to melt off. After a long pause, he nodded. “Yeah. I can take a punch.”

He could. He didn’t necessarily make it easy for Eliot to hit him, but it was clear Barton’s fighting experience was of the rough and tumble variety. He fought with a mix of enthusiasm and desperation, but very little control.

“Stop.” Eliot finally said, as Barton struggled back to his feet. “Man, you fight like a disaster.”

Barton licked some blood off of his newly split lip and glared. He may have been used to having his ass handed to him, but it was clear Barton’s fighting experience was of the rough and tumble variety. He fought with a mix of enthusiasm and desperation, but very little control.

“Stop.” Eliot finally said, as Barton struggled back to his feet. “Man, you fight like a disaster.”

Barton licked some blood off of his newly split lip and glared. He may have been used to having his ass handed to him, but he didn’t like it. Eliot considered his options. Barton knew the ropes around here. He was an Avenger for chrissakes. He could be valuable. Eliot had no doubt he could excel at the physical training, but for the rest of it…sticking close to his new partner was the best play. *Okay, Spencer. Time to play teacher.* “Look. You said you were a marksman? What did you use?” A gimme question, but those were usually the best place to start.

“Bow and arrow, mostly. Daggers, knives, darts, spears, quarters, hell, straws and spitballs. You set me something to aim at, I’ll hit it.”

“Guns?” This was off-track, but Eliot had never heard someone list that many weapons without firearms coming up once.

Barton made a face. “Boring, lazy. Sure, I can shoot them, but it’s no fun.”

“Okay. What happens before you release an arrow?”

The other man glanced around. “Look, I’m all for breaking rules, but I’m pretty sure we’re
“supposed to be demonstrating our skills at hand to hand right now.”

“We have. I’m better than you. We have made this abundantly clear. Let’s move on. You tell me how you set up a shot and I’ll tell you how I set up a fight.”

Barton tilted his head. “You mean a punch.”

“Nah. Punch doesn’t necessarily come first and it almost never ends the fight.” He glanced at the powerful set of Barton’s shoulders and the obvious muscle mass. It was likely he’d been using punches to stop fights, actually. Eliot could believe that in some instances they were extremely effective, given the force Barton had. But anyone who trained using efficiency, rather than power, would not be intimidated by a roundhouse. “Besides, someone already taught you how to punch and they taught you well. Your punches ain’t the problem.” There was that look again. The brief, frozen expression. And then it was gone and he was folding his arms across his chest in annoyance.

“Okay, so what’s the problem,” he huffed out a breath.

*So, taking criticism not a strong point.* “You need to think ahead. Tell me how you set up a shot.”

Barton rubbed the back of his head and spoke in a rush. “Note the target, note possible interferences between me and the target – windspeed, obstacles, that sort of thing – choose an arrow, nock it, bring up the bow, draw, aim, release breath, release arrow. Simple.”

Had he meant that to sound simple? “Right. Simple. You just listed about ten steps in a ‘simple’ process. After that first arrow, are you done? That doesn’t seem like much of a show.”

Now he got an eyeroll. “Nah, you gotta keep upping the ante, otherwise the audience’ll get bored. So the next arrow has to come right as they have registered the last and the shot has to be more impressive.”

“You always know your routine?”

“Sorta. You know what you can do. You know what your partner, if you have one, is prepared for you to do. You have a plan worked out. But if a certain string of tricks isn’t cutting it with the audience, you play to them. Figure out what they want to see and show it to them.”

Eliot allowed himself a smile. He’d thought he would hate playing teacher, but damn if this guy wasn’t making it easy to fall into the role. “Everything you just said can be applied to a fight. Figure out the target beforehand. Think a few steps ahead. Surprise your audience. But, before, you wanted your audience to come back, pay more money to see you. Guys you fight, you want to make them never even think of coming back. Now let’s get to work.”
Chapter Summary

“Circus, you call me Grumpy Cat EVER AGAIN…”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Parker lay stretched out on Clint’s floor using his one-eyed dog as a pillow. Lucky. The dog’s name was Lucky. Eliot didn’t need anything else to confirm he really was in Clint’s living room. That dog would have been enough. Of course if he’d needed other verification, the scattered dirty laundry, old coffee mugs, and the two target dummies by the window, would certainly have done it. The general untidiness of the loft grated on him, but it also felt more like a home than he’d have expected from a guy who spent much of his life jetting around the world and beyond. Whatever else had happened in the intervening decade, they’d set down some roots.

Perched on a barstool at the counter, Hardison was practically drooling more than the dog as he examined Clint’s collection of arrowheads, muttering to himself and cooing to the little devices. Right up his alley, those things. Clever, sometimes too clever for their own good. *Grab the wrong one at the wrong moment and you’re outta luck. Better to not rely*—he exhaled sharply, dismissing the thought. That was old-Eliot, the one who muttered cautions and doubts, who made him check, double-check, triple check everything just to be sure. Old-Eliot kept him alive before the team, but was less useful now, had been for quite some time.

And that meant what, when it came to Clint? He’d invited them back to his place, allowed Hardison access to his weapons with a shrug, grinned at Parker plopping on the floor to give the dog a belly-rub. Eliot, he moved around like a skittish horse, never leaving his line of sight. Okay, so he’d earned that mistrust, but still, the display irritated him. Still old-Clint then, the showman, the performer. *Bring us all back to your own turf, just so you can show me you haven’t forgotten.*

“Beer?” Clint passed him one without waiting for an answer, completely derailing Eliot’s train of thought.

Eliot stared at the bottle, told old-Eliot to shut up again, and glanced at Hardison and the trick arrows, hoping for a safe topic. “Which one is that?” he asked, head still turned.

“Need to see your lips, man.” Eliot twisted, surprised, as Clint reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny, in-ear hearing aid. “Leaving ‘em in all the time bugs me. I take them off at home.”

“Mission?” Clint was blatantly letting his guard down, taking out the aids and straight out telling him he was down a sense. *How’s that for distrust, Spencer, you idiot.*

“Yeah. Messy thing me’n Bobby got into. Do or die shit. It worked though.”

Eliot grunted. “Been there.” He considered asking who Bobby was, but Clint spoke first.

“So Parker’s clearly a thief, Hardison’s into the tech, and you watch their backs?” He took a pull from the beer and grinned at Eliot’s surprised expression. “She’s been eyeing that safe on the
counter for since she got in the room,” he nodded at the small red safe, “and he,” another nod to Hardison this time, “is pretty damn easy to read. And you hurt people.” He said it carefully, without inflection.

“When the situation calls for it,” Eliot agreed, just as carefully.

Parker rolled over onto her side, making Lucky heave a heavy dog sigh.

“Okay. So what’s SHIELD?” she asked.

“Complicated acro-whatsit that they wanted to spell something cool.”

“Strategic–” Hardison began, but Parker interrupted.

“Not what the words say, what the word means. I mean most secret government organizations don’t try for a memorable name. So why you guys? What do you do?”

Clint shifted his shoulders. “Huh. I suppose it’s supposed to tell people that we protect them, and we do – sorta. Try to anyway. S’not the only thing we do…we do a lot of stuff.”

Hardison snorted. “Yeah and not a ton of it on the up and up from what I’ve read.”

The Avenger/SHIELD agent grinned at him. “Well, Nat does like to put some extra juicy stuff in for the conspiracy crowd.”

Hardison stared at him for a moment and then began to pace around the apartment. “I knew it. I knew something was–”

He kept muttering to himself, but Eliot turned his attention back to Clint. “So you stuck with them this whole time? With Nat?”

Clint studied him, expression unreadable. “Sorta. Stuff got complicated.” There was a long pause. Finally, as if the question was dragged out of him, he asked, “Where’d you go after…taking off?”

“Don’t you already know?”

“Natasha does. Whenever I’d ask, she’d say I didn’t want to know, and when she’s telling me that, then yeah, I probably didn’t. Few years back, we were holed up and bored and then I got a he’s figuring it out on the subject of you, so I dropped it for good. Considered bringing you in a number of times but didn’t want to get killed for my trouble.”

“Wouldn’t have killed you.” Probably.

“Maybe, but even your nice way of saying no would probably put me in the hospital, and I already spend too much time there.” Clint glanced at Hardison, who was back to fiddling with an arrowhead, and Parker who no longer seemed interested in the question of SHIELD and was following Lucky out the door. “Hey, where’re you taking my dog?”

“Question is – where’s he taking me?” Parker grinned and shut the door.

“Leave her be, man, he’ll be fine with her. Probably come back with some puppy they’ll have joint custody over.”

“Yeah, and the puppy’s owner demanding their dog back,” Eliot grumbled.

Clint rubbed the back of his head. “Wanna head up to the roof?”
“Yeah. Okay if Hardison keeps playing with your toys?”

“Toys?! TOYS?!” Hardison yelped. “I don’t even know half the applications for these but I can imagine—which ones do you use for aliens?”

“Whatever’s around.”

Hardison stared at him for a moment and then a smile far too knowing for Eliot’s comfort grew on his face. “I gotcha man. You and Eliot go reminisce in grunts and pretend you ain’t smart. I’ll sit here and try to figure out these crazy things that apparently the dog makes.”

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Clint led the way up to the roof. The police tape was gone, but off to one side the dark brown spot waited. As if he needed the reminder. Grills—Gil—hadn’t been safe on this roof. No one in the building was safe. He’d promised them protection, that he’d fix this shit, but what did he have to show for it? No idea how to stop what he’d started and no idea how to finish it. Just lies like the one he’d told Hardison earlier, that he was closing in. He’d only just started figuring out how big of a hole he’d dug himself into. And here was Eliot Spencer. The type of guy who put people in holes.

Nevertheless, he went first; he didn’t want Eliot thinking there was an ambush waiting, though considering their history, he wouldn’t have blamed him. He kinda wished there was an ambush waiting. People change, he told himself, people make stupid mistakes and they regret them and they change. It would be so nice to believe that. He used to believe that so easily. He stuck the aids back in.

Eliot swept a glance over the roof, scoping possible attack points and escape routes; cataloging them in order of need. His eyes settled on the stain. “Should I expect the same?”

He said it lightly, unaware of how Clint’s throat and stomach clenched. “If you don’t trust me, why come up to my place at all?” He snapped in response. The only ammunition he had up here were a few rocks and beer bottles. And some change in his pockets. The last time they’d talked, his fingers had rolled an explosive tip between them. The lack of it now was less than comforting. He forced his eyes away from the spot. Thinking about that now wasn’t going to help. Focus, Hawkguy, focus.

“You weren’t gonna try anything in your place. You took the aids out, showed me you were vulnerable. Plus, there’s kids down the hall. They come over sometimes, yeah?”

“Yeah, we watch cartoons. Only fair, I shot an arrow in their dish.”

“Hardison’ll fix that, you tell him about it.”

“He’ll fix stuff, but you think I’m gonna throw you off the roof?”

“Well, probably not if you do that, no, he won’t.” Eliot smiled. It could have been pleasant or feral. “But let’s face it man, you can’t throw me off this roof.”

“I could! Maybe. I’m not going to.” A memory hit him then, hard and fast.

“Well, that went south in a hurry, come on man, we gotta get to the extraction point, get down here!”

“Up here, we need to go up.”
“Yeah sure, make us an easier target, you crazy?”

“Hey, I’ll have you know my crazy ideas work like 20 percent of the time.”

“THOSE ARE NOT GOOD ODDS!”

“If they can see us, I can see them. I can see ‘em, I can hit ‘em.”

“Fine, if we’re gonna get killed let’s do it on the move. Now MOVE.”

“You’re not afraid of heights are you?”

“Of course I ain’t afraid of heights! But the ground is much less of a weapon when you’re already on it.”

“Gravity. Gravity is the weapon.”

“Gravity is a force, idiot, the ground is the thing that hits you. I can’t believe we are having this argument.”

“Yeah you should probably shut up.”

“ME SHUT UP?!”

“Unless you want to get thrown of this roof.”

“Just you try to throw me off this roof, Circus, I’ll teach you a few more things about physics.”

“Man, you are thinkin’ really hard about that how you’re gonna toss me off this building.” Eliot seemed to have relaxed a bit as Clint snapped himself back to the present.

“Just remembering stuff.” He jerked his head back toward the stairs. “So those two, when’d you hook up with them? Don’t get me wrong, I like ‘em and my dog likes ‘em and he’s a better judge of character. But you were a loner. You barely tolerated me and you were supposed to buddy up to me. You were a loner who would glare and intimidate anyone who got near…heh. Like Grumpy Cat. Grumpy Cat Eliot, finally a fitting nickname.” Clint grinned with satisfaction.

“Circus, you call me Grumpy Cat EVER AGAIN…”

“Yeah, I’m definitely going to need context for that sentence later.” Both men jumped at the new voice at the stairs and turned to see Hardison held at arrow-point by a teenage girl.

“Hey Clint, found this guy messing with all your arrowheads in your totally unlocked apartment. Friend or unfriend?” Kate grinned, clearly enjoying herself.

While Hardison was clearly not enjoying the arrow pointed at his back, hearing Eliot’s new nickname made him forget all about it. “GRUMPY CAT?! Oh man, you are NEVER gonna lose that nickname. Trust me.”

Clint’s stomach slowly untwisted itself at the sight of Kate. If she was here, maybe she was forgiving him for being a crapsack after the funeral? “Hey Katie-Kate, he’s uhh……friend.”

“What does uhh-friend even mean?” Kate rolled her eyes at Clint while keeping the arrow firmly trained on Hardison. At least she didn’t seem too pissed at him anymore. Thank god.

“I intentionally did not shoot him this morning? That counts right?” He knew he should be more
focused on Eliot, who could probably take him and Kate down if he felt the need to, but the fact that Kate was actually here and participating in banter…

“So I don’t need to intentionally shoot him now?” Kate raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. Yes. That is EXACTLY what he means. Thank you.” Hardison quickly moved away from Kate and over to stand near Eliot. “Who are you, anyway?”

“I’m Hawkeye.” Kate smirked and released the tension of the bowstring.

Hardison was not convinced. “He’s Hawkeye.” He pointed at Clint. “Clint Barton. Hawkeye. Avenger. Or were those SHIELD files I hacked total fakes?”

“Nah, I’m what you might call a ‘visible asset.’” Clint said.

“Yes. Yes. That is EXACTLY what he means. Thank you.” Hardison quickly moved away from Kate and over to stand near Eliot. “Who are you, anyway?”

“I’m Hawkeye.” Kate smirked and released the tension of the bowstring.

Hardison was not convinced. “He’s Hawkeye.” He pointed at Clint. “Clint Barton. Hawkeye. Avenger. Or were those SHIELD files I hacked total fakes?”

“Nah, I’m what you might call a ‘visible asset.’” Clint said.

“Or a visible ass,” Kate muttered not that quietly. Okay, so he probably deserved that.

“I heard that.” Clint smirked at her, pointing to the aids. “I was off doing other…stuff, and she took on the name. I came back, and went back to being Hawkeye. So now we’re both Hawkeye. Easy.”

“You? Sharing?” Eliot sounded like Clint had just informed him that he hated purple. Which was impossible. Purple was awesome. Kate was awesome. In his seriously screwed-up life, he’d at least figured a few things out.

“What? She has my back. Tells me when there’s random guys in my apartment messing with my arrows.”

“You told me I could!” Hardison said, indignant.

“I didn’t know that.” Kate pointed out.

“I told you I could!”

They were interrupted by Parker coming up from the fire escape. “Hey guys, Lucky and I decided to bug a puppy and I think we found the exercise mafia bros.”

Chapter End Notes

I kept the original way Clint ended up deafened in the comics, because I love that story. So incredibly Clint - both as a hero and an idiot afterward. And yes, "Bobby" is Bobbi, Eliot’s baseless assumptions are to blame, not my spelling.
“Why the hell are we infiltrating a carnival?”

Clint could think of any number of reasons why they would be infiltrating a carnival. Killer clowns, for one. But technically they weren’t infiltrating. “Scouting and noting suspicious behavior.” He bounced a bit on the balls of his feet. Sure, he’d left the circus with a bad taste in his mouth, but it wasn’t from funnel cake and besides, there was no way Spencer was going to be able to upstage him here. “We’re supposed to blend in with the crowd.”

“I am blending in! You’re the one wearing a bright purple shirt.” Spencer grunted.

“Purple is awesome, and besides, everyone here is wearing bright colors, we are at a carnival, man! Get in the spirit!” His enthusiasm was probably doing nothing to help his case, but he was here to have some fun. Maria’d even told him as much. Okay, so she’d told him she’d assigned him and Spencer to the carnival because she wanted Spencer out of his comfort zone. And getting Eliot Spencer out of his comfort zone was going to be fun. Currently, the guy was scanning the crowd for…whatever he deemed a suspicious character? Spencer thought everyone was suspicious. But he knew this about carnivals; people were here to have fun, or because they were letting someone else have fun. Or because they were setting up illicit deals in a crowded area where no one was paying attention to other visitors…

“Do we have a cover story?” Spencer asked as they wove through the milling people. “Two guys hanging out at a carnival together has to be weird, right?”

Clint eyed him. “Man, you need a wider definition of ‘weird’. But if you really need a character, think college frat guy…bro this, bro that. Everyone will roll their eyes and ignore you.”

Spencer glared at him. “I ain’t doin that.”

“Spoil sport. Well, if you wanna hold hands, that’s also an option.” Spencer’s nostrils flared at the suggestion. So touchy. He hadn’t meant anything by it. His partner was just too easy to goad.

The first of the game joints came into view, and hell if the guy didn’t need a lesson on moving through a crowd without imitating a stampeding elephant. He took off and heard a faint “dammit Barton!” behind him as he wove through the throng towards his target…which were targets. Or rather they were wooden ducks, but the point was to shoot them and knock them over, and that was exactly what he intended to do.

Spencer arrived. “Don’t run off like that, man, we’re supposed…”

“We’re supposed to be having fun.” Clint interjected, “and by having fun I intend to win that unicorn.” He had no idea what he’d do with the huge stuffed unicorn. Probably give it to the first kid who stared at it longingly with big eyes, but the joy was in the winning. He paid the jointie and,
ignoring Spencer’s literal growls of frustration, examined the six gun shooters, selecting two of them.

Spencer, with far too little concept of personal space for someone who got in a huff about hand-holding, muttered at him. “They’re all rigged, Barton. Just cause you’re a hot shot doesn’t mean—”

Clint fired twelve times in quick succession. Twelve ducks slammed flat. Turning to Spencer, he blew imaginary smoke off the pistols, twirled them elaborately, and sunk them into pretend holsters. “Not rigged, just favors the house.” He nodded to the carny who was eyeing him suspiciously. “Do me a favor? Next kid that comes up and looks like they need a win? Give that to ’em.”

“Look man—”

Clint leaned in, dropping his voice low. “I know I can win all of these, and you know it too. Give it to a kid. Good karma.” He winked and stood back, replacing the guns on the table before turning to waggle his eyebrows at Spencer, who was staring at him thoughtfully. “Wanna try your luck?”

Spencer gave him and the ducks an appraising look and then nodded and actually smiled, instantly shedding the cloud of irritation that seemed to hang around him. “Yeah, okay.”

Over the next two hours Clint taught him how to win just about every single skill game in the carnival. The aim joints were the best. Spencer proved to be a quick study and had a knack of finding the flaws in the system once he knew what he was looking for.

That knack didn’t help him on the Jacob’s ladder. Clint raced to the top of the thing, making it look easy, and for some reason Spencer believed him. Clint doubted he’d ever forget the sight of his partner’s face the moment the ladder twisted and dumped Eliot on his ass. He glared as Clint burst out laughing, but he couldn’t hold the anger and his face broke into a grin as he brushed the straw off his pants before shaking his head and turning away. As a kid, Clint’d pulled something similar on Barney, who’d also tried and failed to remain pissed. He shoved the memory back down. El—Spencer wasn’t Barn.

Soon word got round that the guy wearing purple could beat everything, but wouldn’t take a prize and Clint didn’t need to pay for turns. He’d make the joints look good and gather a crowd. Some of the smart carnies gave him the prize anyway and he’d make a show of giving it to a worshipful kid. Jointie gets a crowd of paying folks, kid gets his day made, and he gets to perform a bit and hit some targets. Triple win.

He’d also take a moment to chat with the carnies running the joints. Drop a couple turns of phrase and they knew he had once been one of them and opened up. From there he kept things simple. His buddy worked security, bet he could spot more pickpockets and purse snatchers than a carnie rat, do him a favor and keep an eye out?

He got a few tips each time, nods to casual-looking bystanders in the crowds that gathered to watch him. He was good at visuals and a face was just another type of target. He grinned and flicked several darts toward a wall of balloons. A series of quick pops left him with a smiley face on the wall and laughs behind him. Yup, good day.

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Eliot, after he’d mastered the art of spotting the crooked sights, the jinked barrels, and other tells, lost interest in the games, but Barton’s tendency to gather a crowd gave him an easy opportunity to watch it. Their mission had been to spot suspicious behavior and since Barton was apparently
going to act like a kid in a candy store—he’d tried to make Eliot eat cotton candy for chrissakes and that stuff was just wrong—he was at least going to do his job and watch for suspicious behavior.

Throughout the day, he noted a number of pickpockets, mostly young guys, a few women, and a pair of boys—possibly brothers—who seemed to dodge in and out of the crowds, but never pay attention to the show. After a good few hours, Barton finally seemed to get bored of the games and suggested the rides.

“I’ve been doing our job for the whole damn day, Circus. Time to pitch in.” Eliot actually liked carnival rides, though he wasn’t going to admit that to Barton, and besides they were on a job.

“Fine. Ferris wheel. Good place to scout and compare notes.” Barton rubbed the back of his head, a gesture Eliot was quickly learning usually meant a confession of some sort was coming. “I won’t turn in those two boys.” Barton mumbled.

Eliot sighed. “Let’s get in the air, first.”

High above the fairgrounds, Clint explained his alternative method of gathering intel before repeating, “We can report the others, not them.”

“You know a lot of those guys are set ups for us, right?” He and Barton were both scanning the crowds down below, as if the height would tell them more. “They’re plants by SHIELD.”

“Sure, and I’ve got their faces memorized. And a few others I’m pretty sure are out just doing what they do. The plants will leave what they nab at lost and found, the ones I know about at least will be taken care of by security and if you’ve got any others to add to the list, we can drop a hint…but not the kids. They aren’t plants and they are off limits.”

“They should learn a lesson.” Eliot pointed out.

“They’re learning one. It’s called survival.”

“You sure?” He hadn’t put much thought into it. The pair had looked like two troublemakers and that was it.

“I’m sure.” He sounded it. Eliot made up his mind.

“You got some money?” He was carrying a good bit himself, hidden in places other than his wallet.

Barton barked out a laugh. “Me? Money? I got less than twenty on me.” He twisted in surprise as Eliot began removing bills from various pockets hidden in his shoes, his belt, the collar of his shirt, and the waist of his pants. “You a fan of the hidden pockets too, huh.”

Eliot twisted his mouth in half a smile. “Yeah, they come in handy if I suddenly have to run. Take the important stuff out of your wallet. We’ll make the lift easy on them.”

They left the carnival shortly after, since all their money was gone as well as Barton’s wallet. On their way out, they submitted descriptions of all the plants they’d spotted as well as some genuine thieves to the SHIELD agent playing at being a security guard for the day. She checked them off on a list and nodded, but didn’t say if they’d missed any.

He never learned why Barton refused to turn in the boys.
“Parker, bugging a dog and bugging a dog are two VERY different things.” Whatever Hardison hoped to explain with that statement was lost on Parker, who waved a hand.

“Pssh, we didn’t hurt him. We just attached a little bug to his collar so we could listen to puppy sounds.”

“We?” Eliot raised his eyebrows.

“Rowf!” Lucky declared.

“I wasn’t talkin to you—dammit Parker, you got me talkin to a damn dog.”

“You hurt his feelings!” Parker pouted until Eliot rubbed a hand across his face in resignation. He crouched down, giving a low whistle. Lucky sauntered over, happy to accept an apology in the form of ear rubs.

“Fine, you and the dog bugged a puppy. It paid off?” Eliot’s relatively quick acquiescence intrigued Clint. That wasn’t Eliot, at least not the Eliot he’d known. Another tally in the people change column then.

Parker smirked and held up her phone. Everyone listened. At first they mostly heard normal puppy sounds: sniffing, toenails clicking on the tile floors of the hallway, and then a whine and a scratch-scratching at what must have been a door. There was a creak as the door opened and a woman’s voice muttered something in another language that sounded Slavic. The door closed. Messy slurping sounds registered loud on the phone’s tinny speakers and Hardison winced at the proximity of water and dog slobber to his delicate equipment. Another, deeper voice said something in a curt tone. From the intent glare on Eliot’s face, Clint guessed he understood more than the few words he was picking up thanks to the Russian Natasha had pounded into his brain. The voices died away, probably moving into another room. The bug would keep transmitting for days if no one found it. Anyone who petted the puppy could notice its existence and realize someone was spying on them. Someone crazy enough to bug a dog.

“Gotta admit, I don’t think even Clint’s crazy enough to bug a dog,” Kate commented, still staring at the phone.

“She’s not crazy,” Hardison and Eliot spoke in unison.

Clint was willing to bet that both men had questioned Parker’s sanity on a number of occasions, but outsiders were different. Besides, bugging that puppy was crazy good luck and a genius idea. He should have thought of that. If he’d realized the puppy wandering the building just so happened to look a lot like his dog—*OH*. His brain presented him with a handy diagram of how he’d been an idiot. It had arrows. It looked like this:
Get Lucky (literally) ➪ Gain reputation for liking dogs and bribing with pizza ➪ Piss off Tracksuit Mafia ➪ Gain rep for doing crazy shit ➪ See puppy version of Lucky in building ➪ Forget basic genetics ➪ Pup goes home to mafia with bug ➪ This looks bad.

“That was Ivan,” Eliot said. “And his mother, I think.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Someone’s gonna notice the bug on the dog, Parker.” Clint was somehow glad to know Spencer had never lost the exasperated edge to his voice, even if he’d turned into an old softie when it came to dog-shaped motivations. The fact that Spencer had also followed a somewhat similar train of thought about the bug was less reassuring. Clint had the stupid ideas that sometimes worked. There was a reason he’d named his dog Lucky. Grumpy Cat Spencer had the smart ideas that usually worked and shit only blew up when he wanted it to. Being on the same page disconcerting. The train of thought screeched to a halt.

“Wait a sex…sec,” he winced and barreled on. “We haven’t covered something. WHY ARE YOU HERE?”

The trio glanced at one another. Kate stared at him. “Clint. They are standing in your living room discussing a puppy with a bug attached to it that apparently just revealed the tracksuit guys have been in your building this whole time. You’ve been having beers on the roof while one of them goes through your arrowheads and only NOW you think to ask this question? What other topics could you possibly have covered?” Her hands were on her hips, head cocked to one side. The full-on “my partner is being a dumbass” look.

None of the ones we should have. “I finally gave Spencer a nickname?” Okay, that sounded dumb. Those were all good points. Very good points. The type of points his not-sidekick shouldn’t have to raise. “We were scoping the strip club,” he said. That sounded more competent. Dammit, he was proud of that nickname though.

“We?” Kate matched Eliot’s exasperated tone.

“I was and, separately, they were.” He nodded to the trio. “I knew they were up to something, from my high-up vantage point,” he looked straight at Eliot, to be sure he got the dig, “and fired a warning shot to scare them off. Then Parker stopped by and complimented my vantage point. Well, stole some pizza and then complimented my vantage point. They’re her team. Spencer–” Considering his explanatory options, he went vague. “Spencer, I used to know. Anyway. That’s why they are in my living room. So. Back to my question.”

He should have asked this much sooner. Ivan was in his damn building and could get in any time he wanted. He wasn’t safe here, even less safe than he’d thought. Which would have been okay, he was in the wrong line of work to care much about self-preservation, but it meant the other tenants weren’t safe. And instead of guarding them like he damn well should have been, he’d been off chatting to strange girls on rooftops and reconnecting with a former-possibly-current hitman. (Kate would probably call him a ‘frenemy.’) And bringing them here? Where has your head gone Barton? You know Spencer can’t be trusted, and you left one of them alone in your apartment and the other with your DOG? God, he needed sleep. And fewer complications. Natasha would whack him upside the head for being this careless. Okay. This can’t be a coincidence. Who are they and what are they doing here?

Parker, apparently unaware of his internal unease, subtly switched personalities. “It’s part of a job,” she stated. The woman who’d spent her afternoon running rooftops and bugging puppies, suddenly became someone who appeared competent, trustworthy, and much less odd. It reminded Clint of seeing SHIELD agents off the job getting called in, becoming all business. He never made the effort. I already have a rep as a screw up, why screw…that up…
“We were hired by a woman who owned one of the other buildings on this block,” Parker continued. “She asked for our help after she was threatened and forced to sell. We told her we’d look into it and the deeper we dug, the weirder it got.”

The personality shift was bothering him. The girl he’d met on the roof stealing his pizza; the girl who’d grinned, mouth full and demanded to know who else was gonna eat it – that wasn’t who was in front of him now. And he knew all about facades and playing a role and lying until it felt like the truth. He knew it too well and he envied the sharp line between her *self* and her *character*, but her rapid switch meant he had no baseline to determine if she was lying.

Parker turned to Hardison and he picked up the story smoothly. They’d done this before. “Look, I went through bank accounts, leases, deeds, corporations, conglomerations that owned corporations, man you would not believe how convoluted this paper trail is and I’ve dug through some weird-ass shit before.” He shrugged. “So we took the next step. We decided to bug them. If the data don’t tell us what they’re planning, maybe they will.”

He was barely listening to Hardison. Normally he wouldn’t care if random people he’d just met were lying to him, it sorta came with the territory, but they were on his turf, getting involved in his mess, and one of them was Eliot Spencer. The ambient white noise of weird he lived with constantly intensified. Paranoid or justified? Who the hell knows anymore? Eliot was saying nothing, letting Parker and Hardison take lead. Clint couldn’t get a good read on him. His fingernails dug into his palms.

Parker picked up where Hardison left off. “Since you’re already involved and know Eliot, we should work together.”

Eliot groaned, almost inaudibly. Clint snapped most of his attention back to Parker, finally getting where this was going. Maybe not the whole story, but enough to make a call. “You want me to work with you guys.” He didn’t make it a question.

Parker frowned. “Yeah. What’s the problem?”

“The problem, is that you are a bunch of grifters trying to get yourselves a nice payday and you think I’m the dumbass who will help you get it. And I gotta admit, it took me a while to catch on. That our meeting on the roof wasn’t some random fluke. Nah, girl, if you guys went through Ivan’s financials and all the deeds and leases, then you woulda seen my name, and he,” with a nod at Eliot, “definitely knows my name. I dunno what game you’re trying to run, there’s a bunch of possibilities at this stage of the hook. And I guess Eliot told you I’m a gullible guy. You oughta be careful teaming up with him by the way, he plays his own long con. Else he would’ve told you I figure shit out eventually. So you can take your nice little story, split it up so it sounds more real and feed it to me, but at some point I’m gonna figure out your bullshit and call you on it. Now get out of my apartment.” He stuck his hands in his pockets, choosing Spencer to stare down. He didn’t have an arrowhead in there — *Clint, you dummy, why not?* — But he didn’t know that, and his eyes flicked down and back up to Clint’s.

Spencer’s eyebrows knitted together and his nostrils flared. He’d gotten the message loud and clear. “Parker, Hardison, let’s go. He ain’t gonna listen to reason.” The other two stood there staring at Clint, rabbits stuck in headlights.

*Damn straight. Now get out.* Clint spat. Even Kate was looking at him in shock. *Will she even follow your crazy-ass lead?* She did, after a moment’s hesitation, bringing her bow up, arrow on the string. So one of them wasn’t bluffing, at least.

“But we didn’t—”
“Hey man, don’t say—”

“He doesn’t care, Parker, Hardison,” Spencer growled. “He’s got a stubborn streak a mile wide and a grudge to go with it. C’mon, move.” The other two glanced from Clint to Kate, and then to Eliot, clearly confused. But they obeyed their partner, and allowed him to hustle them out the door. He paused before leaving. “It ain’t like that,” he muttered.

Clint took his hands out of his pockets, letting the other man see they were empty, before folding them across his chest. “Does it look like I care?”

“Nah man, guess it doesn’t.” Spencer shut the door quietly behind him. He’d expected a slam, some force to match the anger bubbling inside him. The echoing lack of violence left a hole he didn’t want to identify.

After they’d gone, Kate gently released the tension in her bowstring and turned. “What just happened? Clint?”

It was a totally reasonable question, but he wasn’t feeling particularly reasonable. Exhaustion hit him like a punch from the Hulk. Keeping watch day and night for the mafia guys, and now he was going to need to deal with Spencer? Is he working for them? Could I have screwed up that badly? It seemed possible. Would Spencer kill him? He’d been perfectly civil, but then that wasn’t any different from the last time.

He couldn’t explain all of this to Kate. She was something new. Someone not connected to his past and all the old shit. He’d chosen to come back and be Hawkeye again and she’d been there, holding the title all on her own. He’d tried to leave most of that baggage behind, so futzing relieved he wasn’t holding this role by himself. But this mess with Spencer, this was his. And Katie-Kate didn’t need to be part of it. Didn’t need to be distracted by him, the human disaster who just had a hit man over for a beer.

“Nothin’ important,” he muttered. He pulled out his aids and headed for the stairs. “I’m goin to bed. See yourself out.” He didn’t look back.
Eliot stared at the tangle of metal. “That one counts as one,” he muttered.

Three weeks in, assignments were getting consistently weirder and Eliot was surprised to realize he enjoyed this. He liked the unusual challenges, the need for unorthodox thinking, and the growing, if slightly distant camaraderie that he’d apparently earned by getting partnered with the legendary Hawkeye. His early, fumbling attempts to fit in were forgotten once he was established “the guy good enough to be assigned to the Avenger.” Not that anyone, including Eliot, knew exactly why Barton was even here, but he seemed happy to clown around with the other trainees. Eliot would watch him, mimicking Clint’s open body language and expansive gestures when he felt like trying on a different personality. If his partner noticed the mimicry, he didn’t seem to care, just as he never seemed to mind if Eliot wasn’t feeling talkative. It made things easier, not having to pretend. On that front at least.

The briefing that day consisted of significantly less helpful information than he preferred. It also consisted of significantly less Clint Barton. Maria Hill stood in front of the room, informing them that they would be fighting a large number of “things” today, but not giving any clue as to what they were or how to kill them. It was meant to be an exercise in teamwork and problem-solving. Except his partner wasn’t here. Hill glanced at him and the empty chair beside him from time to time as she spoke, but gave him no indication of what was going on. Eliot’s natural inclination was to work alone, but if he was being honest, he’d been looking forward to standing back to back with Clint, firing rounds of bullets—or arrows—into some weird threat. For one thing, Circus knew this world better than he did, and might figure out what SHIELD had up its sleeve quick. Give them a good chance at a high score.

When Barton finally got there, he ignored the empty seat waiting for him and leaned against the back wall, arms folded, glaring at Hill who blatantly ignored him. Eliot lifted his eyebrows at him in a silent question, but his partner didn’t even glance his way. Shit. He’d heard rumors about Clint’s temper, had been unable to reconcile them with the guy, who, just last week had gotten yelled at for juggling the softly glowing globes they were supposed retrieve carefully lest they explode and trigger an apocalypse. According to the archer, they were props, and if you hit them just right they’d change colors. He tested this by throwing them at Eliot when he wasn’t looking. The guy could be a pain, a stubborn ass, and a loudmouth, but he’d never seen anything like the sullen fury that was radiating off him now. He turned back to the front of the room. He’d figure out Barton later.

The unknown “alien” threat they were facing that day turned out to be slime robots. Eliot guessed
the things were something cooked up in a SHIELD lab, internal mechanics hidden under a heavy coating of a thick, sticky substance that slowed and swallowed bullets like gelatin. The things looked kinda like the ghosts in Pacman, he decided. If the ghosts in Pacman were four feet tall and had a gooey coating that burned when it came into contact with skin. They were fucking annoying; a trait they shared with one Clint Barton.

Clint was sulking. That was the only word for it. He asked Barton how he’d go about fighting these bastards, seeing as there were roughly three hundred in the block they were supposed to clear; they needed to get a move on. Come up with a plan of attack.

“Hell if I know. Or care.” Clint muttered.

“Dammit, Circus, what is up with you today? You gonna help, or just sulk?”

“I am NOT sulking,” he snapped sulkily.

Eliot glared at him briefly before checking his clip. Everyone had bad days, and hell, most of the time he preferred people leave him alone. But his arms were already covered in an angry rash from these things and bullets were doing nothing. “You wanna at least try to kill one? I ain’t getting a lousy score just cause my partner woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

Clint huffed out a breath, and in a smooth motion, reached back, selected an arrow that Eliot was sure was not random, nocked, aimed, and released it at a green goo ghost. A hissing, bubbling noise and a sharp stink filled the air. The goo melted off the metal frame. Clint released another arrow while Eliot was still staring at the smoking puddle. The explosive tip burst against the frame, leaving a pile of scrap metal in the puddled goop. Huh. “There. Happy now?” The archer snapped. He didn’t bother put another arrow to the string.

“What was that?” Eliot asked. “Acid arrow?” He got a shrug in response. Clint had done as he’d demanded and killed one, but there were at least a couple hundred left, and he doubted the guy had that many acid arrows, if he was even willing to do more. He needed some other tools. “C’mon Circus, move your ass,” he ordered and headed into a building without looking back.

They were in an industrial area, full of abandoned warehouses. SHIELD requisitioned these places and cleared them out for trainings, which did give recruits some interesting terrain and resources to handle, but Eliot always wondered about the lack of people. How would this change with panicked people running everywhere? But that wasn’t his problem right now. No, right now, his problem was a six-foot man throwing a temper tantrum for no apparent reason. Clint hesitated before he followed him in, but he did end up coming. The goo ghosts began to follow as well, apparently programmed target them. Great.

At least the acid arrow gave him an idea for a counter-attack.

It took jogging through three floors of the manufacturing plant before he found something promising; several barrels of hydrochloric acid. He doubted it was as strong as whatever Clint put in those arrows, but there was a helluva lot more of it. He also spotted a fire ax, which he grabbed on impulse and because punching through the covering of the case made a good alternative to punching through Clint’s face. Not as satisfying, but more practical.

Eliot wrangled with the barrels, muscling them over to the head of the stairs. He could have used some help getting them into position, but Clint stayed near the stairs, bow still lowered. The things were slowly making their way upward. He couldn’t tell how they were climbing the stairs, but it didn’t really matter at the moment. With less care than he probably could have taken, he hacked a hole in the top of a barrel and tipped it forward, sending the acid cascading down the stairs. He
watched as the wave of acid hit the goo ghosts, doing a substantial amount of damage, though not actually incapacitating many. Mostly it caused the goo to slough off the frame, revealing a walking, metal skeleton, with whirling blades for arms. Who the hell had invented these things and why?

He turned to Clint. “Okay, Circus, I dunno what’s got you all huffy today, but it’s pissing me off, so I’m gonna go hit as many of those things as I can. You’re only one ahead of me right now, and if you don’t get your ass in gear, you’re gonna look real stupid when I get home with a kill count in the hundreds, while you got a measly one.” Clint glared at him, still saying nothing. Eliot sighed. Time to sweeten the pot. “And whoever loses this, he has to use the other person’s weapon for a week. Lookin’ forward to you trying all the fancy shit with a gun.” He didn’t wait for a response this time, and charged down the stairs, hoping his boots were strong enough to withstand the acid. The first ghost he raised his ax to hit suddenly sprouted an arrow which exploded into some black goo of its own. The thing ground to a halt, trapped by even stickier substance. “HEY, THAT ONE WAS MINE!”

“TWO!” Clint yelled back from up above, and started loosing more arrows. Eliot bared his teeth and began hacking away at the horde, using the stairs to give himself the height advantage, while Clint picked off targets from above. Eventually both of them stopped yelling out counts. Eliot kept track in his head. He was too out of breath to do more. The things were just that — things. They didn’t know pain, or fear, or have any motivation beyond attacking their targets. Hacking off their “head” or burying the ax deep within their circuitry did the trick, but there were so many.

He went down, almost surprised to realize it was happening as he fell under the weight of the ghosts. His skin burned from contact with remaining globs of goo and he knew the floor was covered in a much more dangerous substance. Somewhere he heard Clint counting “forty-two, forty-three, forty-four…” The voice didn’t seem to be getting any closer. Fine. If he was on his own, he’d handle it. An explosion shook the building. One of Clint’s arrows? He let out a roar and bucked upward, grabbing one of the ghost’s frames to haul himself away from the danger of the floor. It hurt like hell, biting deep into his palms, but for a brief moment he thought it had been worth it. Then his heel skidded on a glob of the stuff and he was falling back—

A hand grabbed his and yanked him hard, out of the press of metal and goop. Around them, several robots toppled over, sparks flickering over their skeletons.

“No touchy!” Clint shouted in warning. Now that Eliot was upright, he stood back, eyes roving for the next target.

“Finally got your head in the game?” Eliot snapped. He’d have appreciated the rescue more if he’d known he could count on it.

“Forgot.” Clint loosed an arrow at a ghost with an exposed bit of machinery. It found its mark, setting off a small explosion that sent bit of metal flying in all directions.

Eliot ducked. “Forgot what? Your fucking head?”

“Nothin. You good?”

“Be better if my partner wasn’t such an asshole.” He remembered the axe in his hand, swung it wildly at an incoming robot, barely connecting on the first pass. He had to hack at it, using the motion to cover his shaking arms. He’d almost—

“LOOK OUT!” Barton yelled and shoved him aside. He got the bow up in time to block the whirring blade, so the thing crashed bodily into him instead, sending him reeling back, slip-sliding
on the floor.

Eliot took the opportunity to bury his axe in the thing while Barton recovered. When he glanced over the other man was already moving on to the next group, limping slightly.

“You good?”

Clint released an arrow, setting another to the string as the first sunk into an exposed bit of machinery and flared red and bright, searing electrical components and Eliot’s eyes. Releasing the second arrow—its hit accompanied by another dull explosion across the room—he flicked some slime off his face, rubbed at the rash forming, and muttered, “Peachy.” He went back to fighting, mouth set in a grim line.

Finally, there was one largish cell of five, and others scattered throughout the warehouse that they had missed. Eliot turned for the cell, only to see Clint loose his last arrow, which unraveled into a net of some fine but heavy-duty wire, tangling and trapping the things.

Eliot stared at the tangle of metal. “That one counts as one,” he muttered.

A moment later, all the remaining mechanisms froze in place. Some toppled over, others remained upright and unmoving.

“…And time.” Clint began making a circuit of the room, retrieving any reusable arrows from the wreckage.

Eliot forced his hands to relax on the axe handle, letting it fall to his side. “So that was your idea of teamwork?”

“Huh?”

“Teamwork. Today was specifically about teamwork. If you’d bother to come to the briefing, you’d da known that.”

The side of Clint’s mouth twisted, clearly understanding something. “Ah. Maria.” He picked up another arrow and inspected it before sliding it back in the quiver. “Shit.” He kicked a fallen robot, harder than was wise, and grimaced and did it several more times.

Eliot, thoroughly sick of Clint’s mood shifts today, left the building to await the SHIELD pickup and the reprimand that was coming.

He stood, squinting at the low angle of the sun, perversely grateful to see a SHIELD Humvee approaching. Clint emerged, walking even more haphazardly now that he’d probably bruised his other foot to a pulp kicking that damn heap of metal.

“Worth it?” Eliot asked, making his tone as bland as possible.

Clint said nothing and he could hear his teeth grinding together.

They clambered into the Humvee, Hill giving them an appraising look. The ten other recruits in the back looked worn out, but seemed pleased with themselves. Eliot didn’t like the looks of pity and shock he was getting, and folded his arms, keeping his eyes on the floor of the vehicle.


Eliot sat up and recited. “Seventy-eight kills, Ma’am. Threat not completely neutralized but was
substantially diminished, Ma’am.”

Hill nodded at him. “And you managed that while goading your sad excuse for a partner into doing something. Barton. Report.” It was the first time Eliot had seen her recognize Clint’s existence all day. What the hell was going on with them?

Clint, for the first time since Eliot had met him, snapped to attention. “One hundred and seventeen kills, Ma’am.” He said it so straight, Eliot had no idea if he was mocking him, or Hill, or both of them.

If he was mocking, Hill didn’t take the bait. “Considering your experience and the versatility of your weapon, that score is abysmal.”

Barton glared at her arms folded across his chest. “I don’t belong here with these greenies! This is stupid and pointless! Put me back in the field and stop making me do tricks like your pet monkey!”

Hill raised her eyebrows. “You brought this matter up, so now we will discuss it in front of your cohorts. You were removed from the field because you lacked discipline, and put lives in danger. I decide when you return to active duty and while you treat this like a game and behave like a petulant child I am not inclined to do so.”

“You sent—”

“I am entirely aware of who I sent, and why, just as I am aware who I did not send, and why. But that is classified information, and you do currently do not have the clearance to be privy to it. Now shut up and go back to pouting until you are ready to act like an adult. And if there is one more word out of your mouth about how this is not fair I will keep you in training for an entire year or more.”

Clint pressed his lips tightly together and said nothing. Hill turned back to Eliot. “You encouraged Barton to participate by offering an incentive?”

Eliot cleared his throat. “Uh, yeah. I told him whoever lost had to use the other’s weapon for a week. I lost.”

“Given the point of the exercise, I disagree. But I like your idea. In fact, I like it so much, I’m instituting it as a requirement for everyone for the next week. For most of you, that will mean no handguns for the next seven days. Barton, you avoid guns as a matter of pride, something you have far too much of. For the next week, you are going to use what everyone else normally uses. Spencer, as your original wager began this, and because I personally want to see what you can do, you will be using Barton’s equipment for the next week. I suggest you get in some practice time tonight.”

The Humvee ground to a halt the moment she stopped talking. Everyone else erupted into protests. Clint looked like he was going to join in, but Eliot grabbed him and pulled him bodily out of the truck. “C’mon dumbass, before you get yourself in even more trouble.” From the looks they were getting, there went his hopes of fitting in. For better or worse, Clint was all he had left.

Clint threw his gear down at Eliot’s feet and stalked off. He considered the bow and quiver, gathered it up a bit awkwardly, and took off after his partner. “HEY! WHAT THE HELL IS UP WITH YOU?”

Clint whirled on him. “You got us into this mess, and I am not babysitting you while you figure out how to nock an arrow. Fuck off.”
“No.” Eliot growled and then realized his tone wasn’t helping. If he pushed Clint, the guy would shove back harder. *More carrot, less stick.* “I’m tired, everything hurts, and I dunno which of your arrows will blow me up if I look at it wrong. I want a beer, and I definitely don’t want to go back to the barracks where everyone’s gonna be pissed at the two of us. You coming?”

Clint looked like he was going to yell some more, opened his mouth to start, before blowing out a harsh breath. “Yeah, I could use a drink.”

They grabbed a six-pack from the base convenience store and Clint led the way to the huge tree near the shooting range. Under the tree, the air felt still and suffocating, so he stuffed several cans in pockets, leapt for the lowest branch, and began to climb. The knee he’d twisted diving in to save Eliot twinged painfully, as did his bruised toes. *Damn Barton, you were seven different kinds of idiot today, weren’t you.* Eliot huffed out a breath and followed him reluctantly, taking the same route he chose until they reached the highest branches that could safely bear their weight. He settled into a crook, leaned back and cracked open a can, taking a drink with a sigh.

He expected Spencer to yell at him, or at least growl, but the guy sat in complete stillness, looking out into the darkness. Now that they were up here, he seemed to have lost complete interest in talking to Clint. The silence shouted instead, demanding to be filled. He wasn't great at silence.

“Don’t worry about your score,” he offered to the still shadow. “Maria made that thing about teamwork to goad me.”

Eliot said nothing, did nothing.

“And anyway, we didn’t do too bad in the end, over two hundred kills.” He checked the still figure again. “Go team?”

Spencer muttered something too quiet for Clint to pick up. Stupid ears. “Huh?”

“I said, we ain’t a team.” He said it quietly, loud enough this time for Clint to hear, but with no heat behind it, only disappointment.

He opened his mouth to argue, but Eliot continued, seeming to be barely aware of his existence. “Enlisted straight outta high school. Unit I served in had guys from every background you could imagine. Worked in crews of all sizes, doing mostly crap jobs in crap places cause someone had to do ‘em. Sure, we bitched about it. Then we did it anyway.”

He turned to stare directly at Clint, blue eyes somehow still visible in the murk, intimidating in their intensity. “The shit you pulled today would’ve never flown with any of them. No matter how many times you and your Avenger pals get in the papers for saving the world, the real heroes don’t wear sparkly costumes. They don’t pick and choose a convenient time to come to the rescue. This ain’t a performance for them, they don’t do it for the applause. And neither do I. So if that’s all you’re after, I’ll hop out if this tree right now and tell Hill I ain’t suited to be your partner. I don’t need someone swooping in to save my ass, *Hawkeye.* I need someone watching it to begin with.”

Clint’s breath caught in his throat. He shoved aside the juvenile mental voice which immediately whispered goads and comebacks. He had too much riding on this. Eliot had the leverage to ruin everything, had every right to do it, and yet he was still sitting in this tree, waiting on his non-
partner to give him a reason not to. The blue eyes stayed on him, unwavering. And here I thought I was getting a break from Cap’s lectures. The thought slid in under a guise of sarcasm, but it was impossible to ignore the truth of it now.

“So sorry,” he finally said. It sounded lame and stupid.

“You should be.”

“The others – the other Avengers – they don’t deserve…” he stopped; tried again. “You sounded like…” Dammit. “I’m the screw-up, okay? Not them.”

The words tasted like milk gone sour and he swallowed, hard.

“Who’d they send?” Eliot didn’t ask where, or why, and Clint doubted he had any actual context for the question, aside from his outburst earlier.

“My partner. My real partner.” Sometimes they’d sit like this in trees, or on the tops of buildings, legs dangling over the side, all cut up andbruised, and the bad guys down for the moment.

“You have a partner?” He supposed Eliot had a right to be surprised. It wasn’t like he’d mentioned Nat over the last few weeks. And why was that, Clint?

“Yeah, Nat.” He wasn’t sure he wanted to talk about this.

“And you think he can’t handle a mission on his own? Or that he can, and won’t want you back?” Left unsaid was the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question: What did you screw up? But Clint preferred to ignore that.

“She.”

“Huh?”

“She. Nat is short for Natasha.”

“Your partner’s a girl?”

“You say it like that and she’ll hand you your ass on a platter. Or your head. Whatever’s more efficient.” He took a swig of his beer and managed to relish a moment of Eliot squirming.

“Huh. Didn’t consider that option,” the other man finally acceded. “And she puts up with your sorry ass?”

“Yeah. For some reason.” Eliot was going to drag this out of him. Truth was, he sort of wanted him to. Maybe.

“How long have you been partners?” he asked.

“Long time. She and I, we weren’t always the ‘heroes’. ” He tried to finger quote around his beer can, but it was probably too dark for Eliot to see him anyway now. That was good. Talking about this in the dark was easier. “But I was mostly doing bad shit for her. She—” He considered how to word this without saying too much. Huh. Maybe he was getting some discipline. “—that was her life. Always had been. ‘I eventually decided I wanted to be a good guy — superhero, I guess. And, once SHIELD and the Avengers trusted me, I convinced her to switch sides. Sorta. Uhh, giving myself a lot of credit there. Natasha doesn’t do shit she doesn’t want to. Or at least, not shit she hasn’t weighed all the pros and cons and possible outcomes.”
“But she came?”

“Yeah. And we worked together, things were good. ‘Til I screwed up.” Okay, nevermind, he didn’t want to talk about this. He didn’t want to think about how he’d been cocky, hadn’t listened, disobeyed orders. How Nat had come in to save his ass and nearly gotten killed in the process.

“How’d you screw up?” Eliot asked, trying to sound casual.

“Badly.”

Eliot said nothing, waiting him out.

“Really badly. She had to rescue me, nearly got blown up—I thought she had been blown up. After that, SHIELD took me off active duty, put me in training with you guys. Nat was given leave. She’d done nothing wrong, but she’d gotten banged up pretty good, thanks to me.”

“So now she’s back out in the field?” Eliot prodded.

“I…I didn’t think they do that. I didn’t take it seriously—I know it sounds like I don’t take anything seriously. I mean, I know I screwed up. The review board said I lacked discipline, yeah, duh. Pretty sure they were aware of that from the get-go.” Okay, that sounded bad. “I care that I got Nat hurt, I just thought they’d release us back together.”

“So, what, you think she’ll get into trouble without you there to…get her into more trouble? Or you worried she ain’t gonna want you back?”

Clint winced. Option B cut pretty close to home. “They didn’t even tell me. She didn’t tell me. I heard she’d been sent out through the grapevine this morning. Pissed me off and I decided I didn’t want to play along anymore.”

“Circus, it didn’t occur to you that refusing to work with the partner you’ve been assigned is a really stupid way of convincing them to let you work with your other partner?” For once he welcomed the nickname, taking it as an indication of Eliot’s return to normal.

“Nah. That would’ve made sense.” He sighed. “You ever work close with someone?”

Eliot hesitated before replying, “yeah. He wasn’t much for rule following either. Guess that’s why I put up with you.”

Clint winced. “Sorry. For being a giant pain in your ass today.”

“You gonna do it again tomorrow?”

“And miss all the fun of you guys flailing about with different weapons? Hell no.” He dropped the empty can, listening as it bounced off the branches in the dark. “Maria made her point. I lost this round. I’ll play nicely in the sandbox with you kiddos.”

“You know I can kill you in about ten different ways from here.” Eliot growled.

“Pssh, Nat knows twenty, and sometimes poisons my coffee to see what will happen.” Clint grinned, and it felt good. “C’mon, I’ll teach ya how to not blow yourself up with my gear.”

“Nat ever use your bow?” Eliot asked as they clambered back down the tree.

“She can use a bow, she complains about the draw weight on mine though.” He gave up on being careful and went for the controlled fall approach, catching branches as he passed and swinging
from them.

“Am I gonna complain about the draw weight on that thing?” Eliot called from above him. He wasn’t a slouch at climbing either, but apparently was smart enough not to follow Clint’s lead.

“Probably. How do you feel about pulling two hundred and fifty pounds all day?” Clint yelled back up from the base of the tree.

“Goddammit Circus,” the tree replied.
Chapter Summary

Following people who you know are well trained, possibly dangerous, and you just threatened is a GREAT IDEA, Katie-Kate, her brain was happy to tell her as she stomped down the sidewalk. If Clint is this mad, there has to be a reason, and probably a good one.

Probable.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kate watched the back of Clint’s head, shoulders, and eventually the rest of him disappear upstairs into the actual loft bit of the loft. The temptation to yell at him until he turned around, acknowledged her, talked to her, god-fucking-damn-him was almost overwhelming. He’d hear her, at that volume, as noise if not meaning; she had a substantial set of lungs. But that’s all it would be: noise. For a conversation to happen, you needed two people. It would only work if he put the aids back in, or if he came down to face her, they could have it out with lip reading and Kate’s rudimentary ASL, but whatever the method, Clint would have to participate. She gritted her teeth and stayed silent. Yelling did nothing. Not lately. Talking did nothing. Nothing did anything when Clint Barton got in a mood. Kate liked action, liked movement, hated to sit still, be good, do as she was told. Usually she saw the same thing in Clint. Less talking, more doing, with quick grins and hand signs saying all that needed to be said as they took down bad guys.

Lately…not so much. And part of it was Grills, and this whole mess. She’d try to tell him she understood (and she did – kinda), but there’s only so many times she could watch someone she cared about shut her out, shut everyone out. He was going to get himself killed and sometimes she doubted he cared. But Kate couldn’t not care.

Lucky whined, looking up the stairs and then back at her. She unballed her clenched fists and bent down to rub his ears, lifting her chin so his responding lick didn’t go all French on her. “Go on,” she told him, standing up with a sigh. Nothing beats a dog for immediate stress relief. “Make sure you stick your butt in his face and fart on him. I’m gonna give this one more shot.” She glanced back up the stairs herself, mentally ran through all the choice phrases she wanted to apply to his behavior now that she was calmer. “I back up your crazy mood swing and this is what I get, Barton?” she growled as she headed out the door.

If Clint wouldn’t talk, maybe his weird, sudden frenemies would. I should have gone to L.A.. Sun, sand, sanity. Three things my life has definitely been lacking. Instead, I figured, let Clint sulk for a few days. He deserves a cold shoulder and time to mourn Grills and then we’ll solve this thing. But nooo, he’s got to go and be all weird, and I have to go back his play, and here I am. She exited Clint’s building and scanned the street, catching glimpse of the trio rounding the corner and disappearing from view.

Following people who you know are well trained, possibly dangerous, and you just threatened is a
GREAT IDEA, Katie-Kate, her brain was happy to tell her as she stomped down the sidewalk. If Clint is this mad, there has to be a reason, and probably a good one.

Probably.

Or maybe he’s just being the self-destructive jackass he’s been turning into an art-form lately. Shove everyone way so you’re the only one getting killed. As a survival technique it sucked, especially in an apartment building in New York. There was no such thing as protection through isolation here. But that doesn’t mean he’s not dumb enough to try it. She considered this possibility carefully. If he had no good reason for exploding, then she had no good reason for drawing on that guy. The second time anyway. If she was threatening people, she should damn well know why. Screw Clint and his lack of basic communication skills. She’d find out for herself.

She thought she’d done a pretty good job of being stalkery, but two blocks down, the Grumpy Cat guy stepped out of the shadows of an alley, arms folded. He definitely looked grumpy.

“Hi, Gr...umm..liot.” Great start there, Kate.

Eliot raised his eyebrows, clearly unimpressed. “We gonna have a problem?” He asked the question quiet and matter of fact.

Kate gulped. She could see Eliot being very scary when he needed to be. “Why, you wanna have one?” she challenged. Never let it be said that Kate Bishop got intimidated by scowls and very large muscles.

The eyebrows went up again, but he didn’t laugh at her, as plenty of guys did when a skinny, Asian girl like her goes all belligerent. She noticed him shift slightly, balancing his weight, but leaving the initiation of a fight to her. The fact that he considered her a viable threat, at close range and without a bow notched him up several levels in her estimation.

Before either of them could respond, Parker hopped down ten feet from the fire escape above them (shit – she should have been aware of that) and a moment later, Hardison emerged from an alley. “Ah, so we revealing ourselves now? Thought Eliot was taking care of Nancy Drew.”

“Parker, I told you I’d handle it.” Parker, for no reason Kate could see, poked him in the arm repeatedly until he jerked it away. “Quit that.” Kate recognized the familiar, affectionate heat in his voice. He was irritated, sure, but he’d miss it if she stopped pestering him. Behind them, Hardison’s eyes were alight with amusement, clearly used the sibling-ish bickering. She liked to do that with Clint sometimes; see how long she could annoy him before he’d snap. He was good at the game, tolerating her irritants far longer than she could with his. Perks of running with a Russian spy. Had he and Eliot–?

Parker turned her attention to Kate. “What do you want?”

She kept her eyes on Hardison, this would be about her threatening to assault him, not the other tangle of reasons she was here. “Um, look. The first time I drew on you, it was because you were in the middle of Clint’s apartment and I had no idea who you were or why you were there, and we’ve —” she swallowed, hard, “—had issues with strangers getting into the building and murdering our friends, so I feel pretty okay threatening you then. But, Clint trusted you guys enough to invite you in, and then totally flipped out over what seemed like nothing? And he’s my partner and I trust him, but that was weird. So. Are you guys actually evil criminals?” Not the most tactful question. Fuck tact.

“You think that question’s gonna get you a straight answer?” asked Eliot.
“No,” said Hardison.

“Yes,” said Parker.

“Do you guys want to try not talking all at once?” demanded Kate.

“We’re criminals.” Parker produced one of Clint’s arrowheads, apparently stolen, from out of nowhere and flipped it to Hardison. “Look, pressie!”

Hardison caught it and sighed. “But we ain’t evil.” He held it out to Kate, cautiously. “What is that one anyway? Couldn’t figure it out back there.”

She took it, snorted. “Boomerang arrow. Always comes back, Clint likes to say.” She tucked it in her pocket. “So, who’s giving me a straight answer?”

“We’re con artists, but he’s not a mark. He’s not even part of a game. We haven’t even started a game.” Parker frowned, turning to Eliot. “Is he psychic? I hate psychics.”

“He definitely ain’t psychic.” Eliot muttered. He was watching Kate’s pocket with the sort of intensity she reserved for pockets containing kittens or high grade explosives. It wasn’t either of those. Boomerangs aren’t likely to explode—though that would be a terrifying adaptation.

“Sides, there is no way I’m working Hawkeye, even if the dude did shoot at me. Near me. The guy’s a freaking Avenger! How cool is that?!” So Hardison was a fanboy, that figured. Could she use it? He seemed much less impressed by her, which was lame. “I sure as hell ain’t conning him,” he announced to the group at large.

“Yeah, but that was a long time ago.”

“Clearly not long enough for Clint.” Who could hold a grudge with the best of them, but was also a firm believer in second chances. So what had happened? Juicy backstory, that was for sure.

“Looks like. We done here?” He turned to go.

“No.” Kate had learned early in life that ‘No’ was a very useful phrase. She needed to know who these people were, or at least who Eliot was to Clint. It’d gone beyond apologies, beyond helping her stupidhead partner whether he wanted her to or not. Now her curiosity was piqued and there was no going back, only forward into other people’s secrets. She faced Parker directly, because Parker made odd judgment calls, like stopping to talk to Clint on a roof. Maybe, she’d be willing to talk to Kate. “What are you guys doing here? Were you telling Clint the truth?”

“Yeah, but he clearly has trust issues.” Parker considered her, thoughtfully. “You said someone was murdered in your building? That might cause trust issues.”

“No shit, Sherlock, but Clint had them long before that. “Not my building. Clint’s building. The one he forced the tracksuit mafia to sell to him?” She chewed the inside of her cheek. “Wait, if you’ve been researching this, how come you don’t know about Grills?”

“Who or what is Grills?” Hardison asked. Maybe he was the one to hook? One of them had to be as nosy as her, would help her push to know more about Eliot and Clint. They were clearly as in the dark as she was.
“Gil—Gilbert—he’s the guy who was murdered. Nice guy, always called Clint ‘Hawk-guy’. He was shot on the roof.” The stain on the roof loomed briefly in her mind, and she shoved it away, again, glancing over at Eliot’s sharp intake of breath. Whatever he’d realized, he was leaving unsaid, waiting for Hardison.

“I remember a Gilbert in a police report, which, by the way, you know how many murders have been going down around here? Even for Bed-stuy, it ain’t normal. But there was no mention of a Clint Barton, you think I would have missed something like that?” Hardison threw out his arms in exasperation.

“Wouldn’t be,” Eliot muttered. When no one said anything, he elaborated. “Cops don’t like to put superheroes in police reports, especially not open cases. Some big disaster happens and the costumes show up, fine, not much they can do about it. But unsolved murders? No one wants to stick an Avenger’s name next to that. Complicates things too much. SHIELD don’t like it either, neither do the local politicians. They’ll know who they talked to, but they’ll stick in a placeholder name, least until the case is closed.”

It wasn’t the first time she’d heard of that, cops turning a blind eye to people with power. Just—usually that power came from money in her world, not power-power. Superpowers. Or whatever power she and Clint managed to garner with bows, arrows, arrogance, and a lot of purple. Shouldn’t being a superhero raise you above all that? Above the wheeling and dealing of her daddy’s world? *Quit being naïve, Kate, it’s all the same world. Same country, same city…*

“What about the city records?” She checked over her shoulder, hastily. They’d been standing here, in the open, for longer than she’d like considering how much time she’d been spending helping Clint fight the Tracksuits. Making herself visible.

Eliot nodded approvingly at her wariness. “Let’s move.”

As they started walking, Hardison pulled out his phone. Moments later he asked, “When’d he buy the place?”

“Few months back, I think. Threw a bag of cash at Ivan and when Ivan refused, he beat him and a bunch of Tracksuits up. He’s not a great negotiator,” Eliot barked out a laugh.

“Depends on the requirements of the negotiation.” Parker’s smile in Eliot’s direction was terrifying to behold.

Hardison groaned at the phone. “Of all the ass-backwards—this is New York City and they got a backlog of six months on digitizing the records? What the hell, people?” He held out the phone to show her the dates and she saw what he meant. The building’s digital record hadn’t been updated in years. Still owned by Ivan.

They hadn’t known. Clint’s whole assumption was based off them recognizing his name, but it wasn’t anywhere to be found. Parker nodded briskly. “Alec, Eliot, we’re going to need her.”

“Need me for what?” Suddenly, she was nervous. What if she’d called this wrong?

“You’ll see.” Parker flashed her a distinctively not reassuring smile before heading off down the sidewalk, grabbing Hardison’s hand as she passed him.

Kate stopped walking and stared after them for a moment, until Eliot grunt, “C’mon,” and followed them.
She fell in place beside him. “Where are we going? Are you taking me to your lair or something?”

In front of them, Parker twisted to give her a manic grin as Eliot groaned. “Leverage Lair! Lair for the bear, bears that care, at Leverage lair. We’ll get the bad guy out of your hair!” She sang gleefully and began skipping down the sidewalk, Hardison laughing, stretching his long legs to keep pace.

Eliot stared after her in what seemed like adoring horror. Hell if she knew what else it could be. “You love her?” The question escaped before she could make her brain intercede.

“’Course.”

Kate blinked. “Oh, I thought it was one of those unrequited things. Didn’t expect you to fess up.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” he grunted and started to follow Parker. “And who said it was unrequited or any of your business?”

Apparently nothing was her business. Yeah, right. Kate left off puzzling over that, to deal with more pressing matters of personal curiosity. “Sooooo, you and Clint were…friends…?”

“’Were’ being the operative term. He’s your boyfriend, ask him. Till then—”

“Till the end of time, you will stop calling Clint my boyfriend. That’s super disturbing and YUCK.” She made a face, sticking her tongue out in disgust. “That came out harsh, but for real, not my boyfriend. Way too old for me and he’s a disaster at relationships. Believe me.”

She actually got a smile from the guy. “Fair enough. Let’s just say he’s got a right to be pissed at me and I don’t blame him for kicking us out. I was more surprised he let us in to begin with. He’s changed a bit.” He let out a breath.

“Have you?” She asked carefully. She liked Eliot, could see Clint liking him too.

“Yeah.” Eliot sighed. “But he’s too stubborn to believe it.”

“Thought you said he changed.”

“Sure, but it ain’t like he got a new personality installed. He’s still Barton.”

Chapter End Notes

I realized while writing this, that I couldn't recall what exactly Kate and Clint fought about that caused her to pack up and head to LA. Which I thought was weird, since it was clearly pivotal...it was also clearly from Lucky's POV. Right. That makes sense now.

(Also, damn you Fraction for Clint's line "I don't want to learn your name at your funeral, Grills" in the hurricane sandy issue. Got blindsided by feels when all I wanted was a last name.)
“I’m not spying on you for Hill,” Eliot said. For a statement that was entirely true, it felt sour.

Clint didn’t turn around and for a moment Eliot wasn’t sure he was going to acknowledge the denial. “I wouldn’t hold it against you if you did.”


Now Clint turned around. “You just threatened to throw me through a window.”

Eliot was pretending to be bored out of his mind. They’d been stuck in this tiny, dank basement for going on two days, told to watch the second window to the right, on the second floor of the apartment building opposite. So far, literally nothing had happened. Not just nothing of note — nothing. Monotony was part of the point, he figured. It was possible that other pairs had a more exciting window to stare at, but when Hill had handed them their orders, she’d thrown in a “Good luck” partnered with a tiny, evil smile aimed directly at Eliot. Or at least that’s what it felt like in hindsight. He certainly felt victimized. Stuck in a mildewed basement, in some not-quite suburb outside the city, was one thing, but he was stuck here with Clint “Circus” Barton and that was another issue entirely.

Eliot had trained for boring missions. Intelligence gathering was mostly a waiting game, and that meant laying low and staying alert for long hours or days. Some guys took it in stride, others fidgeted. Some liked to talk, play games to pass the time, dare their partner to do two hundred push-ups, talk about sexual conquests…anything to alleviate the slow stutter of waiting. Eliot preferred none of these. Eliot preferred waiting alone. He was the least irritating person he knew.

Clint was the most irritating person he knew.

Currently, his partner was on watch duty, seated below their window; a small, grimy rectangle on street level that provided a perfect view of the infrequent shoes of passersby if you stood directly in front of it, or, if you looked up from below, the building across the alley. Clint was diligently keeping an eye on the building. He was also, as he put it, ‘practicing his peripheral aim,’ by throwing small rocks at Eliot.

If Eliot was being entirely fair about the situation, he would allow that Clint was also throwing rocks at things that were not Eliot. He’d call out what he was aiming for before he threw, as proof he’d made the shot he intended. Thus far he’d accurately hit Eliot’s head, shoulders, knees, and toes (knees and toes) — and yes, he’d sung the song while doing it, and struck the intended targets in the correct rhythm. It was still stuck in Eliot’s head. That had been the start of several hour’s worth of target practice which involved an uncooperative Eliot, individual bricks in the walls, bouncing gravel-sized stones off ceiling beams to hit items at seemingly impossible angles, and more Eliot, who’d tried dodging, though he was certain that his acknowledgment of Clint’s activities was only going to encourage him. And it turned out it didn’t matter. The guy had a sixth sense for knowing where Eliot would dodge to and the gravel would hit him squarely where Clint called out.

Finally Eliot growled, “Circus, you hit me again and I’m gonna pitch you through that window.”
Clint glanced at him, fingers already in position to flick another stone, and then he grinned apologetically, and let the intended missile drop to the ground. “Okay, okay. What do you wanna do?” He’d turned his head back to the window, but Eliot could tell by his posture that he’d begin fidgeting again soon enough. So his preferred answer of “nothing” wasn’t going to cut it. And there was an opportunity here that he’d been avoiding.

“This can’t be your first time waiting someone out.”

“Nah, done it loads of times. Boring as hell every single time.” He was still staring out the window, though Eliot wasn’t sure he was actually looking at the building. Not that there was anything else of interest in the alley. The angle of his head just looked off.

“How’d you do it with other partners? Can’t imagine they all let you throw rocks at them.”

Clint shifted his shoulders. “Depends on who I’m watching with. Or if I’m alone.” He glanced over his shoulder to flash Eliot a grin and added, “I’m kinda the greatest lookout ever.”

The boast seemed out of place and Eliot found himself studying Clint as he turned back to the window. Then again Circus was like that. Quick shifts between arrogance and deprecation, exuberance and moodiness, amiability and anger. He tested the waters with a known subject. “What do you and Nat do?” As he asked the question, he realized that this line of inquiry might be too direct, but Clint seemed distracted as he answered.

“Talk, practice, she teaches me Russian and I try to make her believe American slang I pull out of my ass.”

“Huh. What about the others?” He let Clint figure out what he meant by ‘others’.

“Others? Oh, you mean the Avengers? It depends on who it is.” He didn’t elaborate.

“Yeah? How?” Eliot asked, forcing his tone to be casual.

Clint stiffened slightly. “Hill put you up to this?” he asked, tone more guarded, though he was still staring out the window.

“Nah man, just curious. And bored.” He found the admission easier, now that there was a purpose behind it. “Why would Hill put me up to anything?”

“Cause there’s never just one point to these missions. If nothing’s happening out there, then there’s a reason we’re in here. And I dunno what it is, but it could be the old ‘trick Hawkeye the blabbermouth into spilling secrets he ain’t supposed to tell anyone, SHIELD or not’.”

Eliot, feeling as if he was treading on thin ice, kept his tone even. “You do a lot of secret gathering while hanging out in a basement? In my old company, it was mostly just card games and raunchy stories.”

Now Clint gave him some serious side-eye. “Man, I’ve done missions with Captain-Futzing-America.”

“So no raunchy stories then?”

The side-eye turned into an elaborate eye-roll. “You kidding? The guy’s a soldier. But there’s an image to maintain. And it’s not that I don’t trust you, but I don’t trust Hill not to use you to trick me, and then never ever give me back my security clearance.” He grinned. “And I like my security clearance. Makes me feel all warm and fuzzy when I know shit others don’t.”
“Kinda thought you and Hill were friends. But you think she’d arrange for your partner to spy on you?” He shrugged. “I know I’m not a people person, but that seems like a dick move.” It was, not that it changed anything.

Clint snorted. “Name of the game. Though my perspective’s a bit skewed; I’m not gonna hold it against her.”

Yeah right, keep telling yourself that. “I’m not spying on you for Hill,” Eliot said. For a statement that was entirely true, it felt sour.

Clint didn’t turn around and for a moment Eliot wasn’t sure he was going to acknowledge the denial. “I wouldn’t hold it against you if you did.”

You would. Anyone would. Even your Captain-Futzing-America. “That mean, in your twisted mind, we’re friends?” Eliot found himself asking.

Now Clint turned around. “You just threatened to throw me through a window.” Eliot sighed, but Clint continued, “But talking shit’s a whole lot different than doing it. I would know.”

“So your friends only threaten to toss you through windows?”

“Well, let’s say they only carry through with the threat if the situation requires it.” Clint grinned again, turning back to the window, which really, was too small to throw him through, even if Eliot had actually intended to. He realized Clint hadn’t answered his question. Maybe that was for the best. “Did you know there’s a word for throwing something through a window?”

“Yeah, it’s ‘defenestrate.’” Eliot muttered, a little surprised Clint knew that.

Clint heaved a big, showy sigh. “Can’t even pretend to be smart around you.” They both fell silent for a while, Clint staring out the window, head still at that slightly off angle, and Eliot staring at the set of Clint’s broad shoulders, trying to piece together his weird-ass partner.

Thing was, Clint was proving impossible to anticipate. Every time Eliot figured he’d gotten a handle on the guy, something came along to disrupt it and he was forced to reassess and adjust.

The other thing was, he liked it. Maybe not when Clint was throwing a tantrum during a mission, or pitching stones at him constantly, but most times. He liked finding patterns, identifying distinctive traits as part of a model, testing for holes, for incorrect assumptions. People were the hardest thing to pattern, but he was getting pretty good at fitting them too, though it didn’t make talking to them easier—yet. He’d learn. Clint, he was learning, if completely backwards. Observing another observer was never simple, and Clint turned unpredictability into an art form. It fascinated him, forced him to react—to interact—differently. The experience was aggravating, but, it was slowly dawning on him, it was also fun. He hadn’t solved Circus yet. Accounted for a number of variables, sure, but he couldn’t truly anticipate him. Given their line of work, it should have concerned him more than it did.

Clint finally broke the silence. “Friends make sacrifices,” he said, looking out on the alley. It didn’t sound like he was really talking to Eliot, and Eliot was glad because he didn’t have an answer to that. At least not regarding him and Clint.

As it turned out, he didn’t need to think of one, because in the next instant, Clint stood up and announced with absolutely no fanfare, “We should feed that dog.”

Eliot stared at him, completely at a loss. What dog? Then he remembered seeing a dog lying in a turned over cardboard box in the first dawn light the morning after they snuck down here. He’d
noticed it, and filed it away as not important information. Apparently his partner hadn’t done the same. “Circus, our orders are to sit here until otherwise commanded. Feeding a stray dog is not part of those orders. Sit your ass down.” He grunted, desperately hoping that would be the end of it. Thought you liked the unpredictability, Spencer?

It wasn’t. “We’ve been holed up here for two days and that dog hasn’t eaten the whole time. It needs food.” Had he been staring out at that dog this whole time, only half paying attention while I tiptoed around questions of friendship and spying? There was no more time to wonder — Clint had started moving across the room, clearly heading for the door. Eliot leapt up and grabbed at him. There was brief and vicious struggle before he managed to pin the guy.

“You do NOT give up your position for a stray dog,” he hissed. “We feed the dog, the dog will come back. People will notice. We will be noticed. Cover will be blown. This is SIMPLE MATH.” Clint struggled for a moment longer and then ceased, panting. “You good?” Eliot asked. At Clint’s resigned nod, he let him up, only to have Clint use the space to dash for the door. Eliot tackled him again.


Eliot did the same. When he’d decided to teach the guy how to fight properly, he didn’t think it would be used on him. At least not so soon. At least not for something as stupid as a dog—

Since when don’t you care about dogs? Is that what Vance made you into? A guy who’s been watching a dog starve and never thought about doing anything? Circus was thinking about it this whole time. Finally decided to take you on. He’s willing to risk his neck and this mission. Over a dog.

He could get us killed, get you kicked out, the practical side of his brain argued. It’s not that you don’t care about the dog, it’s that more important things are at stake. What would Nat have done? “What would Nat do?” he snapped, hoping reminding Clint of the end goal here would help bring him to his senses.

“Helped me,” Clint spat at him instantly.

That didn’t sound like any Russian assassin Eliot had ever run into, but he had a more immediate problem. Clint was waiting to see his next move, but if he didn’t make one soon, the guy would just walk out. So much for anticipation.

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Clint was desperately wishing Natasha was here. The SHIELD rumor-mill said she was back from wherever she’d been sent, though he still hadn’t seen her. And it wasn’t that she’d been all that keen on his insistence they help the dog, but Nat was flexible. If he’d demanded they feed the dog, she’d have pointed out all the ways that could go wrong and then they’d have worked out a way to minimize the risks. Eliot’s response was instantly NO. Followed by a bruising tackle or two. Okay, so maybe Clint hadn’t given him much of a heads up about the dog thing, but still, who’d outright refuse to feed a dog? No one he wanted to be friends with.

Eliot was apparently deciding what his next course of action should be, since the Natasha card hadn’t really worked in his favor. Finally, the guy held up his hands. “Okay. Okay, let’s talk about this like adults.”
Clint doubted that was going to get them anywhere, but hey, if he could talk Eliot around, he might as well give it a shot. “Okay. Let’s talk. You want to kill a dog.”

Eliot’s eyeroll went straight through the ceiling and into heaven. “Dammit Clint, I’m not trying to kill a dog. I’m saying that under the circumstances it is impractical to do anything about the dog. And that sucks, but it’s true and you just refuse to see it.”

“I don’t care.” Clint snapped. “Just like you don’t care about the dog. In case you needed an angle to relate to me here.”

Eliot sighed. “It’s not that I don’t care what happens to the dog,” he began.

“You don’t.” Clint argued, temper flaring.

“It ain’t at the top of my list of priorities, Circus, that doesn’t mean I don’t care.” Eliot growled. “We are flying blind here. We don’t know if this is a real mission, or a just a set up. We could get killed if we blow our cover, or we could get kicked out of training. You’ll lose any and all chance of getting back into the field and you’ll lose that security clearance you were just bragging about. If this is real, we could get other people hurt or killed, which is the whole reason you’re here in this damn basement with me right now, so why the hell are you being so stupid!”

That stung. “Well, I don’t generally get accused of being smart.”

“Barton—”

“You were asking earlier what it’d be like if I was in this basement with someone else. With Nat, or one of the other Avengers.” Eliot opened his mouth but Clint kept going. “They would help, hell some of them might suggest it first. Even Tony, and he’s a self-proclaimed jackass, but all of them would agree to help. So when you hold my job, and my life over me, and tell me I’m making a shitty choice, then sure I’ll agree with you on some level, but that isn’t going to stop me from doing anything. Now are you gonna help or are you gonna get out of my way?”

Eliot studied him for a moment before sighing, “It’s gonna kill you, caring that much. Someday it’s going to get you dead. In the meantime it’s gonna get you hurt. A hell of a lot.”

Clint shrugged. “Well in the meantime, it’s also going to remind me why I’m here. That’s my call. You in?”

Eliot glanced out the window and sighed again. “You got an actual plan? One with steps and backups? One that isn’t ‘we run out and see what happens?’”

Clint offered him a grin. “I’m not big on plans, but just for you, yeah, I got a plan. I go up to the roof, toss an energy bar down to the dog.”

“That’s your plan?” Eliot growled, incredulous.

“What? It’s simple, takes place where no one’s going to be looking, and it’s not like I’m gonna miss.” He folded his arms. “Call out the flaws.”

“One: Someone in another building could see you moving up. This building’s supposed to be abandoned, someone sees you, they could call the cops. If our marks, who we know nothing about, see you, our cover gets blown.”

“Okay, but it’s dark out now, I have the best eyesight of anyone you or I know, and I can move pretty quietly in the dark. No one’s gonna see me go through the building. Hit me again.” He was
enjoying this now, having someone to bounce the idea off of, instead of just being shot down. Eliot looked as if he was enjoying it less.

"Two: Someone sees the food go flying through the air, or hears it land."

"Still dark out, and trust me, people think they see something in the air, they blink, it’s gone, they think they imagined it. And it’ll land right in front of the dog, any sounds will be attributed to said dog."

"Three: We don’t know how long we’re going to be here. We might need to ration that food."

"Been hungry before. Dog’s got a helluva head start on the growling stomach." He waited, but Eliot was looking at him now with an odd expression.

"I’m coming with," he announced.

Clint blinked. "Huh?"

"Circus, if this does go to shit, I wanna know about it and you’ll need someone to have your back. We’ll be out of here a lot fast if one of us isn’t in the basement."

"If you leave the basement, I’m not the only one disobeying a direct order," Clint warned.

"Yeah, I know." Eliot tossed him a bar underhand. "C’mon, you might as well toss one of mine down too." Clint caught it and nodded in appreciation.

They headed up the stairs together.

Even Eliot, who was expecting this to somehow go to shit, was blindsided by how quickly things went to shit. Literally blindsided, by someone who had probably played football at some point in his life, as they reached the landing of the first floor. Eliot went down, tangling his legs in the shadowy mountain and tripping his attacker up as well. From the sound of it, Clint had his own assailant to deal with and Eliot was forced to trust he could handle himself, while he took care his own problem. More by sheer luck than anything else, his foot found the guy’s groin and he folded over gasping. Eliot didn’t wait to see how long it would take him to recover. He barreled into Clint’s attacker full speed, and took him to the ground. He managed to land a few punches, before Clint grabbed at him yelling “C’mon!” and charged up the next flight of stairs.

Eliot called after him, “Well, that went south in a hurry, come on man, we gotta get going, get down here!”

“Up here, we need to go up,” Clint panted and turned to start climbing again.

“Yeah sure, make us an easier target, you crazy?”

“Hey, I’ll have you know my crazy ideas work like – 20 percent of the time.”

“THOSE ARE NOT GOOD ODDS!” Eliot yelled back. Who the hell was attacking them? Why? Too many variables.

Clint glanced at the next landing, helpfully illuminated by a streetlight. “If they can see us, I can see them. I can see ‘em, I can hit ‘em.” He shook the ever-present bow in his left hand.

Eliot gave up the argument. “Fine, if we’re gonna get killed let’s do it on the move. Now MOVE.”
He shoved Clint up the staircase.

“You’re not afraid of heights are you?” Clint mocked as they climbed, heading for the roof.

_As if they hadn’t had a whole conversation in a tree a few weeks back_, Eliot mentally argued. “Of course I ain’t afraid of heights! But the ground is much less of a weapon when you’re already on it.”

“Gravity. Gravity is the weapon.”

“Gravity is a force, idiot, the ground is the thing that hits you. I can’t _believe_ we are having this argument.” They burst through the roof access door, still bickering.

“Yeah you should probably shut up.”

“ME SHUT UP?!”

“Unless you want to get thrown of this roof.”

“Just you try to throw me off this roof, Circus, I’ll teach you a few more things about physics.”

Clint reached into his quiver and selected an arrow, before turning to scan the roof.

“Which one is that?” Eliot demanded, twisting to check the stairway for more attackers. He turned back to see Clint pull out a length of thin line behind the fletching, and Eliot realized what he was looking at. “Aw hell,” he muttered.

“Don’t worry, it looks bad, but it’s stronger that it seems.” Clint said, in what was probably supposed to be a reassuring tone.

“Circus, do me a favor and never try to reassure someone with the phrase “it looks bad”. I promise it won’t work.” Eliot glanced down the stairway again. He thought he’d heard footsteps. “Go do your thing, I’ll keep watch.” He also kept an eye on Clint as he hooked the end of the line to a U-shaped pipe coming out of the roof, nocked the arrow, and let loose, aiming at the roof of the building across the street.

Eliot couldn’t see if it caught, but based on Clint’s soft _whoop_, it had. He called back, “C’mon Eliot! You first.”

Eliot eyed the line to the opposite roof, looked at Clint, and then turned back to the stairway and the voices getting closer. “No, you first, I-I wanna see how you do it.” Not a perfect lie, but hopefully enough to get Circus moving.

Clint glanced at the door they’d busted open. “They’re coming up, aren’t they?” So much for that, then. He didn’t want Circus insisting on staying, not when he could get out, contact the mysteriously absent SHIELD, and find out what was going on. But if there were people to fight, the guy would insist on fighting them.

“Yeah, I can hear them. Eliot wasn’t particularly surprised Clint couldn’t. His eyesight was great, but he never seemed to pick up on sounds as fast.

“We can take ‘em out together—”

Eliot shook his head. “Nah, Circus, one of us is faster at getting across that thing you rigged and one of us is better at beating people up. Cover me from the other side. Now MOVE. I’ll follow in a
sec.” He stated it as a promise and meant it.

Clint hesitated a moment longer, eyes flicking between Eliot and the access door. “You better.” He took off across the roof and hooked the bow over his makeshift zipline. Eliot lost sight of him and a moment later their pursuers rounded the landing and he was distracted.

The two from below had gained a third, and whoever they were, they worked together enough not to get in each other’s way. He engaged. Three on one wasn’t too bad, as far as odds went. The next several seconds were a blur of motion and impacts, promises of bruises to come. Eliot didn’t lose himself in the fight, he found himself in it. Here, amidst the flying fists and feet of his attackers, he knew himself. Knew his capabilities. In each second he knew more of the men he was fighting as well. Recognized the pattern of blocks, the distinctive way one of them threw a punch…

“Okay that’s enough guys, they caught him on the other roof, he’s down, out, and headed to the van. Dammit Spencer! STAND DOWN.”

Eliot’s head snapped up at the familiar voice. The three men he’d been fighting instantly backed off, still wary and ready to continue if he didn’t follow orders. Behind them, a fourth man came up the stairs and into view.

“Vance? What the hell are you doing here, man? I’m undercover! And what the fuck did you just do to my partner?”
“So you guys help people who did the right thing and now are getting screwed because of it?”

Short-ish chapter, but the next one will make up for it, I PROMISE.

A posh penthouse suite in a Brooklyn hotel wasn’t on the same level of opulence as one across the river in Manhattan, but it was enough to bore Kate the moment she followed Hardison and Parker through the door.

Eliot brought up the rear, taking a quick survey of the hallway before he shut the door and deadbolted it. He proceeded to make a circuit of the suite and checked the windows and the balcony before settling, arms crossed, near the sofa in the center of the room. Even accustomed as she was to the security precautions and paranoia of both the super-wealthy and super-heroic it seemed like overkill, as did the hotel room itself.

None of them had come from money, that was obvious, but all of them seemed to react differently to having it. Eliot, in his sweatshirt and beanie stuck out like a sore thumb. Parker was unbothered, as far as Kate could tell, but she had no confidence in her ability to read Parker at any given moment.

Hardison had clearly embraced it, and Kate was willing to bet he’d been the one to choose their lodgings. “C’mon girl,” he practically pleaded, “it can’t be every day you are in a penthouse suite in one of the fanciest hotels in the city.”

Kate shrugged. “Grew up in rooms like this. Lots of them, when I wasn’t in boarding schools.”

Parker glanced at her distrustfully. “You have money?”

“Hey, watch it with the judgy! You clearly do to.”

“Pssh, of course. But I earned it.” She executed a neat forward tumble over the arm of the couch and ended up laying face up, smiling that weird smile of hers.

“Parker, you stole it,” Hardison and Eliot said in unison.

“That’s a form of earning,” she said indignantly. “I worked harder for it that she did.”

Kate’s jaw clenched. “Look, you know nothing about me, or my family, and I’m not here to talk about me and my family in any case. They have nothing to do with this.”

“Nah, you’re here to talk about your boyfriend with the epic mood swings,” Hardison muttered.
Before Kate could say anything, Eliot jumped in. “He’s not her boyfriend, man, don’t make it into that.” Kate arched an eyebrow at him. He shrugged. “Not everything’s about that.”

“Sorry,” Hardison offered. “Why are you here?”

“Let’s start with why you’re here.” Kate folded her arms. “I believed you when you said you weren’t after Clint, but I still don’t get what you do? How does this even work? You said you were criminals.”

Parker groaned in frustration. “Well yeah, the good ones.”

“You just said…or rather they just said you stole all your money!” Kate folded her arms.

“Yeah, but we steal it from bad guys.”

“Wait, what?” Kate was beginning to regret ever going back to Clint’s, not to mention following the maybe-good-bad guys to their penthouse. Did good guys live in penthouses? Well, besides Tony Stark? And he’d been a weapons dealer before. Ok, so reformed, formerly iffy-on-the-subject-of-morality people may occasionally inhabit penthouses. Kate knew a whole more of the sleazeball variety though.

Eliot broke in, trying to mitigate the confusion. “We don’t charge our clients. In fact, usually we end up giving them money. We offer our…skill sets…to people who were taken advantage of. People who did everything right and some big corporation or millionaire uses them. We help.”

“We provide leverage.” Parker finished off, instilling the last word with weight.

Kate stared at all of them. “You guys…play Robin Hood?”

Parker giggled. “You’re the one with the bow and arrow. But yeah.”

Kate nodded and then looked at Eliot. “But you didn’t always.”

He shook his head. “None of us were what you’d call law abiding citizens, no.”

Parker indicating each of them in turn, beginning with Hardison: “Hacker, hitter, thief,” she pointed to herself.

“What made you change?”

“An honest man.” Eliot said it with a finality that meant there was a whole bunch of history there that he would not be getting into.

Kate desperately wanted to ask about the other history Eliot was avoiding getting into, but he still hadn’t relaxed, had barely moved, since they first came in.

Instead she addressed all of them, “So you guys help people who did the right thing and now are getting screwed because of it?”

“Yeah, basically.” Hardison had moved over to a table to her right, its surface covered in a chaotic array of gadgets, wires, tablets, and laptops.

“So, if I had a hypothetical friend, who tried to help a bunch of people about to lose their homes, and now he’s being threatened by the local mafia, that would be something you could handle?”

“Sure, no prob—” Hardison stopped mid-sentence. “Now hang on a sec—”
Kate put her hands on her hips and scanned each of their faces. When she got to Eliot’s, he nodded slightly.

Parker saw the gesture and instantly got up from the couch. “We need to talk. Not you,” she told Kate, and jerked her head towards the bedroom. Hardison and Eliot followed, Hardison turning back for a moment to point firmly at the couch.

Fine, no eavesdropping, I get it. Kate sat on the couch and watched the closed door.

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On the other side of that door, Eliot watched Parker make a flying leap for the bed to get extra bounces in before settling down and crossing her legs. Hardison was pacing back and forth, but slowed to shifting his weight back and forth once the door was shut.

“You told her yes.” Parker said.

Eliot suddenly felt like shifting his own feet and wished his head would stop going a mile a minute. Ever since that arrow had thudded next to Hardision— “Yeah.”

She tilted her head, birdlike. “I don’t get it. He’s a superhero. Why would someone with superpowers need us to help him?”

“Babe, he doesn’t have superpowers.” Hardison was giving him a you okay? look which Eliot ignored. “He’s human, he’s just like, well, us. Really good at what he does. But he ain’t bulletproof, he can’t fly, he just hits what he aims at. Right, Eliot?”

“He got the idea into his head he should be a superhero, and was too stubborn to ever let it go.”

“And you want to help him?” Parker’s question was softer now, but it wasn’t the right question. He’d nodded an affirmative to Kate without asking the others first, but he’d gotten it wrong. Completely wrong.

“I can’t,” he muttered. “He doesn’t want my help, he doesn’t need my help, and he certainly won’t accept my help. He can fight just fine. That ain’t his problem. You guys though – he needs you.”

He didn’t want to actually ask, go clean up my mess. It wasn’t his mess, really, but still—

“No.” Parker stated firmly.

“Parker—”

“No, that’s not how this works. He gets none of us.” Her fingers drummed on her leg. “Or, he gets all of us. That’s the deal.” She gave him a Parker smile, one of the small ones that set her eyes alight.

Eliot didn’t remember him moving, but Hardison was behind him, draping his arms over Eliot’s shoulders. “Someday, we’re gonna get that through that thick skull of yours,” he murmured, thumping his head lightly against Eliot’s to emphasize the point. It was annoying as hell and he didn’t mind in the least.

Parker, never one to miss a chance to climb on him, came off the bed to attach herself, monkeylike.
She hugged, hard and fierce before letting go, moving on to the problem he’d asked her to solve. Hardison lingered, until Eliot finally relaxed into him with a small, involuntary sound. There he grounded himself, inhaling and exhaling slowly. Once that had been his private mental ritual. Now the man at his back breathed with him and when Parker whirled back to face them, eyes burning with an epiphany, Eliot’s head was clear.

“Friend!” Parker shouted.

Clear head or not, he had no idea what she was yelling about. Hardison’s voice thrummed behind his spine, “Pretty sure went beyond that months back, babe.”

Parker stuck her tongue out at them. “Not us. Tara. Tara said she had a friend in trouble. What if it’s Clint?”

Hardison froze for a moment, then disentangled himself to dig out his cell. “Tara’s message, for the bajillionth time,” he announced. “Leaving on job. Short notice, going silent, need favor. Look into property deals of Ivan Banionis. Friend in trouble. Keep me out of it.”

The three of them traded looks.

“Are you telling me,” Hardison continued, waving his phone in the air, “that three separate people have asked us to help a guy who wants nothing to do with us?”

“Right,” said Parker. “Let’s go steal an Avenger.”
“Job was, infiltrate SHIELD training, report back procedures, command structures, equipment…” he ticked points off on his fingers, then gave up, throwing his hands in the air. “How the hell was I supposed to anticipate an Avenger in training?”

Clint desperately hoped he’d been kidnapped by SHIELD. It would mean he’d been set up and screwed over by Hill, but in the range of unpleasant possibilities looming beyond the suffocating black hood, at least it would only hurt his pride. And that was banged up pretty good already. Someone had been waiting on the rooftop where he landed, stayed hidden until he’d turned, ready to assist Eliot. He hadn’t heard them, hadn’t registered anything was wrong until the Taser hit him and he was down. He’d come to, hands bound tightly behind his back, hood over his head, as they manhandled him into what felt like a utility van. If he was lucky, he’d been grabbed by SHIELD agents waiting to see him screw up, testing to see if he would. Which, admittedly, he had. Even the lucky option here was a crap one.

But he was familiar with his brand of luck. It was more of the bargain basement variety than a high quality brand and it broke as easily as bones, a concept on his mind currently, as one of the guards out in the blackness beyond the hood kept cracking his knuckles. If it was meant to sound ominous it was working.

“They say that’s a surefire way to get arthritis,” Clint offered. “So if you’re just doing that to be threatening, it’s really not worth the damage you’re doing your hands. I mean, just think how much it would suck to be the guy who can’t punch right in a few years. You’d be out of the Goonies, like that.” He tried to snap his fingers from their position tied—very securely, nice job on the knots, guys—but his fingers were stiff and heavy from lack of circulation. Right, that would need to change.

“Goonies? Like the movie?” came a disembodied voice.

“No, you idiot,” a different voice chimed in, “like ‘goons’ but you know…with an ‘ee’ sound to make it sound stupid.”

“Hey, I like that movie!” The first ‘Goonie’ sounded indignant. Clint rolled his eyes at the conversation he’d somehow inspired, but if they were talking about movies they probably would not be punching him. Pre-arthritic knuckles or no.

“I’m not saying it’s a bad movie. It’s a great movie! But that’s not what he’s calling us.”

“Now it is,” Clint spoke up. “From now on, you guys are the Goonies. Now let’s go find some pirates. Always wanted to swing from the rigging of a ship.”

“Maybe we’ll make you walk the plank.” Goon #1 seemed quite proud of himself for that zinger.

“Shut up! Both of you.” Goon #2 shifted from somewhere to his left. There was a sound of a window sliding open and indistinct murmurs and what sounded like a gate opening. They had arrived…somewhere?
It’s somewhere relatively close, he tried to reassure himself, it’s somewhere close and Spencer is going to come after me. If only so he can beat me up himself. But he’ll come. He’s a good kid. Okay so he’s technically probably around my age, but he’s still...innocent. Even under the hood, Clint closed his eyes. You don’t deserve the people who work with you. Never listen, do you Barton? May as well still be deaf for all the listening you do. He knew something was up. But no, you were concerned with the damn dog...I wonder if it’ll go down and raid the rest of our supplies...plenty of disgusting energy bars down there. Hopefully it likes them more than we did.

He was startled out of wondering about the fate of the dog and his partner by hands seizing him and pulling him bodily to his feet. He tried to help, to seem compliant, but apparently no one expected him to play along. His and the Goonies’ combined momentum pitched him across the van, hands useless behind his back. His forehead cracked hard against the metal paneling. Light flashed behind his eyelids and for an instant sound cut out, then rushed back in, accompanied by staggering pain. He may have yelled, or whimpered, or possibly, if his autonomic systems were feeling extra obliging today, stoically made no sound at all. He was still conscious, which meant the show wasn’t over, and this was no time to seem injured.

“Geez man, take it eas—” he managed to wheeze.

“Shut it, you moron. You only get to talk when we are ready to listen. And then you sing for us, you hear me?” Clint realized too late he was about to be thrown out of the van. He managed to tuck and roll a bit as he landed, letting his shoulder take the hit, rather than another blow to his skull. It hurt like hell, knocking the wind out of him, and for a moment he was worried he’d dislocated the shoulder. A wave of nausea crashed down, but he was not going to allow himself to puke while black-bagged, so he dug the shoulder harder into the asphalt as a distraction. It worked. He gulped, trying to get a breath of something resembling air. Steel-toed boots enthusiastically encouraged him to get up and he staggered to his feet, completely disoriented, but nothing was critical yet. Okay. Definitely not SHIELD.

“You’re a very clichéd bad guy, you know that?” Why do you keep talking, Barton? His brain demanded in exasperation. His brain sounded a lot like Spencer. Because bravado and bravery are the exact same thing to the other guy, he answered himself. And if I have one, I might as well have the other.

“Who says we’re the bad guys?” The voice grunted almost conversationally.

“Good guys don’t tend to kidnap people? Not to mention the lovely accessories.” He shook his head to indicate the hood. OW. Okay, possible concussion coming right up. Shoulda clued in at the nausea.

“You don’t mess with the classics,” the Goonie said and left it at that.

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“Look, Spencer…” Vance began.

“No, you look! What the hell is this? Some kind of prank? And what the fuck are you doing, grabbing my partner? I’m gonna need to do some serious lying to explain this,” Eliot realized remotely that he was yelling louder than was probably wise.
Vance realized it too. “Will you shut up? God, who’d have thought you’d get so attached.”

Eliot fell silent, and tried to slow his breathing. Yelling objections to an S.O. was more Clint’s style, but it apparently had rubbed off on him. “Why are you here? And who are these guys?” he ground out through clenched teeth, jerking his head to the three men now standing behind Vance. Two of them he’d fought downstairs — he could tell by their rapidly bruising faces, and the way the big one held himself gingerly. They stood with Vance, relying on him to do the talking and Eliot shoved away a worm of jealousy as he faced all of them. This stunt was a textbook Vance move; throwing a wrench in plans to see what would shake loose. It was just that usually Eliot was on the other side, by his side.

“Hey, I had to use guys you wouldn’t know, and I couldn’t let you in on the plan.”

“Is my poker face that shit?” Eliot demanded. “I coulda killed one of them!”

“Briggs, Gutterson, Bennet.” He pointed to each of the men, starting with the linebacker Eliot had collided with earlier. Gutterson offered a little sardonic wave, but otherwise they didn’t say anything. “They’re newer, but they can hold their own, and if they weren’t, then I would have relied on that poker face of yours. Which ain’t half bad.” He offered Eliot a shit-eating grin, which, in other circumstances, he’d have returned. Right now, he wasn’t in the mood.

“Great, good to know there’s something you don’t have a problem with, unlike how I do my job.”

“Look, this wasn’t my idea!” Vance shrugged, hands spread innocently. “Orders came from above both our heads. You know how many chains you rattled, making friends with a fucking Avenger?!”

Well, that made sense, though it still seemed like the kind of cowboy stunt Vance would pull.

“Job was, infiltrate SHIELD training, report back procedures, command structures, equipment…” he ticked points off on his fingers, then gave up, throwing his hands in the air. “How the hell was I supposed to anticipate an Avenger in training?” By the end of the sentence it had lost much of its original heat. It was a relief to admit how out of his depth he’d felt — and know Vance would understand.

“Yeah, you fell on a hell of a goldmine there and man, I know you were doing your best to extract info, but you got jack shit.”

That stung. “Let’s see you do better.”

“With that clown? I’d have him singing from the trees by now.” He glanced over to the edge of the roof. “Hell, if you’re done bitching and we can get a move on, maybe I’ll have a chance to ask a few questions before you play the knight in shining armor.”

So that was the ploy. Anonymous merc-types grab the mark, in this case a certain Avenger, take him to some abandoned building, beat the shit out him, and his faithful partner comes charging in for the rescue, and they escape by the skin of their teeth. Their bond is solidified, any lurking suspicions overcome, and information is shared freely. It could work. It could also backfire spectacularly; Eliot did not have any confidence that a plan involving Clint Barton would go off without a hitch. The idea that Clint would spill something either accidentally, or in desperation during his interrogation was ludicrous. He’d run his mouth like a wise-ass sure, but he wouldn’t give them anything of substance, of that Eliot was confident…and proud? But Vance calling him a clown—

“You got access to my reports? Thought those would be above your paygrade.” He finally started
moving, allowing the others to turn and head back down the stairs. Vance fell in step beside him and Eliot could not decide if having him there felt right, or entirely wrong.

“I talked them into it, said if I was gonna take a team in for a shake-up, I needed to know what kind of superpower shit I was dealing with.”

“He doesn’t have superpowers. Less you count being really annoying.” Eliot grunted.

“What no x-ray vision?” Vance sounded actually surprised.

“No, man, that’s a myth. He’s just a guy who’s good a hitting targets.”

“From your reports, he sounds like a walking disaster.”

Eliot hesitated. He considered telling Vance how off his early assessment was, how Clint deliberately messed with people’s expectations. “Okay, so he’s that too.” Which was not a lie, exactly.

They piled into an unmarked jeep, Vance driving. Eliot took shotgun. The other three crammed in the back and said nothing. He wasn’t sure if it was his scowl or his status as Vance’s protege that kept them at bay. He didn’t much care. Vance was railing on about the Avengers, a bunch of civilians with far too much power of one kind or another, putting people in danger with their antics. It was a familiar spiel — just because Vance liked to toss the rule book out the window and grab anyone whose skillset benefited him, did not mean he approved of other people doing it. Especially if those other people had the capability to destroy entire city blocks. Eliot agreed with him, or at least he had. Now, he seemed to have acquired a tiny Clint-voice in his head, arguing the points and pointing out Vance’s hypocrisy. But Eliot kept his mouth shut as they sped through dark streets until they hit an industrial area. Shabby and rundown, he doubted that anyone who happened to see anything would bother calling the cops. They pulled up to a chain link gate, and the guard on duty hauled it noisily open, waving them in.

“They want him,” he jerked his head at Eliot, “upstairs for a quick debrief before the fireworks.

“Where’d they put our guy?” Vance asked casually.

“Basement, but you are not to go near him—”

“—Try to ruin all my fun, don’t they?” Vance cut him off, before the guard could finish the sentence. If the look they exchanged was telling, Eliot had no idea what it was talking about.

“C’mon, let’s get this over with,” he growled.

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Clint was hauled up a few steps, down a possible hallway, and then down a lot of steps. *Whoever says they count these is lying. I kept track of turns on the way here, for all the good I see that doing me, but no one counts stairs they are being dragged down.* He was very certain he’d ended up in a basement. Basements have a particular smell. Then again he’d spent the last two days in a basement. Maybe the smell was just exuding from him. *Blech.*

Finally, they shoved him onto a hard metal chair and the hood came off. He instantly wished
they’d left it on. A bright light shown directly into his face, effectively blinding him and doing nothing nice to his abused head. From beyond the light a different, softer voice spoke. “We are looking for information. If you cooperate, you will be set free. I will not bother to threaten you with consequences. Just be assured they exist.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “Look I get it. You’re the big scawy bad guys. Vewy vewy scawy. But seriously, could you be a little more original? Th-UNHF—”

From out of nowhere a baseball bat smashed into his ribcage. The first breath he took in confirmed that they’d at least cracked one and he had no doubt they wouldn’t hesitate to crack more. Well then. “What do you want to know?” he panted, trying to keep his breathing shallow.

“The identities of the Avengers. The identities of those who run SHIELD. The whereabouts of your former ally, the Russian spy known as The Black Widow.” The voice listed out the demands in a measured, almost lilting tone. Clint realized he wasn’t sure if the speaker was male or female. Not that it mattered. He didn’t like them regardless. As if he’d give them shit.

“You guys having a wedding? Need to write invites? I’ll deliver them myself. Seems safer for you, really. Dangerous bunch you’re planning on invi–” the bat slammed into his upper right arm. It took a moment for him to gather himself. ‘Can you take a punch?’ Spencer demanded in his head. Sure, ol’ Barney’d taught him how to take one, or more than one, which was often the case in their house. But he was done being a punching bag and done being rescued. Yeah, I can take a punch. Can you?

He somehow knew the bat was coming down again and flung himself in the opposite direction. If he got any chance at getting to his ammunition, he was going to want that arm. A shadow came at him and he stayed low and spun, kicking out a leg and laying out his primary attacker. The light was still blinding, but now he had a wall to his back and whoever came at him was going to have to enter the light. His left looked clear and he dropped and somersaulted in that direction. Ow. Ribs. OW.

He heard a gun bark as he went down and a bullet punched into the wall above him. Finally. A direction to aim in. At least if his hurried analysis of the sound was correct. As he came to a stop, his hands scrambled at the ropes and wincing at the thought, he dislocated his left thumb. Make fun of the circus thing all you want Spencer, how many contortionists do you know? It hurt like hell, but his right hand was free and his vision was adjusting away from the light.

They’d searched him for weapons, but they hadn’t bothered empty his pockets of random crap, just made sure he didn’t have a blade. He did have loose change. And a few other goodies in some hidden pockets because pockets were the best.

“Mr. Barton. Return to your seat, or you will regret our next course of actioAHHHH!” A quarter came to his hand first and he flicked it HARD in the direction of the voice. Now it was the speaker’s turn to be cut off in pain. Think several steps ahead. He dropped a split second before the gun barked again. By now he was pretty sure they didn’t actually want to kill him. Or his luck had gained some value. Whatever. He did not want to stick around to figure out which.

Someone closed with him before he noticed and got in some powerful punches to his face and head. He swore he heard the guy grunt, “Hands work just fine, Goonie.” Good for him. Bad for Clint; he was definitely going to end up concussed.

What turned out to be less good for Goon #1 was that in his eagerness to prove his hands were up to snuff, he’d holstered his gun. Clint’s hands didn’t have much to do while his face was being beaten to a pulp, and he fumbled and scratched till he got it and pressed it into his attacker’s
sternum. “I can hit you from across a football field. Wanna guess my odds at this range?” he choked. Blood in your mouth really gets in the way of good threats.

He spat the blood and forced the much larger goon to his feet using him as cover. “Now I’m a SHIELD agent, and a SHIELD-ED AGENT,” he called out, unable to resist. “Now, I don’t know if you value…” he paused, “hey, what’s your name, Goonie?”

“Brian.” Goon #1 muttered. Bright enough not to give him a useful ID, then.

“I don’t know if you value Brian’s life, but all I wanted to do today was feed a dog, so you can imagine how I feel about the way this day has gone.” He sighed. “And in case it isn’t clear to you by now, I have no intention of naming names.” He was pretty certain Goon #2 was in the darkness somewhere, waiting for a chance to jump him. The Voice didn’t seem like the sort to be armed, but just because they hadn’t done anything yet, didn’t mean shit. Ok, Barton, you’ve bought yourself a corner, a gun, and a hostage. Now what?

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Once they were inside the gate, Vance pulled up to the front of an old brick building and stopped the jeep. “Used to be some sort of small- scale manufacturing joint. Commander’s in the office up the stairs. Your friend is in the basement.” He gave a quick, dangerous grin. “Wish I could go down and play.”

“I heard your orders, remember?” Eliot muttered. He was being goaded, he knew, but that didn’t make it easier. It was hard enough not thinking about this predicament from Clint’s point of view. It’s not like his role in this crapshoot would be explained to him. So he’d run his mouth. He always ran his mouth — the guy could not shut up — dammit Barton why don’t you ever shut up? They won’t hit you as much if you don’t annoy them. The guy could goad anyone, Eliot swore he did it on purpose, did it to prove some kind of stupid point, to himself and to the world at large that he could take whatever punch it threw. Well, Vance hit hard, harder than Eliot usually, and Eliot found himself secretly relieved that Vance was forbidden to participate in the interrogation, for whatever reason.

Of course this was Vance, disobeyer of orders whenever possible. Probably best to salt the earth. “And it’d be a bad idea anyway. I told him a bit about you, once when we were talking partners.” He shrugged. “Wouldn’t want him putting two and two together.”

“You think he’s capable of that?”

It was Eliot’s turn to flash a dangerous smile. “He thrives on people underestimating him.” He turned and entered the building, only glancing around briefly at the dusty chaos of a place that had clearly been abandoned long ago. He could see a door across the room labeled “Basement Access,” but he headed instead for the metal staircase up to a small office overlooking the main floor. He knocked before entering.

“Come in, Spencer,” an even voice called out, and he entered a musty smelling office that had clearly seen better days. Behind a scratched metal desk stood his C.O., Goodwin. She held an ice pack over one eye, but somehow still managed to look entirely composed.

Eliot ignored his curiosity and offered a crisp salute. “Ma’am.”
“Spencer.” She stepped over to the desk and sat down. “I take it Vance explained the situation to you?” A note of frustration managed to creep in to her even tone. Interesting.

“All due respect ma’am, but I’d appreciate a little warning the next time I’m about to get screwed.”

She gave him a level stare for a moment before allowing the façade to crack further. “As would I, Spencer, as would I.” Setting the ice pack down, she sifted through the files on the desk, opening and glancing at the contents of a report before turning her attention back to him. “You must understand, your selection was not anticipated. We submitted a number of candidates to SHIELD, and were confident one of more of them would be elected for training. You were not on that list.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Vance submitted your application himself. He was not authorized to so. He’d previously recommended you for the mission, however I and my superiors had reservations. You were deemed too anti-social for undercover work.”

He shifted his weight slightly, off balance. “W-why did you go forward with it then?”

“You were the only candidate chosen. Considering the goals of the infiltration, it was clear to my superiors that Vance had a better eye for what SHIELD was looking for.” There was true venom in her tone now. Vance had played her, played them both, quite effectively. Eliot could see why; the man could not bear to let an opportunity slip away.

“I’m sorry ma’am, I didn’t know the circumstances. Just that he’d recommended me and I had been accepted.”

“I believe that. In part because, while you lie well by omission, Spencer, I still question your ability to lie directly to someone’s face.” Her eyes, one swollen and bloodshot, bored into his. “And now your abilities will be put to a greater test than I would prefer.”

“Yes ma’am.” Eliot said carefully. He couldn’t fault the honest assessment, only attempt to do better.

“Other parties with a vested interest in our little undertaking were,” she paused for the appropriate term, “intrigued by the possibilities provided in your befriending the Avenger.” She stood, leaning forward on the desk. “Let me be perfectly clear. I believe the instigation of a catch and release at this, or any stage of this operation, is reckless and needlessly endangers you and this mission. I was overruled.”

“The plan was Vance’s?” He already knew the answer, but her curt nod told him plenty about how little control she’d been given. Vance had made friends with someone upstairs, that much was clear. “Permission to ask a question, ma’am.”

“Granted, Spencer. I appreciate you keeping up the pretense I am still in command here.”

They were both pawns, he realized, and gave her a small smile that hopefully showed he understood. “What happened to your eye?”

“Your reports certainly were certainly not exaggerating his skill with projectiles.” She picked up the ice pack again.

“He got loose?”

“He’ll have been contained by now. I’ll return shortly to continue the interrogation. I forbade
Vance to do it, as I’d like Barton to actually be able to walk out of here, and I do still have that much power at least.”

“How’d he get you?”

“I believe it was a quarter.” She answered with a sigh. “He was searched when Vance took a team to pick the two of you up, but loose change was apparently not a concern.”

Of course. What would a guy do with a quarter and his hands tied? They were only planning on keeping him a few hours. Except Eliot had every confidence that Clint could slip handcuffs or rope, or whatever they’d used. And if they hadn’t removed loose change from his pockets, then they hadn’t done a careful enough pat down to find Clint’s “toys.” Instead they’d thrown him in a basement, threatened him, roughed him up, and told him it would be best for him to betray his friends. They were cutting fairly close to the point where Clint would stop playing nice, and he already had plenty of justification to do some real damage. And if he was still loose, he might escape that basement and whoever was tasked to guard him at any moment. And up the stairs in plain view through the window was his “partner” having a polite conversation with his kidnappers.

“He’s got explosives.” Eliot snapped. “Trick arrowheads. He keeps them in hidden pockets. If he hasn’t gone for them yet he’s playing nice — or he doesn’t want to bring the building down on his head, but believe me, the guy’s crazy enough that he might, you get him in a corner. Not to mention, he gets out of there he’ll see me.”

She nodded briskly. “Well, then you best hurry. And Spencer?”

He turned back, halfway out the door.

“Good luck.”
Chapter Summary

She hopped off the windowsill. “You should lock that better.”

“Better?” Clint raised both eyebrows.

“Pshh, well yeah. Just about anyone could get in that.” She glanced with disdain at the frame.

“You know, the number of people breaking into my bedroom to criticize my sleeping style is just not that high.”

*Look bed,* Clint grumbled to himself as he tried yet another variation on the same attempted sleeping pose, *I know we’re not, like best friends or anything. And I know I drop in sweaty—and bloody—and sometimes with strangers. I’m not great at keeping you clean, changing sheets, pretty sure there’s something called a box spring that I have NO idea what its purpose is, but I’m sorry I haven’t given you one…but PLEASE FOR THE LOVE OF WHATEVER, LET ME SLEEP.*

Was it too much to ask to have a place to crash on his day off? That was how this all started, before it spiraled into mafia bros and red-headed women, real estate conspiracies and hit men. Before dogs had been hurt, people had been killed, and the past showed up on his doorstep. All he’d wanted was a cheap spot to pass out between missions. Not like he was home much anyway.

But Grills’d knocked on his door when he was fresh off a mission, busted up and dead tired. Invited him to come up to the roof and wouldn’t take no for an answer, didn’t even seem to understand the concept. He’d gotten food and a beer and a misnomer of a nickname. No one seemed to care much what he did the rest of the time, if he was in the building he was welcome on the roof. Things had been okay.

Generally, his job boiled down to stopping megalomaniacs from trying to take over the country, world, solar system, galaxy, universe, or multiple planes of existence. Why would anyone even want to rule the world? He’d blustered his way into running an apartment building and *that* was kicking his ass. Did they think they could fix things? Fixing shit was never that simple, especially after breaking all of it first. This. This building, this situation, those two kids and their mom not losing their home. That’d seemed fixable. Good use for ol’ Barney’s money, giving two boys their home back.

Now Grills was dead. Simone and her kids, and everyone else in the building was only safe till the tracksuits got up the nerve to kill him. Kate was halfway out the door and he kept shoving her out in spite of himself, and maybe it was better that way, but now was a hell of a time for *Eliot Spencer* to show his face in Bed-Stuy.

Where’d he and his friends fit in? Normal people have an arrow land next to their head, they get scarce quick. With questions, sure, but they ask them from far away. And that Parker girl, she was something else. He’d liked her, even when he knew she couldn’t be some random girl who liked rooftops and dogs. She’d been about as surprised by the bow as he was by her rappel gear.
So why the hell’d I invite them over? You just look at a bad idea and think, yeah, that’s the one. I’ll invite over the guy who betrayed me. See if we could be friends again. That’ll definitely work.

He’d wanted to see if the person he used to think of as a friend had changed. And he had. Still looked like Grumpy Cat, but he’d been looser than before. When did that happen? Even Nat had lost track of him for a while, but every so often Eliot would resurface, flagged in her web of contacts, usually working for some big league shadow-y type as their hired bulldog. Their very effective bulldog. Meanwhile his life had gone to shit, and the last time he’d bothered asking Nat, she hadn’t shared much. “Figuring stuff out” could mean a lot. I thought it meant I wouldn’t have to put an arrow through him one day.

Was I wrong?

Parker left Eliot and Hardison at the hotel talking to Kate, getting details and providing her with what they currently knew. Which, admittedly, wasn’t much. She listened to their bickering overs the comms as she walked back to Clint’s building.

“Look Eliot, when I said there was nothing online, I mean NOTH-ING. I can’t hack what ain’t there, and Ivan seems to be playing old school. It’s a thing now. Crime bosses are going back to analog, keeps them from being spied on or hacked.”

“So you basically caused the mess we’re in?” Eliot’s tone held standard irritation levels, which Parker took as a sign he was back to normal, and breathed out a sigh of relief.

“Oh sure, blame me for criminals going back to ledgers in safes. I’m not the only hacker around, Eliot!”

Poor Alec. This had been his pet project to begin with; a quick favor for Tara while she was out of town. And somehow it had spiraled in directions none of them had anticipated. She was supposed to anticipate complications. Would Nate have seen this coming?

But ledgers in safes, that she could do. Such a misleading name, “safe”. It applied to nothing and no one, but people tried to use it for anything and anyone. Safe, safe, safe. Safe places, safe people, safe safes. All were temporary measures at best.

She tuned out the rest of their argument and Kate’s interjections, coming to a stop in front of the disputed apartment building and studying her options. It was old enough that vents weren’t a viable access point, but fire escapes and roof access would do just as well. Moving closer, she found the puppy curled up on the front stoop, eliminating the need to scope the building further. Shame. She still got to handle the puppy, which whimpered softly in its sleep, paws twitching. Hardison had quickly come up with a smaller bug and hidden it behind some adhesive ribbon. Easy to hide on the inside of the collar and much harder to detect. Parker returned the sleepy puppy to its spot, and watched as it curled up again. Was Lucky asleep upstairs? Clint? She clicked her teeth together in a specific rhythm, then, ignoring the outburst on the other end of the earbud, pulled it out and stuck it in her pocket. She glanced at the fire escape, easily leapt and caught the bottom and started to climb.

She loved fire escapes. The newer, concrete interior ones offered an easy out, but the old metal
skeletons hugging brick walls gave an easy in; a glimpse into a person’s private world. She climbed silently, not a simple feat on the creaking structure, and paused to listen, look, and smell. Incense, cigarette smoke, a bit of weed in one apartment, a crying baby and a mother’s lullaby in another. Soft guitar music with stops and starts; someone was practicing. The sound made her think of Eliot, who still mostly got out his guitar in the dead of night, when he thought she was asleep, and would go down to the restaurant and play quietly. A woman’s voice rang out in that no-nonsense tone Alec’s Nana still lectured him in, “You boys, clean up those blocks and get back into bed, I tol’ you to go to sleep hours ago.” She smiled and moved on.

The lock on Clint’s window was unimpressive. Easy to jimmy that open. The window frame creaked as she slid it up, but he didn’t turn toward her. Hearing aids probably out then. Clint flopped a bit and punched the pillow, while Parker watched from the windowsill, amused. A few moments later, Clint turned, saw her, yelped, and fell off the bed.

Her amusement faded when he came up pointing a gun at her. “Woah, hey now.” She held up her hands. “I’m just here to talk.” The words wouldn’t make a difference, she realized, but enough of the streetlight outside filtered in to at least give her a silhouette. Somewhere in the darkness Lucky whined.

Clint hesitated, then fumbled for the bedside light. The glare blinded her for a moment but when she could see again, Clint still had the gun trained on her. Perhaps taking out the earbud hadn’t been the best idea, but despite the way they’d left the apartment, she didn’t think he’d actually hurt her. He was scared. That was okay, she knew about scared. “I thought you were in the ‘no guns allowed’ club with Eliot.”

“Not a favorite weapon, but easier to store under a pillow than a bow. You know, in case someone comes in my room in the middle of the night to kill me.” His eyes flicked to the window behind her and back to her mouth.

“Not why I’m here.” She kept her hands up, open and unthreatening.

Clint studied her for another moment, but then flipped the safety back on and dropped the gun between them on the bed. He rubbed at the hair sticking up everywhere. “Then what are you doing here? Aside from doing the creepy ‘watch me while I sleep’ thing. Cause that’s never a good sign.”

Parker wrinkled her nose. “Oh please, you are not the first person I’ve watched sleep. You’re really terrible at it though. Like, AWFUL.”

He yawned and shrugged. “Well, sorry for the terrible performance, weird girl in the window. I’ll be sure to improve my ability to remain unconscious next time.” He eyed her and sighed. “You’re not going to leave, are you?”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” she hopped off the windowsill. “You should lock that better.”

“Better?” Clint raised both eyebrows.

“Pshh, well yeah. Just about anyone could get in that.” She glanced with disdain at the frame.

“You know, the number of people breaking into my bedroom to criticize my sleeping style is just not that high.”

“Mafia guys living in your building don’t worry you?” She folded her arms and stared at him. Most people got unnerved by the full on Parker stare. Clint just watched her face till he was done lip reading, then snagged his aids off the table by the bed and shrugged as he put them in.
He looked around his floor for what turned out to be a pair of ragged jeans. “Want some coffee?” He pulled on the pants and headed for the staircase leading down from the loft. Lucky heaved himself up off the rug with a sigh and followed him, stopping to sniff at her hands.

“Eliot says I should never, ever, ever be given caffeine. For the sake of all mankind. And it tastes gross, so he won that argument.” Sort of. Hardison had introduced her to frappuccinos immediately afterwards.

The banister called to her and she considered resisting temptation, but instead ran forward, beat him to the stairs and slid down the railing, landing in a neat crouch on the lower floor. Clint kept trudging down the stairs, unfazed. Sophie had taught her to watch how other people reacted to her behavior as an indication of the way the other person thought and how they’d respond to other actions or stimuli. Well, she supposed she now knew Clint wasn’t too impressed with people sliding down railings.

She eyed the red safe on his counter again, but found herself distracted by his coffee-making process. He grabbed a can of bargain brand, pre-ground beans, and dropped a few heavy spoonfuls on top of the old grounds in the basket, setting it to brew without emptying the old coffee from the pot. Her mental version of Eliot grumbled in horror at the sight. Did that ever happen? Did they argue about coffee? Does he know how much Eliot likes to cook?

“Do you cook?” she heard herself asking without quite intending to.

“Sometimes. Grill stuff mostly. Don’t really have any food right now…less you want some Easter candy.” He glanced over and actually gave her a hint of a smile at the eager expression on her face. “Top of the fridge, I was hiding it from Kate.”

She retrieved the chocolate and perched on the counter, swinging her legs. She waited till he was leaning next to the coffee pot, a cup in hand, before continuing. “I don’t think you were fair to us earlier.” She bit off the head of a chocolate bunny and bounced the rest of it over her fingers, watching him.

“Telling a bunch of con artists to get out of my apartment?” He took another sip of the coffee, closing his eyes for a moment. “How was that not fair?”

“We aren’t grifters,” she paused. “Okay, so we are grifters, but we’re like Robin Hood grifters.” Clint choked on the sip he was taking. “You break into my apartment to tell me that I’m not being fair and then you reference Robin Hood? To an archer??”


“Fine, spoil sport. We help people who get screwed over by rich and powerful people. We con back their money. I’m a thief, Hardison’s a hacker, and Eliot—”

“I know what Eliot is.” Clint snapped.

“No.” Parker refused to raise her voice. This time when she stared at Clint, she held his gaze. “You don’t. You know what Eliot was.”

Clint sighed. “I want that to be true.”
“Well, good news! It is.” The bunny was melting on her fingers. She licked them carefully, punctuating her speech. “Eliot’s a hitter.” *Lick.* “Literally.” *Lick.* “He hits people.” *Lick.* “And when he hits them, they usually have the sense to stay down.” The itty-bitty bunny tail should go next. “He doesn’t kill if he doesn’t have to.” She nibbled on the tail and watched Clint’s face. “Sometimes he critiques guys while he’s fighting them. So they can improve. After they’re out of the hospital, in any case.” She stopped eating the bunny. “Do you believe me?”

Clint put down the coffee mug. “I believe you believe you.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t change anything, though. Now, you gonna take off?”

“Why, you going to go to sleep after all that coffee?” She slid off the counter.

“Parker…”

“Yeah, I’m going. Night-night Circus.” She headed for the windows, then paused by the target dummies in front of them. “Why Circus?”

“’Cause Spencer doesn’t have a lot of imagination when it comes to these things.” He headed over to the couch and unhooked the bow that hung over it. Clipping a quiver around his waist, he beckoned her away from the window. She moved to the side, and watched as he methodically drew, aimed, and released at the dummy targets stationed in front of it. “You know how people joke about wanting to run away to the circus as a kid?” He kept shooting. It seemed meditative, like when she would hang upside down from a ceiling, just turning slowly. Or Eliot’s breathing thing.

“Home was that bad, huh?”

The breath he let out was too sharp. “Which one?”

And she suddenly understood. “You too.” He glanced over at her then, a question and a confirmation all at once.

“How old?”

“Six.” She surprised herself by answering. “You?”

“Somewhere around there. Parents died in a car crash, so Barney n’ me…” he trailed off, looked down at the bow as if remembering its existence.

“You have a brother?”

“Yeah, thought he was dead for a while, but turns out I was wrong. You?”

*I did, but he isn’t coming back.*

Clint must have gotten the idea. He nodded and turned back to the target. “I’m guessing you ran away too?”

“I blew my house up. They could never prove it. Gas leak.” Explosions were safer ground.

Clint grinned at her, releasing the arrow he’d drawn without looking at the target. It flew true. “Very useful, gas leaks.”

“Right? Clear a building in a rush so you can go in…”

“…explain away a minor alien attack…”
“…quick and dirty way to cover up evidence…”

“…robots…” He turned back to her and asked, “So, who taught you?”

“A thief. You?”

“A carnie. Went well till I found out he was stealing from the circus and he tried to bring me in on it.” He went over to the targets and began pulling out the arrows with more force than necessary.

“Not my kind of target.” She meant the circus, but Clint frowned at the actual targets, confused for a moment. “To steal from. Rich people have so much more money. Can I try that?”

“What, the bow?” His fingers tightened on the wood. “I have to replace those windows plenty already.” It was an excuse and they both knew it. Parker was willing to let it stand unchallenged, but after a moment Clint loosened his grip and passed it over to her. “Draw weight’s not as heavy as my last one, but it’s still pretty high. I have some others if you can’t—“

Parker pulled back the string. It took effort, but it felt good on her shoulder blades. “Is this right?”

“Uh, lower your, um…” he stammered, moving step forward, his hands out to adjust her and then stopping abruptly.

Parker released the string with a snap and he winced. “Well?”

“Okay, one, don’t do that. That’s a dry fire and it’s not good for the bow.” No hesitation there. “Uh, two, you…”

“I what?” She was getting irritated. Why wouldn’t he just fix her position? Wait. Sophie’d had a talk with her about this too. The theme of the talk had been: How to Seduce a Man into Letting You Pick Every Pocket He Has by Pretending to Let Him Teach You Something. It was a good technique, when Parker remembered to lose.

But she wasn’t trying it here, and Clint didn’t seem to think she was either...she rotated the elements in her head and finally it clicked. “You’re allowed to adjust my position, I trust you.”

“Uh, but—”

“And I won’t let Eliot kill you either, even if he smells you later.”

Clint gave her the look Hardison did when she said something completely normal that he considered weird. Then he shrugged. “Okay. So your elbow’s too far out—” he came over and adjusted her stance, pointing out which muscles should feel the pull, how her feet should set, guiding her hand back until the string brushed her cheek. Around the bow, his hesitation vanished, forgotten. “You want to inhale, and then exhale before you release. For one thing it steadies you, keeps your heart rate more even. And on the inhale your lungs can be different levels of full. It’s easier to hit the same level of empty. I dunno, that might be crap, but I think it makes a difference.”

“Breathing’s important,” she agreed. Alec’s breathing was all over the place, awake or asleep; too excited, distracted, or wired to properly control it. Eliot regulated his deliberately, constantly. Sometimes she’d listen to it for hours at night, unsure if the slow, even breaths indicated he was awake or asleep. His nightmares were the only time she could be certain. “Did you ever teach Eliot how to shoot?”

Clint tensed beside her. “If I give you an arrow, you promise not to break my window?” he asked, ignoring her question entirely.
“If I hit the target, will you answer my question?” she returned.

He quirked his mouth in a not-quite smile and handed her a basic arrow, its tip almost dull. With enough force, she could probably break the window with it. She set herself carefully, attending to her posture, breathing, and sighted along the shaft. Inhale. Exhale. Release.

The arrow thudded firmly into the dummy’s chest.

Clint gave a low whistle. After a pause he added, reluctantly, “Yeah, I taught Eliot how to shoot a bow. We had some fun messing around with guns too, tryin’ to make them more interesting.” He handed her another arrow. “He doesn’t use them anymore?”

“No. Not unless he absolutely has to and I think that’s maybe been twice in the six years I’ve known him.” She nocked the arrow, keeping her focus, and therefore Clint’s focus, on the bow. “He prefers to eliminate them from the equation. Level the playing field.” She set, drew, exhaled, and released, watching the second arrow land close to the first.

“I’ve seen Spencer fight hand to hand. ‘Level’ isn’t the word I’d use. You sure you’ve never shot a bow before?”

“Not a longbow. Crossbow with a grappling hook, plenty of times.”

Clint rubbed his hip and winced. “There are times it’s best not to miss with those.”

“You missed?”

“If the rope had been longer, no. That landing sucked.”

“Do you like jumping off tall buildings?”

“Jumping, yes. Falling? No. Do that second one too much, especially when the grappling hook needs more line than I got.”

“Know any good tall ones around here?”

“In New York? Nope, no tall buildings around here.” He held up his hands in surrender at her glare. “As a matter of fact, I know a nice tall one that we won’t be arrested for breaking in to. And we’ll make your boyfriend incredibly jealous.”

“Which one? And where’s the fun in jumping off a legal building?”

“Hey, I didn’t say we were gonna knock on the front door! I just happen to know the owner, which cuts down on paperwork if we do get caught. Also, we’ll need to duck a few robots and probably some laser grids.”

Who was hooking who here? Laser grids? Oh, this was going to be the best job ever.
Chapter Summary

“Hey, Circus.” He groaned and lied. “Came to rescue you.”

Clint was pretty happy in his corner, shielded by the large bulk of Brian, but he knew he was going to have to make a move or the home team was definitely going to use their advantage. Problem was, one hand was relatively useless and the other hand was occupied playing “pin the gun to the Goon.” An important role in his continued survival no doubt, but only if he made a move fast.

He didn’t make it fast enough. Goon #2 shot Brian in the leg and Brian went down. In the corner of his brain devoted to this sort of trivia, he noted that the shot was a good one – hitting Brian in the meat of his thigh but not near the femoral artery. So they’re willing to shoot each other and Goon #2 is pretty damn good at it. He grinned. I’m better.

Clint made his first shot as he dashed for the table. Goon #2 was holding his gun in a sensible, two-handed stance and the bullet smashed into one of his hands. He yelled and dropped the gun, then dove for it with his good hand. Small caliber ammo, Clint’s brain commented. His legs kept moving. He needed to get behind the light. He needed to see who belonged to the Voice and he needed Goon #2 to be blinded trying to see him. How’s that for planning ahead, Spencer?

Behind him, Goon #2 started shooting again. Clint skidded under the table, bad hand fumbling awkwardly in one of the secret pockets. Finally, he managed to hook the arrowhead [flashbang] waiting there and pitched it in front of him into the dark recesses of the basement. He slammed his hands over his ears and scrunched his eyes shut as the arrowhead exploded. It helped, though his eyes still had vision spots and his ears were ringing as he came up to a crouch. No one was in the corner, but he spotted an access door and dove for it, suddenly hopeful. No luck. The door remained locked and solid. Whoever the Voice had belonged to had made a hasty exit at some point, but apparently locked it behind them. He threw his uninjured shoulder against it several times before giving up.

It was a dangerous waste of time. Behind him he heard movement and felt a bullet hit his side and another hit his right calf. Muscle memory and anger took over. He shot based more on awareness rather than sight. Goon #2 went down for good this time, just as the door at the top of the stairs opened. Clint fired again.

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Vance found him on his way across the factory floor. “You heading to the rescue?”

Eliot paused. “Goodwin explained the situation. You—”

Vance cut him off. “I made sure we had the best guy on the job. You’re gonna be something great, Spencer, and I’m gonna make it happen.”
His heart-rate quickened at the compliment. “And if this goes south?”

“You get out of there. People that get tossed in SHIELD prisons don’t come out again. No way I’m letting you rot in a cage.” He jerked his head back up to the office. “You won’t be taking the fall.” He handed Eliot a gun, and clapped him on the shoulder giving him a shove towards the basement as he walked away, yelling orders to start prepping to bug out. The gun would be untraceable, Eliot knew. His protection if shit really did go south. He tucked it in his waistband at the small of his back and covered it with his shirt.

He had no idea what was happening in the basement, but from the stances of the soldiers on his way, they had been told not to interfere. “Get out of here!” He snarled. “How’m I gonna pull this off with all you standing around?”

One soldier nodded, “Yessir,” then saluted and beckoned the others.

“Make yourselves useful – and bloody.” Eliot called over his shoulder and continued on.

He found the door to the basement and didn’t stop to think. If he was going to play the rescuer he was going to have to barge in and rescue.

Clint shot him. Twice.

The first shot grazed his skull and the second slammed into his shoulder. For an instant, everything went red and then black. The door, being a standard hinged variety, swung open as he staggered against it and he pitched forward. Falling down stairs is never fun, but when your partner has just tried to kill you and very nearly succeeded, it adds an extra sting. And knocks all the air out of you to boot. He could barely see Clint behind some damn bright light and for a moment lay there gasping as his brain threatened to close up shop for the day.

“Sp-Spencer?” Clint spoke a little too loud, or maybe that was just Eliot’s head.

He coughed and finally heaved in a breath. A sharp pain told him a rib hadn’t liked his method of going down staircases. *Add it to my bill.* “Hey, Circus.” He groaned and lied. “Came to rescue you.”

“FREEZE.” Off to his right, one of the soldiers assigned to guard Clint struggled upright, clearly favoring a leg, and pulled out a second gun.

*Crap,* thought Eliot. The head wound was doing funny things to his eyes even without the blinding light and he really doubted that he could shoot his fellow soldier in a relatively safe way. *This guy’s gonna ham it up. Great.*

Clint put his hands up, gun dangling from a finger. He looked beat and defeated and Eliot had no idea how he was supposed to believably get them out of here. *Guess I should take that bullet in any case.* He pushed himself to his feet and lunged forward.

The soldier, briefly confused by the change in immediate threats, hesitated. In that instant, Clint whirled and used all of his momentum to fling the gun directly into the man’s forehead. He dropped instantly.

“Sorry, Brian.” Clint muttered.

Eliot managed to stop himself before he tripped over the body he’d just been about to plow into. “I think that’s the most useful shot you made with that gun,” he remarked, briefly enjoying the rush of adrenaline that kept everything else at bay.
“I was out. Wasted my last two shots on you. Sorry about that. I hit anything major?”

“Clipped my head and got a nice solid one in my shoulder that’ll need digging out.” He pulled in a breath harshly through his nose. “I don’t think I like guns.”

“Told ya.” He turned off that damned light. “Don’t want us to be easy targets on our way up. Anyone waiting for us?”

“I took care of ‘em.” He said the lie easily. Later he’d have to come up with details, but for now that would work. “Can you walk?”

Clint spoke from the blackness near his right side. “Got shot in the calf, so take it slow?”

“Yeah, we’ll take it slow.”

By the time they reached the top of the stairs, both of them knew how many there were.

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If Clint thought getting out was a bit too easy, he didn’t let himself dwell on it. Spencer still had two good legs, so he took the lead and shoved him into the back seat of a jeep and told him to stay low. That sounded good to Clint. He had a nagging feeling he was forgetting something important, but he really wanted to go to sleep. The seat seemed like the comfy, obvious choice, so instead he crawled onto the floor and inched underneath as far as he could.

Spencer’s voice seemed to come from far away. “Hey man, I’m gonna need to ram the gate—are you even listening? Clint?!’ Spencer was always so shouty.

He let him keep yelling and decided he’d filter through it later, just listen for now. Listening was good. He knew going to sleep was a bad idea. They tell people with concussions that and Clint was certain he fell in that category. Also the blood loss.

Come to think of it, there was a lot of blood on him. Was it someone else’s? He had shot some people, including Spencer. Oh, Spencer was never gonna let him hear the end of that. He’d been on autopilot, but that was stupid. He needed to remember to look first, think first, act third.

He also needed to remember how to count.

Count…like the vampire dude on Sesame Street.

*One bullet…MWHAHAHA…two bullets…MWAHA-oh fuck I forgot about the other bullet…*

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Eliot noticed Clint semi-conscious on the floor and gave up all pretense of pretending to break out. “MOVE!” he yelled and they did.

He drove for a few minutes till he spotted an empty parking lot and bounced in over the curb. No
one was pursuing them, which he’d expected. They’d be focused on bugging out, expecting him to give them as much time as possible before calling SHIELD. Shit, he really was gonna have to lie his ass off.

Clint groaned in the back and said something about counting and Sesame Street. “Hey, you stay with me and we can watch Sesame Street,” because you don’t argue with a guy who’s bleeding bad. He grabbed the med kit in the door and went around to the other side.

“Forget a bullet…shoulda counted better.” Clint muttered.

“Yeah, I’m definitely sending your ass back to kindergarten. Put your hand on that—is your thumb dislocated?”

“Oh right, hands were tied…then things got busy,” he grabbed his left hand in his right and smoothly popped the joint back in place. “Ow.”

“You are some kinda crazy, Circus.” He surveyed the damage and did a quick size up of his own injuries. Head wound was still bleeding, shoulder would need patching up soon, but it wasn’t too bad. “You and me are both lucky they like using small caliber for interrogations,” he muttered to himself. Clint’s eyes were mostly shut and he didn’t look at all with it.

Still, be careful Spencer. You start talking to yourself and you’re gonna say things a lot more incriminating than rambling about Sesame Street.

“I’m a GREAT kinda crazy,” Clint argued. Of course he’d argue.

“Yeah, how so?”

“Made the interrogator shut up with a quarter in the eye. At least I assume that’s where it ended up. Couldn’t see nothing.”

“That’s pretty impressive, man. What did she want to know?”

“Wanted me to name names. Avengers, SHIELD people, uh…others…” He fell silent until Eliot probed a bit too hard and he had to bite back a yell. From what he could tell, the round hadn’t managed to pierce through his abdominal muscles to the organs beneath. He took a breath, exhaled, and pulled it clear. Clint made a low, harsh sound.

“Got it. Just have to do your leg now. They get you anywhere else?”

“Slammed my head, cracked some ribs, minor league stuff.” He looked worried. “Are you ok? Pretty sure you aren’t supposed to shoot your rescuer.”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. We need to move soon, just in case.”

“Walmart. Walmart’s a good place to hang if you need a place to lie low. They don’t kick people out of the parking lot and the 24-hour thing would be handy right now. You get juice and crackers when you give blood right? I want my juice and crackers.” He still seemed out of it, which made Eliot both relieved and a bit worried.

“Sounds good, man, let’s hit up Walmart.”

Clint smiled at him, punch-drunk, eyes half lidded. “You aren’t arguing with me. That means I’m dying, right?”

“Prefer to argue with someone who isn’t muttering about Sesame Street.” Eliot grunted
noncommittally.

He found the nearest Walmart and left Clint in the backseat after making him promise to stay conscious. Taking the medkit with him and managing to avoid the greeter lady, he headed straight to the bathroom. Digging a bullet out of yourself is never a fun exercise, but at the moment he had some doubts about even Clint’s aim and besides he needed time to think.

Next would be the hard part. They needed to call for an extraction, contact SHIELD, explain what happened. He was going to have to explain breaking in and out of that factory, while injured, with an injured man. It would have been swept, but still it sounded ludicrous. Eliot knew he was good and he knew SHIELD knew it too. But the jeep had no dents, and neither would the gate. Hypothetical blood could be cleaned up, but there was no damage to suggest a fight…except in that basement. He could make getting in sound likely, but getting out he’d panicked. He’d been sloppy.

Shit, how long could he stay in here? How long could he stall? He should have already contacted SHIELD. Clint needed medical attention beyond the slap-dash first aid he’d done back there and the longer he waited the more questions he’d have to answer. He could say he’d lost his phone in the fighting. He could’ve said they were fleeing and didn’t want to stop to let any pursuers catch up, but he had stopped, to make sure the guy he was in the middle of betraying wasn’t dying on him. There was a payphone outside; Clint had directed him straight to a phone, damn him.

God, his priorities were messed up. Goodwin and Vance needed more time; he and Clint were too close. What would the response time be for a seriously hurt Avenger? Very good, probably. Fuck.
“Listen to me.” Eliot stood up, finally focusing on Hardison. “I can’t tell that girl out there. She’ll walk. And we need her for this. Parker and Clint might have hit it off, but he won’t trust her, not like he trusts Kate.”

“She’s kinda cute when she’s asleep,” Hardison commented, his eyes on Kate sprawled bonelessly across the sofa. “But don’t tell her I said that though, or she probably will shoot me,” he added hastily and shifted a bit in his position draped over back of the armchair Eliot was sitting in, before starting to play with his hair. It was getting long again and if Eliot was in a certain mood, Hardison thought he liked having it toyed with. Not that he’d admit it. He just wouldn’t grumble about it.

Or, if he was distracted enough, he wouldn’t even notice.

“Yo, Earth to Eliot…” He tapped Eliot’s head a few times, upping the annoyance factor until Eliot jerked his head away.

“Dammit Hardison, stop that.”

“Come on, I know you weren’t asleep.”

“Yeah, but she is. Don’t wake her up.” He surged to his feet and stalked off to the bedroom, brushing his hair back from his eyes.

Hardison slid off the chair and followed, shutting the door behind them. “You okay, man? You’ve been, I dunno, weird.”

“I’m fine.” He said it with finality that left Hardison entirely unconvinced.

“Yuh-huh. Sure.” A thought occurred to him and he sobered. “You ain’t worried about Parker, are you? Should I be worried about Parker?”

Eliot snagged one of Parker’s hair ties of the bedside tabled and pulled his hair back. “Nah, she and Clint hit it off earlier.”

“Yeah, but then he realized you were in the alley. And then he invited us back to his place. And then he kicked us out. What I’m sayin’ is the guy’s a bit unpredictable. And Parker took out her comm. So I have nooo idea what’s goin on.”

“She’ll be fine with him, quit being so antsy,” Eliot muttered, pacing over to his suitcase and rummaging in it.

Hardison glanced at his smart watch, which he insisted on wearing, even if Eliot gave him grief about it. It was a challenge, okay? He could hack just about anything with a smart phone, this was upped the difficulty level. And at the moment it told him it was well past 2 a.m. and Parker had not called. “I’m not ansty, you’re ansty.”

“No. I ain’t.” He sat down on the bed and started pulling on a pair of running shoes.
Hardison forced himself to stop fidgeting, cause two of them denying the obvious was just ridiculous. “Eliot. Seriously, chill. It’s almost three in the morning. Let’s take a page out of that Kate-girl’s book, pass out for a few hours and when Parker gets back, you can give us the backstory before we go diving into this thing.”

“Not happening.” Eliot muttered, tying the laces with more force than was strictly required for sneakers.

“Wha-what do you mean it ain’t happening. You said we were doing this. Backstory is part of this.”

“Listen to me.” Eliot stood up, finally focusing on Hardison. “I can’t tell that girl out there. She’ll walk. And we need her for this. Parker and Clint might have hit it off, but he won’t trust her, not like he trusts Kate.”

“Eliot, whatever happened, happened a decade ago.” Eliot just waited, until Hardison tossed up his hands. “Okay, okay, fine. Parker gets back, you just tell the three of us and then we’ll figure out what to tell Kate.”

“Go to bed Hardison. I’m going down to the gym. I’ll talk to Parker when I get back.”

“Hold up, you’ll do what now?” His stomach plummeted to the floor. “What the hell, Eliot?”

“Bug the balcony, record it, play it back later, I don’t care,” Eliot tossed over his shoulder and stalked out of the bedroom, and out of the suite. He’d take the stairs down, Hardison knew, and gave up on the thought of chasing after him.

“What’d I miss?” Kate asked sleepily.

“Oh, nuthin. Just Eliot being F-I-N-E, fine.”

“Freaked out, neurotic, insecure, and emotional?” She pulled herself upright, crossing her legs under her, yawning as she quoted Miss Congeniality.

Hardison found himself grinning at her recognition of the reference. “Yes. Exactly.” He held out his fist and she bumped it with a smile of her own.

“What’d he go?”

“Oh, jus’ running 30 floors of stairs, followed by punching a bag real hard, probably.”

“God, no wonder they used to be friends.”

Hardison tried to bite back a laugh and failed, though it came out sounding harsh. He snagged a spare ear bud off his tech table and tossed it to her without thinking. She caught it without looking, before holding it close to examine it.

“What’s this for?”

“Eavesdropping.” She raised her eyebrows at him in a silent question. He sighed. “Look, Eliot’s got it into his head that if you hear what he did to make Clint hate his guts, then you’ll hightail it outta here, after kicking him the balls.”

“And you think I won’t?”

“Nah, I don’t think you will, but I’m giving you the opportunity to decide for yourself.”
“Do you know what he did?”

“Nope, and he don’t want me listening in either, cause’ we’re a team. But I get it too. Parker’s kinda easier for him to talk to about shit he’s ashamed about. And he doesn’t get ashamed about much. Guilty, sure.”

Kate twisted a strand of hair. “Is there a difference?”

“Having pretended to be a lot of psychiatrists over the years, I feel I am qualified to tell you that guilt is a teacher, but shame is a roadblock, it’s just you punishing yourself.” He shrugged. “And getting anything outta Eliot is hard. Things he’s ashamed of, for that you need a crowbar.”

“For leverage?” Kate grinned, biting her lower lip.

“Ok, you know what...”

She held up her hands in mock surrender. “So you want me to eavesdrop, but you’re gonna do the honorable thing?”

“I’m hoping to prove a point. And he told me I could bug the balcony, so you bet your ass I’m doing that. And then I’m going to bed.” He paused for a moment before adding. “Look, if I just told you later, or handed you a recording, you’d have no reason to think it wasn’t edited. I am the bomb at editing A/V shit. You need to trust us, cause Clint sure as hell ain’t. So if this is gonna work, you need the full story. Straight from the hitter’s mouth.”

Parker slipped in the door, head still buzzing from her adrenaline high. It left her tired, but in a warm, comfortable way; not the exhaustion she expected from too much proximity to a person who was not hers. Clint wasn’t, but he fit, somewhere, somehow, into a larger picture she had not discovered the edges of quite yet.

She froze half-way across the room, registering the abnormal shape on the couch and the partially open curtains shrouding the door to the balcony. A brief glimpse of the shadow beyond the door reassured her it was just Eliot, who viewed sleep as a practicality when necessary, and nothing else. She took a closer look at the couch shadow. Kate hadn’t gone home, but sprawled, one leg falling off the edge, fast asleep. Someone, probably Alec, had covered her with a blanket.

She found him in the bedroom, curled in on himself on one edge of the huge mattress. Odd, he was usually the bed hog, though he’d argue she was, and Eliot would mutter that they both were and why did they always act surprised when he got up so early. She considered waking him, but there was a sharp sound from Eliot on the balcony, and she left Alec be.

The sound must have been him setting down the beer bottle he’d been holding with too much force. He didn’t glance at her, just kept staring out at the city. “Well?”

“Well what?” She asked innocently.

“You took your earbud out, Parker, we had no idea what was happening!”

“It was private, okay? And he would have noticed.” They were made to be pretty much invisible,
but she wasn’t going to test that against an eagle-eyed sharpshooter who wore hearing aids. That was just stupid.

“You guys hit it off?” It was barely a question.

“We talked, I ate a chocolate bunny, and then we went and broke into Stark Tower for some fun with preprogrammed security and BASE jumping. Nothing dangerous. Does that count as hitting it off?” Eliot muttered something underneath his breath about her definition of the word dangerous, but she ignored him, looking instead at the beer in his hand and the number of empty bottles. “You okay?”

“Better if people stop asking me that,” he grumbled in response.

“It’s just, this seems a bit—”

“This ain’t—I ain’t Nate, Parker. Jus’ needed something to do while I waited for you to get back.” He set the bottle down without taking a drink, and turned to her, giving her an actual smile. A strange one, but it classified as an Eliot smile.

“You didn’t need to wait up.”

“Yeah, I did.” He ran his fingers through his hair and she realized it was wet, like he’d come out of a shower.

She perched on the balcony railing, enjoying the bite of the wind and open space at her back. Eliot watched her, but didn’t tell her to get down and stop freaking him out. After a moment he got up and came to lean on the railing beside her. She unhooked an ankle from the railing and hooked it around his leg instead, using the motion reach over and snag his beer, claiming it for herself. The tinny sounds of the traffic below echoed up, even this late at night. So many people, so many lives. The awareness of it was overwhelming and she drew in a breath and letting it out. That simple act reminded her, and she re-centered herself on the problem at hand. “Eliot?”

“Yeah?”

She plucked at the hood of his sweatshirt, pulling it up over his head. Alec was always on them about going out with wet hair, and it was chilly out here, above everyone. “What happened with you and Clint?”

Eliot didn’t argue about the hood. “Short version: I conned him.”

“I didn’t think you did that…back then.”

“Did what I was ordered to. At the time, I was proud of that.”

“Should I wake up Hardison for the long version?”

“Nah, let him sleep. He won’t get any once we get goin’. He’s recording this.” He tapped his ear. She still had hers in her pocket, she realized, but left it there, waiting for Eliot to continue. “This was…before. Before I lost—. Anyway. It makes a difference. I made a choice.” He took his own deep breath, let it out, and began.
“Shit, Eliot, we’ve been set up.”

Last flashback! Contains a good bit of whump because I enjoy beating up Clint. Perhaps too much.

I fucked up. Again. His damn ears wouldn’t stop ringing and he couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t focus. He needed to focus. Something was wrong, he was missing something important, but he was so tired. He could figure it out later, right? He could just lie here, and not give a damn. Spencer would be calling SHIELD right now. Soon they’d be here, and he’d follow their orders. He needed to tell Maria this was his fault. Spencer was not getting punished for him being a dumbass.

Spencer. When he got back he’d yell at him if Clint passed out. He needed to stay conscious. Stay conscious. Wait for Eliot. Okay. Two things. He could do two things.

Something happened to time then, where he blinked, and twenty minutes had passed according to his watch. Crap, this wasn’t working. He needed to get up. Eliot wasn’t back yet and that was a bad sign. Had they found them? The car hadn’t moved; the yellow light from the parking lot still filtered in the window. Were they waiting outside? Who the fuck was ‘they’ anyway? None of this made any sense, but that could have been his head.

Right. Moving. He needed to move. Better just get this over with. Like ripping off a band-aid.

Clint pulled himself upright and immediately regretted every decision he’d ever made. His head roared and he finally lost control of his stomach—not a fun experience thanks to the hole in his side. Speaking of…uh, that was a lot of blood. Huh. That didn’t look good. Why’d Eliot take the bullet out, if it was in that deep?

Where was Eliot?

He’s a trainee, Clint, you idiot. He’s a damn good trainee, but he’s a trainee in way over his head, with an idiot for a partner, who shot him twice, by the way. Could be you hurt him worse than he let on. He’d do that. Shrug it off, till he was alone. You should be helping him, but you’ve been lying in the backseat of a stolen jeep moaning about a headache and some blood. Useless. You’ve got quarters, there’s a payphone by the building. Go call SHIELD and face the consequences.

Walking seemed unfathomable. He’d have to drive the jeep. Eliot had left the keys in the ignition. All he needed to do was get out, get around the car, climb back in.

Putting weight on his calf actually helped clear some of the fog from his brain, though it did nothing for the ringing. Stupid ears. He rounded the back of the jeep just in time to see Eliot walking up, holding a plastic bag loosely in one hand. Eliot froze the moment he saw him, and started to reach behind him.
Clint’s brain short-circuited to GUN! and he dodged right without thinking. His calf screamed and he went down, tumbling to the asphalt by the front of the jeep.

Eliot approached, looking worried, nothing but the bag in his hands. “Circus, man, you don’t look so good. Thought I told you to stay in the car.” He crouched down in front of Clint.

“Sorry.” Then, realizing the need to clarify, “about everything. When SHIELD gets here, don’t worry. You aren’t taking the fall for this, it’s all my fault. Shoulda listened to you.” He paused, panting. “You called SHIELD, right?”

Eliot hesitated. “Was about to. Wanted to make sure you weren’t dead.”

Clint let his head fall back against the grille. “Okay. Note for future partnerships. I ain’t a fan of extractions, but things go this wrong, especially on a training run, call in the goddamn extraction.”

He looked away, trying to keep his frustration under control. Eliot had come to rescue him, had gotten him out; driven the jeep through the gate. Strong jeep, looks like it came through that without a scratch… He vaguely remembered Eliot yelling MOVE at some point. There’d been no gunfire.

They’d been allowed to escape.

“Shit, Eliot, we’ve been set up.” The realization finally jammed his brain into overdrive, flying through a reassessment of everything that had happened since they left their post. Who were these people? Paramilitary types pretending they weren’t, relatively lax security, that interrogator asking for such vague information…

What did she want to know? Eliot had asked. She. He knew the interrogator was a woman. I didn’t know that.

He could’ve covered. Gone along with Eliot’s game till they got back to SHIELD and he had backup. Were they going back? Eliot hadn’t called them. Maybe he hadn’t dug that bullet out with the best intentions. Maybe he’d been hoping to find him dead. Maybe he had been reaching for a gun.

Clint forced himself to meet Eliot’s eyes. “Why?” he snarled.

The moment those blue eyes bore into him, Eliot knew his cover was blown and no amount of lying was going to fix this. Not that it mattered. Clint didn’t wait for an answer, lunging up at him faster than he would have believed possible, given his injuries and position by the jeep. Eliot leapt up from his crouch and sidestepped, avoiding the charge, and clocked Clint hard on the side of his head as he went past.

Clint dropped, slamming into the cracked asphalt and lay still for several seconds, stunned.

“Stay down, Circus.” Eliot snapped. He regretted the nickname the moment he said it. His voice sounded foreign and harsh.

With a groan that was more breath than noise, Clint pushed himself to his hands and knees. “Fuck
Blood dripped from his mouth and nose, spattering the ground. Eliot could see a runnel tracing down from his ear. *Shit, I hit him harder than I thought.*

Barton staggered to his feet, ignoring the blood. His movements were clumsy, off-kilter, and Eliot regretted the force of his punch, until he saw the arrowhead, an explosive one, appear in Barton’s hand. *Was this an act?* Clint rolled the device haphazardly in his fingers, listing slightly as he faced Eliot.

Vance’s gun was out of his waistband and up before he stopped to think. “Didn’t mean for it to go down like this,” he said softly, but it too sounded cold.

“Yeah, well, betrayals ‘re rarely neat n’ tidy.” Clint spat blood on the ground between them and Eliot flinched as if it had hit. “I’d know. Lived through ‘nough of ‘em.” His words slurred together.

Eliot kept the gun trained on him, trying to decide if Barton was that out of it, or just faking. He couldn’t risk the latter, not now, with no backup and his cover blown.

“’liot, put th’ gun down. Lemme take you in. I’ll vouch you n’ we’ll work this out.” His fingers still fumbled the arrowhead.

“You think I’m actually gonna fall for that crap? You think I’m that gullible? That you’re not just sayin’ shit because you botched the mission, didn’t notice you had a spy as a partner, and now your only option is mutually ensured destruction?” Eliot snarled.

“Don’t feed me crap about how we can work it out. All that’s waiting for me at SHIELD is an interrogation and a cell I ain’t never getting out of. Fuck that. You don’t get to make those promises, *Hawkeye.* You’re a failure and a joke with no power but a big mouth full of bullshit.”

The words were surprisingly easy to say, once he got going. Barton could promise all he wanted, but Eliot lived in the real world, and no ex-carny with delusions of grandeur was going to talk him into switching sides and trading the chance to do some real good for a prison cell.

He made a circuit around Barton, keeping the gun leveled on his head until he reached the door of the jeep. Reaching to open the door, he discovered the shopping bag was still in his hand. He tossed it between him and Clint. “Juice and crackers,” he muttered and climbed into the jeep.

Clint remained where he was, swaying slightly as he watched Eliot. For once he seemed to have nothing to say.

Eliot slammed the door hard, got the engine going and gunned it. In the rearview mirror he saw Clint slowly fold in on himself and collapse onto the asphalt.

He did not turn back.
“If we do this,” she paused at the slight lift of his eyebrows, “what’s your first move?” Parker spoke. “We’ll need some middle ground and some bait.”

Eliot nodded, stepping away from the balcony. Parker came with him, piggyback, and Kate found herself unable to keep down a smile. “You got a place? With a kitchen?”

Hey we've reached Part 2! Sorry for all of the ouches of the last chapter, uh hopefully now they get to make up? RIGHT GUYS?

Kate lay underneath the blanket Hardison had given her, fighting a dual battle of remaining as quiet and still as possible, while not falling asleep. Sleep had almost won out when Eliot returned to the room, his harsh breathing the only indication of his presence. Had he run back up all those stairs? Geez, dude. He disappeared into the bedroom and she heard the shower start running.

She could feel the weight of the earbud nestled in her ear, and the guilt accompanying its presence. That guilt only grew when Eliot emerged, grabbed some beers from the minibar, and headed out to the balcony, leaving the door cracked. It wasn’t until he took a drink that she realized he’d put his own earbud back in, and her heart started pounding in fear that he’d hear her breathing. But he didn’t, just sat quietly, staring out at the city, apparently waiting for Parker. It felt weirdly intimate, and intrusive, listening to the tiny noises he made and trying desperately to make none of her own. But she had to know.

Parker arrived before the night lightened into pre-dawn, going into the bedroom to check on Hardison before joining Eliot on the balcony. Kate’s lips twitched into a smile at Parker’s description of her night with Clint, but she lost the smile as their conversation continued. She couldn’t hear Parker with the same intimacy as she could Eliot—she didn’t have a comm in, apparently. Once Eliot started talking, it didn’t matter; Parker didn’t interrupt, stayed as silent as Kate, huddled inside.

Eliot talked about training, about going out on assignments, about one memorable time they’d had to chase a fugitive through Central Park and Clint commandeered two horses and assumed he’d have to teach the Kentucky boy how to ride. He talked about tiny details that Kate would never have noticed until Eliot mentioned them. She learned that “distinctive” was a catch-all phrase in his vocabulary, that sometimes he’d start a word, but pause, considering if it was the one he wanted.

He talked about Clint getting grabbed by his people. About his orders to pretend to rescue him and how quickly that had gone south once they were “clear”. He talked about hitting Clint, refusing his offer and driving away. And then he stopped. “That’s it. That’s the end.”
Kate breathed out in a rush and realized instantly that it had been audible. She sat up, meeting Eliot’s eyes through the open door. She hadn’t dared look at them this entire time, and now she could see Parker perched on the railing, arms draped around Eliot’s neck, as he stood, serving as her anchor.

For a moment, no one said anything, Kate trying to marshal a flood of conflicting impressions and emotions into an opinion. Finally, voice low and shaking, she asked, “When did you realize you’d fucked up?”

Eliot glanced over at the bedroom, rather than answer immediately. No one emerged, and Hardison’s voice didn’t come over the comms. He’d kept his end of deal and Kate decided Eliot didn’t need to know where she’d gotten the earbud.

“Still not sure if he meant what he said. Took a while to realize I didn’t mean what I had.” Neither Eliot nor Parker moved when he spoke, both watching her.

Kate got up, wrapping the blanket around her and came out to lean in the doorway, waiting, her arms folded. She’d expected fury and it was there, low and hot in her stomach, but it didn’t rise to scorch her throat and the air between them yet. “He did.” She didn’t hear the quiet ferocity of her tone until it left her lips and suddenly the anger was there, bubbling forth. “You spent all that time with him and you doubted he meant it? How could you be that stupid?”

“Hey!” Parker snapped suddenly, the first sound she’d made since Eliot had finished his story. “You don’t get to call him stupid.”

“Parker…” Eliot began, but stopped and redirected at Kate. “I had a lot of stupid ideas. Some of ‘em were mine, some I was given, free of charge. Took me ‘bout four years to start questioning them, and the past six to learn some new ones.”

Kate chewed on her lip, considering that. Ten years ago, she’d been a schoolgirl, still trying to win her father’s attention and approval, neither of which she’d ever gotten, would ever get. But she’d never have listened to anyone telling her otherwise, not then. Eliot had been older, probably a few years older than she was now, but he’d been searching for the same thing in a way, and with a better chance of catching it.

“If we do this,” she paused at the slight lift of his eyebrows, “what’s your first move?”

Parker spoke. “We’ll need some middle ground and some bait.”

Eliot nodded, stepping away from the balcony. Parker came with him, piggyback, and Kate found herself unable to keep down a smile. “You got a place? With a kitchen?”

“Yeah, and unlike some people’s, it actually contains food. Why?”

“Eliot cooks.” Parker grinned and dropped to the ground. “You should make pizza.” She told him. “Lucky likes pizza.”

“You’re suggesting I apologize to Clint by feeding his dog?” He quirked his lips into half a smile.

Kate blinked, a new appreciation of Parker’s genius. “That’s actually kinda brilliant. I can’t promise it’ll work, but I’ll help you try. Let me go do some dog-napping.”
Clint awoke mid-morning to find an apartment that was lacking in dog. It took him a while to notice the note Kate had tried to leave on the fridge — now located halfway underneath. “Aww magnets,” he muttered and bent down to retrieve the paper.

*Clint, when you decide to actually act like a person and TALK TO ME, get your ass over to my place and I’ll give your dog back.*

Clint blinked blearily at the note. “Seems a bit drastic,” he muttered. At least it meant Lucky was in good hands while he investigated something that was nagging him about this whole situation.

He opened the door to the fridge before remembering he’d been telling Parker the truth the night before. Crap, he really needed to go grocery shopping, but it was gonna have to wait. He rummaged in a few piles of laundry until he found some decent-ish slacks and a shirt that wasn’t too wrinkled, and checked to be sure he had a few different types of official ID in his wallet. Bureaucracy could take a while, but there were a few ways to speed it along.

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That evening, he arrived at the door of Kate’s apartment and, steeling himself for what was doubtless going to be a night of intense questioning from one very curious teenager, opened the door. “Kate, you really should keep that lock—” The sentence died as Kate and Parker turned around from the island in the middle of her kitchen. On the other side of the island stood Eliot, wielding a knife as if it was an extension of his hand.

Clint froze. Enough was enough. “No,” he snapped, immediately furious. “Absolutely not. You,” he pointed at Spencer, “can crash my surveillance. And you,” turning to Parker, “can spy on me while I sleep, and whatever the hell else you’re planning that’s part of the game you’re intent on running on me. I’ll figure it out eventually and then *I*’ll be the one having some fun. But leave *her* out of this. She is off-limits, you hear me?”

“Oy!” Kate glared at him, hands on her hips. “I get to decide if I’m off-limits, and FYI, you overprotective, presumptuous jackass, I followed them last night, I chose to spend the night getting to know them, I eavesdropped on a conversation I definitely wasn’t meant to hear, and I invited them over here this evening, just like I invited you! Do you think they could have conned me into doing all of *that*?”

“Pssh. Easily.” Parker commented. Eliot pinched the bridge of his nose and went back to chopping, clearly choosing not to get involved. “We didn’t,” she amended, “but we could have.”

“Still not helping, Parker,” Eliot muttered.

Kate seemed to think it was helping. “See? They didn’t.” She folded her arms and waited. Clint expected her toe to start tapping at any moment.

“Okay, first, you didn’t invite me over, you kidnapped my dog. Where is he anyway?”

“Over here,” Eliot called. “He knows the sausage pizza’s for him. Smart dog.”

“Well, duh.” Clint offered as an eloquent comeback. He didn’t like Eliot complimenting his dog, and he didn’t like his dog giving Eliot sad beggar eyes, and he didn’t like Eliot in Kate’s kitchen, and he really didn’t like that he’d made Kate mad at him before he’d even shut her front door. Dammit.
He shut the door. Kate was still waiting, and yup, there was the toe. “Okay,” he said grudgingly, “they’re here because you invited them?”

It may have sounded a bit more incredulous than Kate appreciated. “Damn straight. And we are going to have a nice dinner, and you are going to behave yourself, and if you don’t I will kick your ass back to your apartment so hard, you’ll fly straight past and land in the dumpster out back.”

He glanced at Eliot, who caught the look, shrugged, and started punching dough forcefully. Clint wouldn’t have taken him for the cooking type, but considering the knife skills and fists involved, it seemed to suit him.

In that distracted moment, Kate was hugging him, tight and fierce. Why? Parker, after staring for a few seconds too long, wandered off to peruse bookshelves, and Eliot focused his eyes downward. Kate finally pulled away, and stepped back.

“He told Parker what he did,” she signed to him, “that’s what I listened to. I needed to know.”

He nodded, signed back “okay,” though he wasn’t sure it was and asked aloud, “So where is Hardison?”

Parker stopped in front of a shelf, studying a tea set Kate had displayed. It looked as if the pieces had been broken and put back together. “Working on the actual case we were handling before you came up on our radar.”

He was tempted to call her on that bullshit, put an end to this charade immediately, and get the two of them out of Kate’s apartment. Maybe even out of their lives. But he could, sometimes, be patient. He’d lose nothing by playing along with this charade while he figured out their game. The jaunt last night with Parker had been fun sure, but it’d also given Jarvis a very good look at the thief, without her knowledge. Tony was likely missing a few toys now, but he hadn’t left anything incredibly dangerous or secret lying out. Probably. With an ace in the hole—a few of them actually, cause when did an ex-carny play by the rules—he could afford to act the part.

“…depending on the age, it could be valuable, I mean, not worth millions or anything, but I stole a sixteenth century one once.”

“Yeah, kay, don’t steal my grandmother’s kintsugi set, Parker, or you’re the one whose ass I’m kicking and Eliot better stay out of it.”

“Ain’t a fight worth having.” He pointed a floury finger at Parker. “Stop complimenting people’s things by saying they’re worth stealing.”

Parker snorted. “Can I throw one?”

“NO!” Kate yelled.

“Yeah, but only in the kitchen.” Eliot held up a lump of dough and held it out to her, as Kate adjusted to the lightning switch in Parker’s focus.

Parker grinned broadly. “Clint, you like throwing things, can you toss a pizza?”

It took him a few tries to get the movement right, but then it was flying and he caught it for the first time without punching through the center, letting the momentum of the dough guide its movement naturally. He flung it again with satisfaction, repeating the process for longer than necessary, getting lost in the task. Then somehow they were all in the kitchen, covered in flour and trying to outdo each other in pizza tossing. The circles of dough came out a bit misshapen and
lumpy, but Parker decorated Lucy’s with sausage in the shape of a bone, while Eliot micromanaged the assembly of the other pizzas, insisting on certain amounts of ingredients in specific orders, slapping Clint’s hands away when he tried to pick off some olives for munching.

By the time the food was ready, Clint was starving and conflicted. Despite himself, he still liked the guy, dammit. He should hate his guts, should have punched him the moment he saw him in that alley. Nothing about their story since then had added up. Nothing in this situation told him trust was an option.

But the guy could definitely cook. Clint burned his mouth on the first bite and forced himself to slow down. “Where’d you learn this?”

“Pizza ain’t that hard, Circus,” Eliot said with a shrug, clearly pleased. “A good guy who taught me another way to use a knife.”

“We helped him out a while back,” Parker added. “He came to Eliot for help with some nasty truffle smugglers.”

“TRUFFLES?!” Clint burst out laughing. Kate kicked him under the table.

“So uncivilized, Barton.” She rolled her eyes. “Truffles are crazy expensive — smuggling is a big problem. How did you guys fix it?”

“Tricked the bad guy into carrying a bad full of stolen truffles through customs and made sure the authorities caught him.” Parker answered, grinning. “Simple.”

“Simple? Parker, I had beginner chefs trying to make gourmet food for an entire restaurant while Russian thugs kept coming into my kitchen and trying to kill me!” Eliot glared at her. “All you had to do was sit in the restaurant and eat my food and pretend to like it!”

Parker grinned. “Yup. Simple.”

Clint watched the two of them bicker and knew that this was an old habit. That Eliot was the furthest thing from angry and Parker was actually paying a high compliment. On his right, Kate waggled her eyebrows. She’d bought into this. Kate was a sucker for a team and Clint wanted to accept them as well. But Kate thought all their cards were out on the table. She’d come from a different world, a world where the deck was stacked in her favor. But where Clint was from, they counted cards, dealt crooked hands, and kept some hidden up their sleeves just in case.

That’s enough with the card metaphors, Barton, now lay out your hand.

Clint stretched and leaned back in his chair. “So you guys came all the way out here from Portland, to help some woman who owns a building on my block?” He thought he saw Eliot tense slightly, but he wasn’t sure.

“Yup.” Parker said. “She found us online and things looked really fishy so we agreed to help.”

“And you’re only just now coming out?” He watched Parker glance at Eliot. “Cause the other buildings were sold before mine. And then I had to buy mine, and then there’s the months in between then and now. If she’d caused a ruckus about this, they would have killed her.” He winced at the thought of Grills. “These guys aren’t afraid to get their hands dirty.” He imagined laying out a card for each point. He had a nice baby straight and it was about to be crowned with an ace high. “Not to mention, I checked the city records today before I came over. No buildings that have been bought up by these guys were previously owned by a woman, least not for the past few years.” His smile was less than friendly. “Same mistake twice Spencer, that’s just sloppy.”
Eliot folded his arms. Parker glanced around the table. “Ok,” she said, “this looks bad.”

Kate laughed nervously. “Usually that’s his line. Uh Clint? Are you saying they lied to us?”

“I’m waiting for a different explanation, but it better come fast and it better be good.” Clint stared at Eliot. The other man shifted slightly, but it was Parker who spoke.

“We were asked to help you,” she said, “by a friend who wants to remain anonymous.” She looked down at the table.

“You should probably tell me who that is, now.” Clint said softly, adding an edge to his tone. He wondered if it was true. He wanted to believe it was something that simple. But he needed a name.

Parker shook her head. “Can’t. They want to stay in the shadows and I’m sticking to that. You can trust them, I promise.”

“Yeah, sorry if I don’t think that’s worth all that much. I don’t need the help of people not brave enough to show their face.”

“Oh shut up, man,” Eliot burst out. “You work with a bunch of people with secret identities who wear masks and a pretty shady and highly secretive government agency. You don’t get to call people on the secrets thing. The person who asked is a friend of ours. They didn’t mention you by name, either. Just said someone they cared about had gotten in deep shit with the wrong crowd while trying to do the right thing. And they couldn’t step in, so could we take a look. Found out later it was you.” He finally paused for a breath.

“I asked Parker and Hardison to do it without me, ‘cause I know I ain’t exactly your favorite person, but they’re set on this whole “team” thing.” He gave Parker the shorthand of a smile and she returned it, just as fleeting. “You ain’t gonna ask your Avenger buddies ‘cause you would have by now. But this thing won’t be solved by some weird trick arrows. Not only. So use some different tools. You need a hacker and thief and now you have them.” There was a long pause and he sighed. “And if you want another guy to help you hit things, I’m available.” He folded his arms again and watched Clint for his reaction.

That was quite the speech coming from Eliot. “Sure you can’t tell me his name?” It was a long shot and he doubted it would pay off, but if you don’t take the shot…

“No, man. She told us–” Eliot froze at the grin spreading over Clint’s face. It was not a nice smile. …it has no hope of hitting its mark. “Gotcha.”

Of course, “she” didn’t narrow it down too much. But it was a place to start.
“This, people, is why we don’t make cover stories out of thin air. And also why Eliot isn’t allowed to try to con Clint Barton again until gender-neutral pronouns become a widely accepted thing.”

The revelation that the trio had been working on the behalf a mysterious woman they would not name effectively put an end to dinner. It wasn’t that anyone ran away, and Clint kept his end of the bargain and didn’t even threaten anyone, it just got awkward. Sooo awkward.

Once they were gone, Kate didn’t allow herself a moment of quiet. She gathered the dishes from the table and began rinsing and filling the dishwasher. But it was a mindless task and it didn’t take long for actual thoughts to intrude.

“Way to go, Kate.” Her mouth didn’t need other people around for sarcasm. “Clint’s not about to ask for your help again, you definitely trusted those guys too fast, and now there’s a third player? Someone Clint has a history with. Great. Just great.” The dish loading took on a bit more violence. “I don’t even think I was wrong! I mean, they were working for us—sorta—without telling us all the details…okay that’s pretty skeazy. Also totally something I would do. Dammit.”

She started the dishwasher. There was leftover pizza still sitting on the counter and Kate stared at it as if it contained answers. Pizza. With answers. She rolled her eyes.

The problem was, Kate had no idea who was right. They shouldn’t have lied, but they claimed they were respecting a friend’s wishes. Clint needed their help, but he had no reason to trust them. And she could see both sides, but she’d learned her lesson and was staying out of it from now on. No matter how curious she got, interfering was clearly pointless and no one, particularly not a certain archer, appreciated her trying to help. Maybe she should go to L.A. like she’d been planning after Grill’s funeral, when Clint was being a major jackass. Whatever was going on here, it involved too much of Clint’s past. And had nothing to do with her. But. Someone should know.

Behind her TV there was a loose brick. And behind that loose brick was a burner phone Maria Hill had given to her after the whole Madripoor thing. Probably because she’d prefer Kate call rather than handle things herself, which she totally had…practically. It wasn’t as if she thought SHIELD would really help out with Clint’s iffy life choices, but maybe they’d be worried enough to contact someone who would? Kate had no idea how she would go about calling Natasha or Bobbi, but Hill, on the other hand…

No one picked up, there was just a normal “leave your message after the beep” which didn’t seem that spy-ey to her. “Uh hi. It’s Kate. Kate Bishop, um, the other Hawkeye? Anyway, the other other Hawkeye’s in trouble and he’s being stupid and I know you guys probably aren’t allowed to care about that sort of thing, but could you please contact Natasha or Bobbi because they’ll actually do something useful? Thanks, bye.” She ended the call before she could chicken out and cancel the message. She doubted it would come to anything. After all, Madripoor had actually been important to SHIELD…but this? This was just Clint screwing up on his free time.

The burner phone buzzed. “Hello?” It had been all of 30 seconds since she’d called, had they even
had time to listen to the message?

“Kate, this is Maria Hill. I listened to your message.” Well then.

“And?”

“Bobbi Morse has just returned from an assignment and is currently being debriefed. I have no doubt that any conversation the two of you may have would be fascinating, however, due to the probable nature of that conversation, I cannot let it happen on SHIELD grounds.”

“Um. Could I have a phone number?” Why would she need to go to SHIELD headquarters in order to talk to Bobbi? Phones were a thing. So was text, facetime, snapchat, passenger pigeons…ok, so those last were extinct, but still, options.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “I believe Morse will be completing her debrief in approximately three hours. I would suggest getting some sleep and offering your services as a driver when she exits the building.”

Kate considered what she was not being told. She was not being told that Bobbi was not allowed to communicate with her while she was in SHIELD headquarters. She was not being told that talking to Bobbi was time sensitive. She was not being told that this had anything to do with Clint. Wow, SHIELD was great at not saying things. “I get what you’re saying,” Kate said. “Tell her she’ll have a ride waiting.”

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Clint took off from Kate’s shortly after the other two left with greater eagerness than they would have shown if he hadn’t called their bluff. Don’t play cards with a carnie, he thought smugly, we’ll find some way to stack the deck. Of course, it hadn’t given him any immediate answers, just more questions revolving around a single clue. “She.” So not helpful. He needed to narrow that down. Jess, Kate, Nat, and Bobbi. One of them was probably responsible—hell they were all more responsible than him—but one of them was specifically responsible for asking a bunch of grifters to secretly help him in taking down these guys. Which really went to show how little they trusted him. Fair enough.

So. Jess. Jess was (rightfully) pissed at him. Jess was also unflinchingly direct. He had firsthand experience in her method of tackling problems. Hit it a few times, see if it gave in, and then hit it some more. They were probably too similar in that. He’d been hitting this problem for months and it was only getting bigger. But he couldn’t see Jess getting a few do-good criminals in on the action, while she waited in the shadows. Nope, not Jess.

Kate. Clearly had already joined forces with them last night. Also clearly surprised when he called them out. Not Kate.

Nat? Natasha used people, manipulated them effortlessly, and had a weird sense of when to step in and when to send other people in, whether they knew what they were getting into or not. She also knew about Eliot. She’d kept tabs on the hitter, ever since she picked Clint up that night, bleeding in the Walmart parking lot. He knew that the program Eliot had been a part of had lost funding, leeway, and support after what happened, knew she’d had something to do with that. He doubted she’d have called Eliot. But she’d said he was working out. Maybe she had set up this chance. Ugh.
He hated the idea of being unsure about Nat, of all people. That was just wrong.

Bobbi. If he wasn’t sure of Natasha, he was actually positive this was the type of thing Bobbi would do. She’d known the situation, been helping till a job came up, and this was entirely her style. How did she meet them? On a job? Did they know her as Bobbi? Or an alias? If I list off the 20-some alias of hers I know, will one of them hit the mark? Did she know Eliot trained for SHIELD, and what happened? He sighed, pretty certain he’d found the answer to his mystery and oh looky there came the questions tumbling after.

“Futzing hate mysteries,” he muttered to Lucky. Beside him the dog whined and flattened his ears to his skull, scenting the evening breeze. Clint glanced at him and then started a slow hyper-alert scan of his surroundings as they approached the apartment. Nothing shifted in the shadows and the evening breeze just smelled to him like garbage and the piss someone must have recently taken in the nearby alley. “Gonna point out that while I’ve got the better eyesight of the two of us, you’ve got me beat on hearing and smell, how is that fair?” His dog whined, pressing against his leg in a movement that was less than reassuring.

And yet nothing jumped them as he opened the door and started up the stairs. No one waited on the landings. The hallway to his door was silent. They entered the apartment and Lucky immediately bounded throughout the space before heading up the stairs to investigate the loft. Clint desperately hoped to hear him bark, announcing they weren’t alone and he had something to fight, but Lucky returned, ears still tight to his skull. He looked up at Clint and whined.

“I dunno, but I feel it too,” he crouched to rub Lucky’s ears and got some slobbery licks in return. “Glad to be back in the creepy apartment of weirdness?” he asked the dog as he checked his water dish. Man, he was antsy. Mostly talking to the dog to make it feel less empty in here. Which was ridiculous, because if anything it felt like he was being watched. Get it together, Clint. Can’t even tell if you’re being watched. Can’t tell if these guys are friendly or not. You need another pair of eyes on this. He stared at the phone for a long moment. Bobbi was on a job, and getting in contact meant going through SHIELD, meant explaining to Maria Hill why he needed to so urgently speak to his ex-wife that he might endanger her and her mission. Not happening. He should call Jess, but things were…weird there. Okay, then.

“Hey, Nat, it’s me. Uh, Spencer’s in town. Don’t know if you knew that. He’s wrapped up in this shit with the tracksuit guys, but I don’t know how. He wants me to trust him. So. Yeah. Call me back?” He replaced the receiver on the wall and grabbed his bow and a full quiver. Whatever was going on, this building was his. And he wasn’t leaving.

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Before they’d left for Kate’s, Hardison had requested for the sake of his own sanity that at least one of them wear a comm. Sure, Parker’s reasoning for removing hers the night before was sound: it wasn’t a risk she’d been willing to take with a hard-of-hearing sharpshooter. He couldn’t really argue with that logic, even if it hadn’t occurred to him. But if he was staying behind doing research, he at least wanted to know what was going on. And they had better bring him back some of that pizza.

Parker had agreed, wearing her hair down to cover her ears, and Hardison had listened while getting in a nice smooth groove of tracking down some difficult to trace financials. Paying only partial attention, it took him a moment to comprehend how quickly everything turned from a
friendly dinner party into a tense call-out from Clint and an awkward exit for Eliot and Parker.

Oh, they were never gonna hear the end of this.

“This, people, is why we don’t make cover stories out of thin air. And also why Eliot isn’t allowed to try to con Clint Barton again until gender-neutral pronouns become a widely accepted thing.”

He’d waited till Parker’d told him they were clear, but only just.

Eliot must have stuck his comm back in the moment they left. “Shut up, Hardison.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who just got set up like a can on a fence. He led you straight into that one, based on a slip you made decade ago. I gotta say I’m impressed.” He’d listened to the recording earlier, though he hadn’t talked about it with Eliot yet. Things were getting complicated.

“I told you. Clint Barton is very good at pretending to be an idiot.” Eliot muttered.

“Yeah, ain’t no one I know who plays that card.” He let that hang in the air for a moment before adding, “But that ain’t the only thing he’s pretending to be. Get back here and I’ll tell you what I’ve got.”

When they arrived, both still agitated from being called out, Hardison was in for another disappointment.

“You didn’t bring me pizza?” he asked in disbelief.

“Clint had just called us liars, which he’s technically right about. I wasn’t gonna stop to ask to borrow some tupperware!”

Parker opened her purse and pulled out an entire plate, wrapped in a napkin. She removed the napkin to reveal a pile of pizza slices. “Here.”

Eliot stared at the plate. “Parker, didn’t Kate specifically ask you not to steal her dishes?”

“She told me not to steal the kintsugi set. I did not steal the kintsugi set.” Parker handed Hardison the plate and he stared at it bemusedly, before snagging a rather battered slice. Regardless of the circumstances, he was not going to pass up Eliot’s cooking.

“You’re gonna return that,” Eliot told her.

She shrugged and flopped down on the couch. “Hardison, what’ve you got?”

“Remember how I talked about criminals going analog? Ditching the high tech ‘cause everyone’s got it, and going back to hard copies? While back there was an auction in Madripoor. Lots of big money shady types heading to town to buy a VHS tape.”

Eliot tensed and drew in a sharp breath. “So?”

“Rumor was, a mole in SHIELD got the tape and it showed Clint Barton, aka Hawkeye, assassinating a head of state. I didn’t pay much attention at the time, but I went back to make sure I was right. You know about this, Eliot?” Hardison wanted him to say no, as Eliot withholding information tended to not go well for them, but somehow he wasn’t that surprised by the answer.

“Yeah, I heard about it at the time. Figured it was a fake.”

“You ‘figure’ on telling us about it now that we’re getting involved with the guy? Cause there’s the official line about the Avengers and SHIELD, and then there’s the rumors. And those rumors come
with some pretty damning evidence.”

“I told you, I thought it was fake when I was offered the job, and I still think it’s fake.”

Hardison dropped the half-eaten slice back on the plate, and Parker sat straight up. “Hang on, you were offered the job? What job? The murder job?”

“No, not the—not the murder job, Parker. The retrieval job.” He looked at both of their faces. “I turned it down, we had another job at the time, and I don’t take jobs involving Clint Barton.”

“Until now.” Parker pointed out.

“Yeah. Until now. And I still say it’s a fake.” He folded his arms.

Hardison stood up, too irritated to keep still. “I’m not saying it’s not. I can’t exactly check it, as from what I can tell there was some sort of fight at the hotel, but all the security feeds are wiped, mentions online have been scrubbed extremely thoroughly, and just about anybody who’d think about talking, isn’t.”

“So how can you tell there was a fight?” Parker asked.

“Hotel put in an order for a contractor, and the contractor ordered the type of materials that spell fight-with-someone-with-delusions-about-gravity. You know, smashed windows 50 stories up, that sorta thing.” He was pretty pleased with himself for that discovery. “Now the hotel didn’t pay out of pocket for those damages, and that, along with the complete disappearance of that tape, and the lack of ripples online, is why this stinks of SHIELD.”

“So?” Eliot threw his hands up. “Of course it stinks of SHIELD, why’s it matter?”

“Look, Eliot. You’re the one who was running a covert op on SHIELD for the US government, because people were antsy about their powers and the lack of transparency. I’m just saying.” He hoped Eliot would get what he wasn’t saying, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Dammit, Hardison, why is this important, right now? It’s in the past.”

Okay then. “Yeah. The past. The past is full of shit you don’t tell me. And I’m usually fine with that. But when an arrow lands next to my head because it’s a message for past you, or when I get tossed in a swimming pool and nearly drown because of past you, sometimes that makes me feel a little less safe around you.”

He’d wanted to make the point, partially because of the arrow, partially because of Eliot’s refusal to talk to him last night, and definitely because even though Moreau was years ago now, he would never forget the instant he realized Eliot had been withholding information from the team, from him.

The way Eliot froze, he may have made the point too well. Maybe this was the wrong time and place to bring it up. He didn’t want Eliot defensive or running. Hell, he didn’t even want to hurt his feelings. He just wanted him to get it.

Eliot grabbed his wrist, forcing him to stay still. “I don’t—I don’t want that. Ever. You understand?” He seemed to realize how hard he was gripping and dropped his hand to his side.

“Then tell me shit. I get that it’s scary, but sometimes y’all push me off buildings. If I gotta do scary shit, you do to. Fair’s fair.” Eliot opened his mouth, probably to deny he was scared, but Hardison continued with a shrug. “I’m a goddamn hacker, man. I just hate not knowing things.”
Eliot nodded, still serious. “Got it. I won’t do that again.”

Parker stood up, checking back into the conversation now that Hardison and Eliot. “Can we get back to the mafia guys in Clint’s building? That’s why we’re here, right?”

“Yeah. About that. It ain’t his building.” He looked at both of the perplexed faces in front of him and nodded. “That’s what I’m talking about. From what I gathered, going down and looking at records today, he tossed a bunch of money at this Ivan guy and basically threatened him to keep out. But the building isn’t in his name, he has no deeds, no paperwork, nothing. Legally, he’s a hostile squatter. Which, by the way, is seriously going to screw with getting any kind of justice for the other residents. They trust him because he lives there, he’s a friend, and he’s an Avenger, but he’s literally got nothing to stand on.”

“So we need to steal the building he says he’s bought?” Parker asked. “Piece of cake.”

“Yeah, don’t blow out the candles yet, babe. We haven’t gotten to the murders.”

Eliot glanced up sharply. “What murders?”

“There are a number of mysterious, unsolved murders that happened in this area, dating back a few years, up to the present day. Grills is the last one. I mean, I know, it’s not the greatest neighborhood, and the cops couldn’t find any witnesses, but they did find a symbol at each crime scene. A circle with a dot in the middle and a teardrop underneath.” Hardison paused. “I was gonna ask you about Clint in relation to that, since it looks kinda like a target, but–”

“It’s not.” Eliot interrupted.

“You sure?”

“It’s a very distinctive symbol. Mark of an assassin that calls himself The Clown. He’s a ghost. Slips in, silencer, double tap, slips out. If he’s on this job, I gotta get in there.”

“Okay, you got an alias we should dust off, or do I need to whip one up?”

“Nah, I gotta go in as myself. Can’t be sure they haven’t heard of me. I won’t give ‘em my name if I can help it, but I can’t risk a fake.”

Hardison winced. Eliot had a point, a good one, but as he’d just pointed out, he had no control over real Eliot’s past the way he had control over an alias.

“How are you gonna get in with the tracksuits?” Parker got up and started a gear check, carefully going over each piece of her kit. She looked distracted. Did she realize how exposed Eliot was going to be out there?


He gave up the thought of talking them out of this. It would work out. He’d find the pieces he was missing, Eliot would come back safe, and they’d steal a building and give it to the superhero who didn’t quite buy it. “Not totally caught up yet, but they say ‘bro’ constantly.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah that too.”
“Huh?”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“DAMMIT HARDISON.”

“Do I have to spell it out?! BRO. SERIOUSLY. HUH. Basically all they say. Go be a Neanderthal.”

“Seriously??”
Clint, you dummy, don’t go out on patrol with your spidey senses tingling fit to vibrate and then get caught with your pants down. Literally. Stupid belt.

Clint, you dummy, don’t go out on patrol with your spidey senses tingling fit to vibrate and then get caught with your pants down. Literally. Stupid belt. Also, don’t tell the Parker kid you just actually thought the term “spidey senses.” Huh. You now know two people named Parker. Wonder what the rest of Parker’s name is? They should hang out. Also literally. New Parker would love other Parker’s mode of travel. I should tell her that. If I see them again. If I see anyone again.

He grunted as the van he’d been banging about in came to a stop. The sack they’d stuck over his head itched, and he couldn’t see worth a damn. Situation not ideal, Barton. Good thing you left Nat a message. At least if you die, you’ll get to watch the aftermath from a fluffy white cloud. What I have to do to earn a harp? In that Disney movie, the rooster shot an arrow using a harp. I could manage that. Maybe a few arrows at a time or an arrow for each string, draw ’em back with separate fingers and that’s like—DAMMIT BARTON FOCUS. Not that he could see a point in focusing. He knew where he was; the block with the strip club on it. He knew who had taken him, and why, and he had a pretty good idea of what his immediate and perhaps final future looked like. He was tied up—too tight to make wiggling loose an option, even with his skill set—he had a bag over his head, and his stupid pants were effectively hobbling his ankles. He was, in a word, screwed.

Had anyone seen him get grabbed? He’d left Lucky in his apartment, for the dog’s safety. Hopefully Nat got his message, or Parker decided she was still interested in the well-being of one disaster-prone Avenger and came back again tonight. May the odds be ever in your favor…great, another pop culture archer to contend with. ’Cause there weren’t enough of those lately.

The tracksuits half-dragged, half-carried him down some back hallway, celebrating the entire time. Bro, we got you now bro! You dead bro! We catch you pants down BRO! Taking a piss, yeah bro! Clint didn’t bother tell them about his belt being broken, there was no point. Loud music thumped through the walls and a few high notes registered harshly through his aids. He winced, wishing he could reach up and adjust the volume. Not really an option at the moment.

The music faded as they pulled him down a flight of stairs. Out of habit he counted them, and memorized the number of steps, and all twists and turns. Briefly, his captors came to halt to get a door open, and they dragged him inside. Shit, getting out of this one was gonna be hard.
Getting an in with the mafia guys was exactly as easy as Eliot had anticipated. Head to the strip club, get friendly with the Tracksuits, buy a few rounds, and take care of any guests that got rowdy in a brutal and effective manner. He dropped a few hints that he was looking for a job and soon found himself in the back talking with the old guy they’d seen entering the club a number of times. They’d nicknamed him O₂, because of the oxygen canister that accompanied him everywhere.

“So you want to work for us, bro?”

Eliot leaned back in his chair and shrugged eloquently. “Wouldn’t say no to a job, man, whatcha got that needs handlin’?”

“Depends.” It was almost impossible to read the guy’s expression, thanks to the ridiculous slatted sunglasses he wore. “You have particular talent?”

Eliot gave him a slight smile. The idea was to show the mark that he was relaxed, confident, and capable of handling anything asked of him. Fit in, but stand out at the same time. He’d originally intended to market himself as a bouncer and all around muscle. But if the guy was looking for something special, he could oblige him. “Yeah, I’m what you could call a retrieval specialist, bro. You want something, I can get it for you.”

“Something? What kind of something?”

“Hell, anything, if you pay enough.” He paused for a moment, then expanded, leaning forward. Sophie called it ‘engaging.’ “Everybody wants something. Some people want things. Some people want other people. Some people want information. Tonight I just wanted to see some girls dancing, but if you want something and have the cash to pay for it, tonight can be your lucky night.”

O₂ considered him for a moment. “Is accident you come into my club?”

“You mean, of all the strip clubs in all the boroughs, why’d I come into yours?”

“Yes.”

“I served in your neck of the woods. Got a taste for the girls you got, especially the redheads. Came in to see if I could find something similar.”

“Redhead means trouble, you know this?”

“Sometimes I like a little trouble. But like I said, won’t say no to a job, instead. So. What do you need, bro? Thing? Information? A person?” If they were planning to grab Clint, he needed to be prepared.

O₂ watched him through those weird slatted sunglasses. “I have person. He has information. Eventually, he die. You have problem?”

Alarm bells started going off in Eliot’s head. “You need someone killed, I can handle that easy.”

“No, I have friend who handles this. But if you get me what I need, I hire you. This man is valuable. Has information that is valuable. You get me information, I pay, then I can kill him.”
“Who is he?” Eliot had a sinking feeling he knew exactly who he was.


In his earbud, Hardison yelled far louder than was comfortable. “OH SHIT!”


“He steal from me. Among other things. He must die.” The guy’s tone remained casual, as if he wasn’t risking everything by kidnapping and killing an Avenger.


“Yes! You, bro, you understand. But he is stubborn. A lot of mouth, not much brain.”

While those people were among the easiest to interrogate, Clint was not actually one of those people. “Yeah man, I’ll get your information. I get to do it my way though. Can’t promise results if I can’t do it my way.”

“I give you rest of night. He has friends, bro. They come, game over.”

Eliot pictured Cap’s shield coming flying at him, full speed. “Better get started then. Where are you keeping him?”

People always seemed to think you needed to be a special kind of crazy to put on a costume and go out in the world looking for a fight. Who wakes up in the morning and rolls out of bed just to go get hurt? Plenty of people, that’s who, and for plenty of reasons. Superheroes were pretty much the minority there. Hell, even if he didn’t do this, he’d probably have some other job that got his ass beaten on a regular basis. He couldn’t remember a time when that wasn’t the case. But at least if the world was punching him, it was on his terms. He could take the punch. And the next one. As long as he was taking them, whoever was doling them out wasn’t hitting someone else.

Not that it was all that fun. He yelled random shit because yelling was cathartic when getting the crap beat out of you, and if he was going to yell, it better not be anything important. He could never stop his mouth from running, but that didn’t mean his brain had to go hurling off the cliff after it. Probably.

At some point, they ripped off the hood and saw the hearing aids. He’d been wearing the ones Tony had made the last time he’d been grabbed. Basically invisible, those had sat inside his ear and stayed put while he did whatever crazy shit he needed to. Too bad they were lost somewhere in the depths of the apartment. Way to go, Clint. So he was on his spares; a more standard pair of BTEs. Bright purple ones, naturally, and way more visible. The Tracksuit in charge with sorta interrogating, but mostly softening him up for whoever was running late, saw the aids and lost it.

“What is this? This some kinda Bluetooth bro? You call friends with this bro? You think you clever?” He yanked them out, dropped them on the ground, and brought his heel down hard.

Clint did not panic, but he seriously considered the option. Hostile situations were not a good time
to be down a sense and here he was, tied to a chair getting the crap beat out of him. On the other hand, the sheer stupidity was kinda funny. Bluetooth was the phone thing, right? God, he wished those things were Bluetooth enabled. He was giggling before he realized it, and tried to use the reaction, adding in a tinge of hysteria, because crazy confuses people.

The Tracksuit wasn’t smart enough to be confused, but he was not pleased by Clint cracking up, and his displeasure hurt like hell. He stuck the hood back on as well, just for an extra helping of suck. So now he was down two senses as this entirely futile interrogation continued. Clint went back to yelling random shit at the top of his lungs to distract himself.

“LUCCCY I’M HO—OOME…

STELLAAAAAAAA…

IN THE TOWN, WHERE I WAS BORN, LIVED A MAN WHO SAILED THE SEEEEEAAAAA. AND HE TOLD ME OF HIS LIIIIIFE, IN THE LAND OF SUBMAR–”

A fist smashed hard into his mouth and he lost the ability to yell for a while. Too busy choking on blood. Awesome.

O₂ led Eliot down a flight of stairs and through a hallway that was much longer than the building Eliot had entered. The atmosphere had a dank, underground texture to it, though at least it moved. Air must be pumped in and circulating somehow. Great, secret tunnels. Just what we needed. “This is quite the setup, boss,” he commented.

“We buy all buildings. Make people sell. Then sell to highest bidder. But right now, all ours. After, am too rich to need damp tunnels. Is bad for health.” He wheezed a bit to prove his point.

“It much further? Had to be a good half mile by now.” Eliot made it sound like he was asking for O₂’s benefit, but Hardison was already responding.

“Trying to find some sort of schematics, Eliot, but I doubt these tunnels are recent or legal, so give me a sec.” Eliot could hear him typing furiously. “Unless they’re old subway tunnels…” He tuned out Hardison’s muttering, and tried to shove the conversation they’d had earlier back into the recesses of his mind as well. The rambling was easier to ignore. Sometimes that makes me feel a little less safe around you…

By the time they stopped in front of a solid metal door, Eliot was grateful for an effective distraction. Two tracksuit guys stood outside, but said nothing to them, just stood aside as O₂ knocked five times in a particular pattern. He automatically memorized: long-short-short-short-long. The door was opened from inside by a third tracksuit and Eliot followed O₂ into the room. In here, the light was slightly better, thanks to the bare bulb hanging above the head of a hooded figure tied to a chair in the center of the room, his pants around his ankles. That, and the tang of blood hanging in the dank air, made him feel sick. Another tracksuit looked up from the punch he was about to throw. “Yeah bro?” he asked. Behind them the two guards began to close the door. In the last foot of its arc it suddenly slammed shut, reverberating harshly. Must be the airflow, creating suction.
They were interrupted by the figure on the chair suddenly yelling out “HEY COMPANY! THE MORE THE MERRIER! COME JOIN THE PARTY!” Definitely Clint, then. He was perversely thankful for the hood. Everything about this situation looked bad from Clint’s point of view. Seeing Eliot walk into a room with his captors, dressed like one of them, would just make things worse. *Less safe*… He gritted his teeth against the thought worming its way back in.

“He tell you anything?” O₂ asked.

“Nah, bro. He jus’ yell stupid shit.”

O₂ turned to Eliot. “See what I mean?” He looked back at the interrogating Tracksuit. “This bro going to question him now.”

Eliot took a step toward Clint and felt something crunch a bit under his feet. He bent down and picked up the remains of a purple hearing aid. “What the hell?” He glanced about until he found the other one, also crushed, by Clint’s feet. Eliot carefully ignored him and picked up the other hearing aid. “You smashed his aids? Why?”

“So he not call anyone, bro.” The Tracksuit seemed quite proud of himself. “He use to call Avengers.”

Eliot welcomed the chance to vent. “These are NOT secret communication devices, you idiot!” *Don’t look in my ear, don’t look in my ear.* “These are hearing aids. For HEARING.” He went over to Clint, and snapped his fingers loudly next to his years. Clint did nothing to acknowledge the sound. “He’s deaf, you moron. No wonder he ain’t talking sense.” He turned to O₂. “Questioning a guy that can’t hear is gonna be a hell of a lot harder. He’s probably got a spare set at his place.”

O₂ was looking from Clint, to the Tracksuit, to Eliot. “Who heard of deaf superhero?”

Eliot stared at him, wondering if that was just a truly terrible joke or an actually stupid question. “I’m gonna start my job. But I don’t know sign language and he ain’t exactly cooperating anyway. I need his aids and your *bros* are probably going to need supervision. Leave me with him.”

O₂ shook his head slowly. “I monitor, you question.”

Eliot shook his head more forcefully. “Not from in here. I see that camera,” he nodded at the security camera set in the corner of the wall facing Clint, “and I’ll bet you have a mic in here somewhere.”

The Tracksuit, eager to gain points back, pointed at the lightbulb. “Is on cord.” O₂ glared at him. *Okay, closer than I’d like, talking to Parker and Hardison is gonna be tough.* “You can listen and watch all you want, but I need him focused on me. And I *need those aids*.” He was hoping that O₂ would go to the apartment with them, where Parker and Hardison would arrange a surprise for him there and then they’d have a hostage of their own while effectively cutting off the head of this little mafia operation. But mostly he just wanted them out of this room so he could figure out what the hell to do next with Clint.


*Decoys?* Eliot ignored that for the moment, and nodded at his new employer. “I’ll figure something out.” They left the room, the door slamming shut behind them again.
When it did, Clint sing-songed “COMING! GOING! COMINGGG!” Eliot, testing a theory, stood
stock still, barely breathing, for several moments after the door shut. After a minute, Clint called
out, much quieter now, “Guys? Hellowoooo anyone there?” and even softer, “Futzing hell, Barton,
how are you getting out of this one?”

Friend in trouble. Leave me out of it. Not for the first time, Eliot wondered what Tara meant by
“friend.” In her line of work, that could mean a helluva lot of things, not all of them actually
friendly, especially considering the second half of that request. The half he was going to violate in
a few moments, if it would make Clint trust him, at least until he got him out of here.

If Hardison can’t trust me to tell him shit, no wonder I ain’t getting anywhere with Circus. The
thought turned his mouth sour and got him moving. Clint didn’t seem to register his presence,
focused on slamming himself forward to test his bonds, but the chair was bolted down and his
restraints held. He grunted and settled back, panting. It must have hurt, but Eliot would’ve done the
same if he’d thought he was alone.

Still, considering the way he was carrying on, Eliot definitely did not want Clint to say something
stupid, like ‘HEY GRUMPY CAT’, or worse, when he took the sack off his head. Blocking the
view of the camera with his body, he muttered under his breath to Hardison, “You have eyes on
me?”

“Eyes and ears on the whole club. Good thing Parker went ahead and tapped in when she did. And
did you have to tell him to listen and watch you, that’s gonna be hard to loop in a fake, if it comes
to that, Eliot.”

Parker spoke up. “Clint okay? I’m on my way to his place, I can prep a surprise something for
Kaziu, whoever he is.”

“I’m about to find out. Be careful, Parker,” Eliot murmured and went back to considering Clint.
Finally, he reached out and carefully tapped on his knee: long-short-long-short short-short short-
pause he nodded carefully. Eliot took off the sack.

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The sensation of the door slamming shut registered more as vibrations than sound, though he did
pick up a dull thud. Pretty damn loud, then. Which meant it was heavy, probably metal. Why slam
it so hard? Intimidation? Nah, hang on, he’d felt the air moving, it was getting pulled shut by the
draft. Where was the air coming from then? They were underground, so maybe a closed off
subway tunnel, or sewer? Under the city was a warren of forgotten space. Okay, maybe not
forgotten. How many times had he fought the Serpent Society in some stupid tunnel before?

Huh. That was a long of train of thought to get through without someone punching him. Had they
left him alone? On the off chance they had, he slammed himself forward, hoping the rope would
give or the chair would pitch him forward. But this chair was bolted down even more firmly than
he’d anticipated, and all he managed to do was remove all the skin from his wrists and almost
dislocate both shoulders. OW.

He panted under the stifling hood. It smelled awful, thanks to the spit, blood, and sweat he was
producing. At least none of the stomach hits were hard enough to make him vomit. Retch, yes, but
he wasn’t gonna lose that pizza. No one hit him again for testing the restraints. Maybe they had left him alone.

A hand touched lightly on his knee. So much for that theory. The change in tactic worried him for a second, before he registered that it was tapping Morse code. *As if I could be a spy, previously married to a spy named Morse and not know this shit.* The deliberate tapping spelled out C-I-R-C-U-S.

His shoulders tightened as he considered warring implications for Eliot being here. *Not like I can run this time.* At least he’d finally know. He nodded and the hood came off.

Eliot stood in front of him, dressed to blend in with the TrackSuits. Clint swallowed against the visceral twist of his stomach, as Eliot bent over to look him in the eye that was not swelling shut, and said something, barely moving his lips. That was aggravating. Clint opened his mouth to tell him so, but Eliot’s fist came out of nowhere and Clint snapped his head back to avoid the hit, which…didn’t connect. He raised his head warily, staring at Eliot.

This time the guy exaggerated his lip movements. Also aggravating. He wasn’t an idiot.

(End. MI(C).)

Oh. They were being recorded. Eliot was doing the close-lipped thing again and Clint grunted his frustration. He was the one tied up to a chair with the shit beaten out of him, least his maybe rescuer could do was enunciate.

Eliot mouthed: (Sorry.) (something) (Par(k)er) (?)

Clint glared at him. Whatever he’d been going for in the middle was probably ‘Hardison.’ It was all well and good for Eliot to have multiple people and ways to communicate, but he himself was shit outta luck. As usual. He offered up a slurred “Where’d you come from?” Seemed like a pertinent question with multiple interpretations, and no harm in playing more out of it than he was.

(You rea(d) LIPS(?)

Clint almost lost it at the absurdity of the question. “Fuck you,” he spat and wondered if pretending-to-be-tortured Clint or has-just-been-tortured-and-is-still-tied-to-this-damn-chair Clint was operating his brain currently.

(No than(k)s.) (I’m se(t)?) He gave him a shit-eating grin. (I ain’t go(tt)a (?) hit you.) Eliot’s fist came flying at his solar plexus and Clint, braced himself. Instead, it barely grazed him. Eliot leaned in close, which probably looked pretty threatening for the camera, but from Clint’s angle, the grin was still in place. He still wanted to punch Eliot’s lights out, but he got it now. All for show. This was all for show. Okay. He could do that. Hell, it was what he did best.

(Here(s) the deal.) (…choice.) (We can ESCAPE.) (Or.) (We can stay pu(t.)

If it was Nat, or Bobbi, or Kate asking him this, the answer would have been easy. Stay put. Stay in a position to get info. Bruises and cuts can heal when the job is done, and the bad guys are put away. Hesitation was not a frequent guest in his thought process, but right now the option of cut and run seemed so preferable. “Who do you work for?” he demanded of Eliot, and dared him to not know what he was really asking.

This time Eliot didn’t hesitate to provide the information. T-a-r-a C-o-l-e. He tapped out on Clint’s leg. Not that the name was helpful in the least. Eliot must have seen the confusion on his face, because he continued, mouthing the words.
The last word went with an eyebrow raise and a slight shrug, suggesting he didn’t know if “Tara” was a spy, but suspected she might be.

Warmth flooded through him. *Okay. This will be okay.* He said loudly, “Gee, you’re worse than my *ex-wife!* Shoulda *stayed* with her.”

Eliot stared at Clint in shock for a moment, apparently recalibrating his brain for a reality he hadn’t considered. Finally, he nodded, grinned for real, and punched him for pretend.
Chapter Summary

The woman studied her and then said softly, in a tone that could have been matter of fact, but definitely held a promise of threat, “I know your name. I know Alec Hardison and Eliot Spencer. I could very easily make life very difficult for all of you and I am asking a reasonable question. Please answer it.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once Parker heard Eliot get invited to the back of the strip club, she left Hardison to his computers (“…sure, y’all just go out, get some nice fresh air, while I stay here and monitor your asses…”) and headed over to Clint’s to see if she could get back into his good graces. Usually, sweet talking the client or the mark (or in this case both) was not her strength or her role, but Clint was like a weird jigsaw piece that looked like it would fit nowhere but dropped into place instantly. She could do this.

Of course, when she was nearly there she learned Clint had been kidnapped, Eliot was pretending to beat him up, and someone named Kaziu was headed to Clint’s apartment to find hearing aids. Oh, and Clint had been married to Tara.

Sometimes plans change.

Eschewing the fire escape as being too obvious if Tracksuits were coming to call, she scaled the wall up to Clint’s third floor apartment using window sills, drainpipes, indentations in bricks, and a random suction cup arrow that she was pretty sure had been shot up here a long time ago and just never retrieved. She left it there to facilitate an escape route, should she need it. The apartment was dark, but Eliot hadn’t said anything about a dog, so Parker carefully slid open the window frame and hissed “Lucky?” She was answered with a lot of slobber. “Huh. You are a good judge of character,” she told the dog, as she navigated the room, allowing her eyes to adjust to the murk. Flashlights were too suspicious, but turning on the lights of a room under surveillance when the occupant has just been kidnapped is an invitation for unwanted guests. Lucky whined. “I don’t have Clint with me,” she informed him, heading up to the loft. “It’s not my fault he tries to do everything by himself.”

The dog followed and she took that as an invitation to keep talking. “He should have taken you along. Stupid. He’s stupid. Eliot’s stupid. Tara’s stupid for telling us not to mention her to her ex-husband.” Over the earbud, Eliot grunted in annoyance and Hardison giggled. Clothes, some weaponry, and a number of fast food bags were strewn about the floor of the loft. *Where would Clint leave hearing aids and then forget about them?* They could have been anywhere in this mess and she didn’t have a lot of time.

Sometimes plans change.

Back downstairs, Parker focused on her new quarry. She’d noticed it the first time they come to Clint’s apartment, had stared at it hungrily for several seconds before Hardison bumped into her, intentionally redirecting her at the dog. She’d been very careful not to stare the next time she
visited Clint, in the early hours of this morning. Apparently people don’t trust you when you stare or ask questions about their safe.

It was a strange safe though. Parker had befriended a lot of safes. Many of them very large, very high tech, and containing very valuable items. You could judge the contents by a safe, usually. The more hidden, expensive, and elaborate, the better the goodies inside.

This safe was a contradiction. Who puts a bright red, small, basic combination safe on their kitchen counter? Who buys a red safe? That was like, asking someone to pet it, talk nicely to it, bend an ear close to hear its secrets. Who displays it? Was it some weird hipster decor? Portland was full of shops that sold broken antique objects for people decorate with. (Hardison had needed to explain that one to her. An ancient suitcase as a coffee table? Why?) She mentally reviewed the apartment, and decided that Clint’s old stuff, like the corded phone on the wall were there because he wasn’t the type to get new things when the old ones worked. Which meant this safe worked. Parker grinned. “Hello, beautiful,” she whispered, “what secrets do you have for me?”

The fastest way to open a basic combination safe is a rare earth magnet in a sock. There were plenty of socks strewn about, but while it was possible Clint had a heavy-duty magnet lying around somewhere, she wasn’t going to bother looking for it in this mess. Besides, while it was an effective method to raid someone’s hotel room in under two minutes, it was cheating. She always felt dirty, forcing them, rather than just asking nicely.

She picked it up and carefully set it on the floor, laying down next to it to get into a good listening position away from the old pipes in the walls. Lucky proceeded to lick her ear. “GAH. DOG. NO.” The dog looked at her and licked her face again. “Okay, that’s it.” She grabbed his collar and escorted him to the bathroom. “You can come out when I’m done,” she told the door and tried to ignore the whines.

Back to the safe.

Nothing could ever quite replicate the euphoric wave of satisfaction that accompanied the final click of the last pin falling into place. Parker closed her eyes and allowed herself a wide smile before pulling open the door and retrieving the contents of the safe. A gun, which she laid off to the side as unimportant, a small…well, Eliot would call it a doohickey, and Hardison might actually know what it was. In any case it was small enough to rest comfortably in her palm, black, rectangular, had some sort of connector port she’d never seen before, and looked high tech. She put it in her pocket for Hardison. Finally, there were files. Documents, surveillance photos, notes. She frowned and studied the contents for a moment before it dawned on her what she was holding. “Guys! I–”

Nothing quite erases euphoric satisfaction like a gun pressed against your temple. Parker froze. In her ear Hardison was asking what she’d found. She didn’t answer. Eliot always said it was stupid to stand close to someone when threatening them with a gun, and he’d taught them all how to disarm someone who made that mistake, but it was a risky move and this guy hadn’t made a sound getting in position. Parker didn’t like her odds.

“Stand up.” The voice sounded male, soft, accented—Polish maybe? This must be Kaziu.

“Where’d you come from?” Really the question was how had he done it so quietly? He must have entered through the front door, but—oh Clint. She hadn’t checked the front door to see if it was locked because of course someone being targeted by the mafia would lock their doors, right? In the bathroom, Lucky began to bark up a storm, scratching frantically at the door.

“From Hell.” Kaziu answered. It had the rhythm of a mantra. He probably meant it to sound
threatening to his victims, but it sounded bitter and sad to her. She had no doubt he was telling the truth. She turned to face him.

Eliot had described “The Clown” who tagged his targets with a circle and a teardrop, but that didn’t really prepare her for a man in white facepaint with the same markings. She almost laughed.

“How about the front door?” She glanced over. It was definitely ajar. “Why are you pointing a gun at me?” The last felt like a stupid question, but then it wasn’t for her benefit. In her ear she heard “P-PARKER?” and “What.” Okay, now they were listening. “And what’s with the facepaint? Are you a sad clown?” She didn’t like clowns.

“Who are you?” The sad clown asked.

Hardison was trying to ask a string of questions all jumbled up; Eliot angrily snarled “WHAT DO YOU KNOW?” Which worked for both her and his cover beating on Clint.

“Hey now, I’m not the Polish clown sneaking up on people with guns now am I?” There. That was all the information she had at the moment.

“No, but I am the man with the gun. You shall answer me.” He raised the gun higher.

Parker thought she saw a shadow of a shadow move out of the corner of her eye. “Uhh…What was the question again?”

He stepped forward, “Who are you—?”

The gun flew out of his hand and landed near the kitchen, closer to Parker. She lunged for it and took it out of the equation, like Eliot had taught her. Magazine out, tossed in one direction, chamber cleared, stripped. She spotted a large knife on the counter and seized that instead.

Meanwhile, the shadow of a shadow had launched itself at The Clown. Parker caught a glimpse of flying long red hair in the blur of movement as The Clown blocked her kicks. She allowed herself to fall to the floor and then took him down with a sweep of her legs, flipping upright in one smooth motion. The Clown rolled away and surged to his feet in a similarly graceful fashion, but slightly slower. He was by the window now and Parker could see him more clearly. He looked, under all that paint, scared.

The red-haired shadow lashed out and kicked him hard in the kneecap, generating an audible *pop*. As he staggered, she used the momentum of her mid-air rotation to launch him through the window. The glass shattered around him on the fire escape and the Clown picked himself up, much less gracefully this time, and flung himself over the edge of the railing. She heard the rattle as he caught a lower rail and then he was gone.

In the light of the streetlight shining through the window, Parker could clearly see the woman now. She was watching her quarry flee with a grim expression on her face. *Why not chase him down?*

“Now then. Parker. Let your partners know you are safe, then remove the comm, while we talk.” She turned from the window, still mostly in shadow.

Considering what the woman had just done to The Clown, she didn’t see much choice. “Hardison, Eliot, I’m okay. Be back online soon.” She clicked her teeth together rapidly a few times, a shorthand for “safe at the moment” and removed the ear bud and set it on the counter.

The woman strode over, picked up a mug, dumped the contents in the sink, and set it down on top of the bud. “What kind of grift brings you to this particular apartment in Bed-Stuy?”
“How do you know my name?” she asked instead of answering.

The woman studied her and then said softly, in a tone that could have been matter of fact, but definitely held a promise of threat, “I know your name. I know Alec Hardison and Eliot Spencer. I could very easily make life very difficult for all of you and I am asking a reasonable question. Please answer it.” Her breathing precise and unlabored; she did not sound as if she’d just been in a fight.

Parker wished she was Sophie, who lied as easily as she breathed, and made both look so natural. Any lie she told this woman would be seen through immediately. How would Sophie do this?

But Sophie wasn’t here. And lying had never worked once on this job. Because—“This is isn’t a job. It certainly isn’t like any job we’ve ever done before. We aren’t playing roles to take someone down. If you know my name, you know what I do. But I’ve been thinking about this whole thing in the wrong way. Clint isn’t a ‘client’ and he isn’t a ‘mark.’ He’s my friend. And I think I knew that the moment we talked on the roof two days ago. But things got complicated, and that’s why I’m in his apartment, umm…” cracking his safe seemed like a poor way to end that sentence, even if the evidence was all over the floor. “…looking for his hearing aids.”

The woman tilted her head for a moment, then nodded, and strode over to the light switch. “You should probably summarize quickly.”

Parker did. What choice did she have? She left out Tara completely, rather than attempt to explain her involvement on the slight information she had. “…so now I’m here.” She finished, finally. “Who are you?”

“Natasha. Clint is my partner, has been for years.”

“Oh, you! Well, I can’t find the aids, not in this mess. I find things people want to hide. They make it so obvious.”

“An heiress to the Hope diamond used to keep the jewel in her couch cushions and attach it to the collar of her Great Dane. But I take your point. Despite the fact that both of you think hanging upside down from high places is a form of relaxation, Clint’s living style is somewhat different from your obsessively neat tendencies.” She stepped over a discarded purple t-shirt and moved towards the couch.

Parker stared at her. “You don’t know how I live.” Fear that had mostly dissipated with the disappearance of The Clown started to creep back in.

Natasha lifted her eyebrows and told Parker her address. “It’s a highly practical set up, though I imagine it disturbed your partners when they first discovered it. Normal people do not live in the exact center of a giant warehouse.”

“You had no right!” Parker spat, glaring at the other woman. She would need to clear out that warehouse immediately, dive deeper, where she wouldn’t be tracked—

Natasha turned towards her fully, holding up a hearing aid she’d rescued from the depths of the couch. “And whose apartment are you in, cracking whose safe?”

Parker’s eyes burned, but she couldn’t deny the truth of the statement. She said nothing.

Natasha returned to her rummaging, asking conversationally, “Why do you think Clint cares so much about this building?”
She blinked. In a normal job, if Clint was the client, they would have met, had a talk, learned what he wanted from the people who had stolen things from him. Of course, this wasn’t a normal job. Clint wasn’t a normal client, and their normal operating procedures had never really happened. The entire thing felt sloppy and wrong-footed and she was frustrated. With herself, with Hardison for staying at the computers, with Eliot for not saying anything about anything, with Clint for being whatever Clint was being. “I don’t know. I thought we were alike. But I don’t know why he lives here.”

“You would clear out?”

Parker frowned. “No. I wouldn’t live here to begin with. Thin walls. Too few escape routes, too many people.”

“Ah.” She held up the second aid. “Clint likes people. Civilians. He—” She paused. “He doesn’t have powers. And he wasn’t...trained as I was. He goes out and gets beat up handling the things we handle, and then he comes home to people, some who know who he is, but don’t treat him differently because of it. They just accept him and hand him a beer. And he feels safer. Even without enough escape routes.”

Parker thought about pretzels and wrestling grips, of robots and hurtles down elevator shafts, of regular breathing, of flavors and feelings, of ice caves, piggy back rides, punches and bickering. Of the brewpub and Amy. “I don’t use the warehouse much these days.”

Natasha gave her a half smile and nodded at the safe. “What did you find in that thing?”

Parker showed her the files and the gun, but didn’t mention the doohickey in her pocket. “He never said he had all of this. And why it’s in a bright red safe in the middle of his kitchen.”

Natasha sighed. “I don’t know all the details, but I believe that he stole it from the strip club because a pretty girl asked him to and then couldn’t open it.”

Oh. Now that made sense. Parker rolled her eyes. “Damsel ruse? Please that’s so BORING.”

Natasha’s lips quirked upward. “And yet it works so frequently. May I see?”

Parker hesitated. This was her score. But as Natasha had said, this was her asking *nicely*. She handed over the files.

The agent flipped through them, quickly gleaning key details. “Hmm, so they were gathering leverage...” She let the word hang between them. Possibly a joke and possibly a reminder to Parker she had been watching them. Probably both. Parker wouldn’t be surprised if Natasha had Nate’s sense of humor.

“Operators with less power, holding information on their co-conspirators to increase their own value. If this sort of thing got out...” Parker’s grin was sharp.

Natasha matched the grin before moving to the wardrobe to pull out a compact black case. “Send those to Hardison.” She walked over to the phone and called a taxi. “I doubt our friend stuck around, but there’s no reason to test the theory.”

Parker nodded and began taking pictures of each sheet.

Natasha inspected the contents of the case muttering, “Clint is going to insist on returning here.”

He would, Parker knew. The building was unprotected, vulnerable without him here acting as its
lone guardian. But he didn’t have to do this alone. She made a judgment call. Retrieving the comm from underneath the mug, she handed it to Natasha. “I’m taking Lucky back with me to the hotel. Go get Clint and give the tracksuits a reason to not bother this building tonight. Just, be nice to Eliot while you’re taking him out?”

“I’ll be gentle.” Natasha assured her, amused. She tucked the comm into her ear.

“Meet me back at the hotel. We’ve been going about this wrong and it’s time to fix that.”

Chapter End Notes

FYI: The great dane who wore the Hope Diamond was named Mike. :)
“Man, your interrogations need work. I think talking is supposed to be involved. You talk, demand I talk, I refuse to talk, you hit, I yell, we do it all again.”

I am positive most of that debrief was completely unnecessary, and the time could have better spent in an excruciatingly hot shower. Bobbi exited the SHIELD building, pulling up the collar of her coat. One California mission and I’m going to be ruined for East Coast weather for the next month, even if it is almost May. Hill had said she’d have a ride waiting, but she couldn’t help glancing about for a taxi. Before she could actually hail one, a purple Vespa pulled up in front of her and Kate Bishop waved.

“Hi. I’m here to give you a ride.” Kate’s face had that look of relief and worry that could really only mean one thing in this context.

“Something’s happened to Clint.” It didn’t need to be a question.

“No! Yes? Uh, is going to happen? Probably? It’s complicated.”

“Kate, if there is one thing I have learned from my marriage, is that it is never not complicated, so you are going to have to be more specific. Shall we?”

“Yeah, just one question first.”

“Shoot, and yes, I intended the pun.”

“Does the name Eliot Spencer mean anything to you?”

All of her assumptions about Kate’s presence here tilt-shifted into a new perspective. “Oh no. Oh they didn’t.”

Kate pressed her lips together. “So it was you.” Well, that was ominous. Bobbi ignored it, lacking too much information to do anything else.

“Are they in town? How many of them? Has anything exploded yet, major organizations been hacked, or art gone missing?” She closed her eyes. “Just to cover the most obvious of bases.”

“Uh…Yes. Three. No? Probably. Don’t know.” Kate recited. “You need some less obvious bases by the way. Try Eliot and Clint trained at SHIELD together, but Eliot was undercover for an even more secret organization and betrayed Clint and then they didn’t talk for like years.”

Another perspective shift, this one involving a sickening drop. Shit. She’d contacted Hardison aware of the outside chance that she’d blow her Tara Cole alias and the crew’s trust in her along with it. It was a price she was willing to pay for Clint’s sake, but instead she’d managed completely screw up everything.

“They should hire you to do debriefs. You stuffed far more information for import and concern into one sentence, than I think was just covered in five hours in there.” She groaned, dismissed the
likelihood of a shower and bed. *Time to clean up a bunch of messes you made, Birdie.* “Okay. I’ll need details while we go, but I need to talk to…if it’s three, it gonna be Eliot, Hardison, and Parker, right?”

Kate nodded, relieved to find someone with a handle on the situation. Or an apparent one, in any case. Bobbi wished she could feel the same.

“Okay. You know, I should have guessed this would happen. All I did was ask Hardison to do some background digging online regarding that Ivan guy. That was IT. What the HELL are they doing here?”

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“Man, your interrogations need work. I think talking is supposed to be involved. You talk, demand I talk, I refuse to talk, you hit, I yell, we do it all again.” Clint was sort of enjoying himself. He’d finally gotten Eliot talking in longer sentences and not bothering so much with the over-enunciation. It was more distracting than useful and made him feel like he was a kid again with people talking extra loud and slow, like that would do anything but make him feel like the idiot they clearly thought he was. Eliot at least easily adjusted when Clint had snapped could they move this along. He still kept things short, but that was Eliot for you.

(Dammit Clint.) (Ca(n) you pretend this hurt(s) MORE?) (We gotta SELL this.)

“How exactly are you gonna get me to talk if your idiot friends smashed my aids, huh?” He demanded and braced himself for Eliot’s “retaliation”.

(What good…talking do?) (No one(’s) told these guys you read lips.) A blow didn’t slam into his solar plexus.

“Well fine then,” Clint coughed out, making his breathing ragged and hitched. Good thing he had plenty of real life experience to help him sell it. Did wonders for his performance. *I should get an Oscar for this, whatchamacallit? Oh yeah, method acting.*

“I’ll just do all the talking then, but it’s not going to be about anything important. Shit, I don’t know anything important. I’m Hawkeye, remember? The guy who brings a bow and arrow to an alien invasion? Look, I know I’m the easiest target to kidnap, but quality ain’t cheap.”

Clint allowed his head to move to the side with the slow punch that connected to it. “Usually interrogators do some interrogating. What do you want to know? My favorite color? Definitely not purple. In fact, I hate purple. I made myself a red and blue costume, like Captain America. But I ended up in hot water and the colors ran together. That’s how the costume happened. Insider Avengers knowledge right there. Clint Barton, aka Hawkeye, hates purple.”

(Really?)

(No.) “That’s why my ex-wife left. The whole purple lie. You can’t really escape it once it becomes a thing, you know? Like people who say they like cats and suddenly every present they get is cat-related. Everything ends up being purple. She’s a blue-type gal.”

(She a spy?) (She pretended to be…grifter named Tara Cole.) (Worked (on(?)) our team for…year(s(?)).)
Clint considered how best to answer this. “Don’t marry someone in your field of work. You won’t escape it. Don’t marry someone outside your field either, they won’t get it. You know what? Best plan is to just die alone being beaten under a strip club by an interrogator who refuses to say anything. I know that’s how I’m planning on going.”

Eliot stiffened suddenly, alarmed—which was a new look for him—and clearly shouted (“WHAT DO YOU KNOW?”)

He wasn’t ready for the punch Eliot threw. It slammed into his diaphragm, forcing all of the air out of his lungs as he doubled over and vomited. Okay, this looks bad and feels bad. Great. He wheezed, trying to convince his lungs that oxygen was a necessity and they needed to let some back in. They didn’t cooperate and gah gut punches suck if you aren’t ready what the hell Eliot? Choking and gasping, he finally managed to drag air back in and spit out the blood and puke in his mouth. Eliot’s hand gripped roughly in his hair and pulled his head up.

Okay, this looks bad and feels bad. Great.

He wheezed, trying to convince his lungs that oxygen was a necessity and they needed to let some back in. They didn’t cooperate and gah gut punches suck if you aren’t ready what the hell Eliot?

A minute later, Eliot crouched down in front of him, so Clint could see his face again. (She’s OKAY.) (Your Natasha showed up) (Handled it.) (She’s…Black Widow, right?) (Parker’s talking to her.) (You OKAY(?))

The camera wouldn’t catch it from this angle, so Clint nodded and allowed himself a smile. Okay, this looks better. If Nat was there, she would soon be on her way over here. And she’d probably know where he left the other aids...and bring him a bow. God, he wanted a bow.

That also meant it was time to move forward with the charade. No more snappy backtalk. That punch was a good transition, even if it sucked. There was no good way to tell Eliot any of that directly, so he was just gonna have to do it Nat’s way. Control the interrogation from the chair.

“Aw man, I was trying to keep that pizza. It was a great last meal.” He pitched his voice low and tired, dropping an act rather than putting one on. “Guy I know made it. Used to kill people and now he’s cooking pizza. Funny how people change, ain’t it?” Eliot frowned but didn’t say anything. Good, let him make the play, he actually sorta knew where this was going, just needed to talk till it came clear. “This guy, he reminds me of a woman I know. Both seem like they’re wound tight as a coiled spring, gonna lash out at any minute and only iron self-will is keeping them in control. That’s bullshit, but people get out of their way when they walk down the street. And they could definitely kill you in about 50 different ways before they’d need to get creative. But they stopped wanting to. I know, ‘cause I brought one of them in and the other one I cut loose. I wish I hadn’t done that. Missed out on a lot of pizza. No idea if it would’ve made a difference, but you miss all the shots you don’t take.” He looked up, gave Eliot and the camera his best cornered animal look of desperation and hope. “But I took one shot and it flew true.”

(Circus(?)) (CLINT(?)) Eliot actually looked worried he’d done some damage to him. Don’t hit me just yet, I promise this is going somewhere. Before he could continue the ramble, Eliot’s face shifted into faraway mode as he listened. (Widow is coming.), he announced and then, (You already knew that didn’t you(?))

“The itsy-bitsy spider crawled up the water spout...” Clint sang soft and broken. Nat probably wouldn’t thank him for giving the opposing team a heads up, but he needed to start giving Eliot some of his own leverage if he needed to stay behind. It might take a bit for the clue to dawn on
them and she could handle the tracksuits regardless. He wheezed out a laugh and gave Eliot the wild-eyed stare of someone running out of time and options.

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When Hardison answered the door of the suite, Bobbi repeated her earlier question. “Hardison, what the HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE?” She glanced around the room and saw the normal array of gear indicating a job was in progress, but no Eliot or Parker. “And where are your significant others?”

“What the hell am I doing here? Oh, that is so NOT the first question being answered, Tara.”

Bobbi risked a glance at Kate, who appeared even more perplexed than she was. Fair enough. She turned back to Hardison. “Okay, what’s the first question?”

“Why is my boyfriend currently pretending to beat up your ex-husband under Ivan Banionis’ STRIP CLUB?!”

“WAIT, WHAT?” Clearly this was news to Kate as well.

Bobbi opened her mouth with no idea what was supposed to come out of it, but it didn’t matter, since Hardison steam-rolled onwards.

“A second question might be: Why was my girlfriend held at gunpoint by a clown from hell in an Avenger’s apartment, and then rescued by a mysterious woman, who knows way too much about us?”

At this point, Bobbi determined this conversation was not going to be held halfway in the hallway, and she shoved past Hardison into the room. Kate followed. Hardison shut the door and turned, still furious.

“And a third and final question could be: Who the hell are you, ‘cause you ain’t a grafter named Tara Cole, that’s for damn sure.”

Those were all good questions. She had a better one. “Is everyone safe?”

Her response gave Hardison pause and when he answered his voice was less frantic, though still edged with frustration.

“Yeah, though you and I got a very different definition of safe.” He grimaced then, and took his comm out. “You still got one, Kate?”

The girl dug into her pocket and held it up. “Didn’t want to press my luck after this morning.”

“What happened this morning?” She had to ask.

“I eavesdropped. Found out what Eliot did to Clint.” And here she was working with them. It was the right call, but not one Bobbi would have made on Kate’s limited knowledge. Girl was either a damn good judge of character, or far too naïve. Or possibly both, she is a Hawkeye, after all.

“Yeah, well, they’re working past that right now, but I can’t listen to it and talk to Tara, or whoever she is.” He nodded at his laptop. “Do me a favor, play monitor, and keep an eye on the strip club
feed? Warn Eliot if the old dude is getting antsy.”

Kate looked to be awash in questions, but she nodded, tucked the earbud in and instantly winced.

“He ain’t hurting him,” Hardison reassured her, his voice gentle now. “Just putting on a show.”

Kate swallowed and sat down in front of the laptop.

Bobbi waited until she had his full attention back before stating, “Barbara Morse. My friends call me Bobbi. My work calls me Mockingbird.” She stuck her hand out, but Hardison ignored the gesture.

“**YOU’RE AN AVENGER TOO?**”

“It’s complicated. Long story. Which is an answer you’ll get about a lot of my history, and it’s not because I’m brushing you off, it’s because my life is just that complicated. But here’s what you need to know.” She needed to get this over with, like ripping off a bandaid.

Taking a deep breath, she plunged on. “You were never under investigation. Any of you. Nor was Sophie under investigation when I met her. It was a job. I was using the alias Tara Cole, and we became friends. Like Parker did with that girl with good taste in cats and horrible taste in men.”

Hardison sighed. “Okay, point. But you were with us for a year!”

“When Sophie asked for my help, I was going through some shit, Clint and I were having a rough patch, and it was a valuable alias. I took the time.”

“To con your way onto a crew that didn’t trust you?” Hardison demanded, still in disbelief. “It was worth that much?”

She looked away for a moment, but forced her eyes back. “It was refreshing to be distrusted for such a simple reason.” She shook her head at the curiosity on his face. “I told you. It’s complicated. And classified. But I was much happier running cons on shitty corporations, so thanks for that.” She meant it. Their resentment at her replacing Sophie was much simpler to navigate than the resentment of others at a Skrull replacing her.

“I thought for sure I’d slipped up enough for Nate or Eliot to call me on it. A few missteps definitely qualified as ‘distinctive’.” She finger-quoted the word and Hardison actually gave her a smile. “You know how much it killed me to let Eliot do all the fighting? Or most of it. I solved a few things by punching my way out of them when you guys weren’t looking.”

She met his smile carefully, aware she was treading through a minefield. Something had already exploded, based on Hardison’s emotional state, and from what she’d gleaned from the furious questions he’d flung her way, she couldn’t blame him. “Hey, at least I can finally admit I wasn’t actually in it for the money.”

“Why pretend that, then? We would have liked you better.”

“Sure, but you wouldn’t have trusted me. I mean, maybe you would have, but Nate, Eliot, and Parker needed a motivation they could trust. One they knew all too well. One they knew how to manipulate. It made them feel safe.”

There was that flicker of something again at the word safe. That was one mine she’d have to disarm carefully. “I’m sorry I got you into this mess. I know some good hackers, but none as good as you, and anyone else would’ve asked more questions than I wanted to answer. But I didn’t think
you’d actually come to Bed-Stuy, and I sure as hell didn’t know about Clint and Eliot. Kate filled me in on that on the way over, but he never mentioned it to me. I should have anticipated it, though; I can’t think of a single job we did together where you didn’t go above and beyond.”

“Aw, damn woman, you’re gonna make me blush.” He did that little pleased hopping dance she’d forgotten about until now, but forced himself to stop, suddenly wary. “You ain’t doing a Sophie and trying to con your own crew, now, right?”

She shook her head. “No. For one thing, been there, done that, obviously. For another, Clint could use the help, but he’s truly hopeless when it comes to acknowledging he needs help and asking for it. You,” she pointed to Hardison in emphasis, “are the guy on your crew who communicates. She,” now pointing at Kate, who glanced up distractedly, “is doing her darndest to do the same with Clint. If all of us are working together to take down these guys, I need both of you.”

Kate nodded, solemn, and pointed to the laptop. “When Clint left my apartment, he was wearing pants and Eliot was definitely not wearing a tracksuit. What the hell happened?”

“Right. Okay, so I have no idea how Clint got himself into trouble.”

Bobbi hand-waved that. “It’s Clint.”

Hardison barked a laugh and Bobbi let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding as he began to summarize the events of the night. He may not have forgiven her yet, but if he was willing to move on, they might just get there.

“…So now Eliot and Clint are in some weird holding pattern which has got to look pointless to the old dude in white monitoring them. Parker’s in a taxi with Lucky on her way back here, I’ve been looking at the files she found but I don’t know everyone in them yet. Now that you’re here, you might be able to finger a few. Oh, and Parker gave her comm to the woman who rescued her—Natasha. She don’t talk much. Just said she was heading over to extract Clint, and that was it.” He spread his hands, obviously frustrated. “I told Eliot to have Clint give him a fake password to SHIELD. I can wrangle something that looks good so it looks like Eliot was successful, even with Clint escaping.”

Oh thank fuck Natasha’s involved. But what did he mean she knew too much about them? “It’s a good plan, until we know what we’re dealing with. Kate, will you tell Nat that I’m back in town? And bring up those images.” She and Hardison went to stand behind the girl.

“Hi Natasha, no one told me you were on comms until now so I’ve just been listening to Eliot pretend to use Clint as a punching bag. By the way, Bobbi’s a spy. I knew that and you knew that, but now the people we don’t know that she does know, know that. Just so you know.” She listened for a moment and Bobbi turned to Hardison, holding out her open palm. He picked up a case from the table and dropped a comm into it.

“…going in.” Natasha was telling Kate.

“Got it. Go kick some tracksuit ass.” The girl grinned and started rotating through the files Hardison had open until she found the images. “Okay, we’ve got Kingpin, Madam Masque, that creepy dude with the hat…” She trailed off, staring at a surveillance shot. “Um?” Her voice shook. “My dad. That’s my dad.” Kate pointed to a man in the background of several images. “Right there. Hardison, why is my dad in these pictures?”
Clint, surprised, didn’t pull back from Eliot’s slow swing at his temple quite fast enough. He felt the sting of a cut and fresh blood trickled down his cheek, retracing a dried track from earlier.

Eliot glanced down at a ring on his finger. (SORRY.) (Over soon.) (…to break fingers.) Eliot moved behind Clint, and leaned down. He grabbed a finger and bent it back, not far enough to snap, but definitely enough to allow him to feel the threat. Clint took the hint and screamed. “My name is Clint Barton,” he panted. “I am an Avenger.”

Eliot pressed back a different finger. Clint screamed again, realizing that after being tied in ropes so long, this was actually helping his fingers wake up. All the better to hold a bow with. “CLINT! BARTON! AVENGER!”

They continued along this trajectory, Clint following a pattern he knew all too well. SHIELD trained agents to withstand torture, not that he’d found the training all that helpful in reality. But he knew what people expected torture to look and sound like. And he was nothing if not a showman.

His partner in this performance took his own sweet time on the fake finger mutilation, hamming it up for their invisible audience to give Natasha time to get into position. Clint followed his lead. It was disconcerting, reacting to a fake situation that very likely could have been real. He had time to think, time to imagine his bones snapping under Eliot’s fingers, broken and bloody and fumbling into uselessness, unable to flick through fletchings, select a fitting shaft, grip it and nock it to the string. He shuddered and shook his head harshly, incorporating the reaction into his act.

As with most things, there was a trick to it. To leaping without being certain of the landing, but being as certain as possible in his ability to stick it, not thinking too hard about what would happen if he missed. Think ten steps ahead, consider all outcomes, but never, ever, consider the cost. In this room, he was given a chance to consider that cost. Told a price that he could have been charged, but for the fact that Eliot owed him a debt, and like him, had learned to accept the price.

Eliot tapped out H-E-R-E in Morse code on his hand before slicing the rope most of the way through and slipping a small pocket knife into his fingers. Clint closed and opened them a few times, getting them limber. The rope was loose enough that he could be out of it in an instant, but he left it on for the moment, focusing on making himself go mostly limp, as if barely conscious. Eliot knelt in front of him again, slapping his face none too gently. Clint pretended to be unresponsive, carefully watching Eliot’s lips. (Need (a) PASSWORD.) (Fake one.) (For SHIELD.) (Hardison…do the rest.) Clint gave him a tiny nod in acknowledgment.

Natasha arrived. Eliot faded into the shadows by the door and he could see fallen bodies in the hallway as it swung inward. She stepped over them carrying his bow case, and gave the room a cursory glance before moving toward Clint. She got about halfway there, clearly in view of the camera, before Eliot jumped her.

Nat slithered out of his grip and dropped to the floor, clearly trying to kick his legs out from under him. Eliot rolled forward instead, coming up to a standing position before she managed to regain her feet. Clint added in few weak struggles, but he knew if anyone was still watching, their eyes would be on the main attraction.

Eliot settled into his low fighting stance and beckoned the Black Widow towards him. Natasha’s
grin was feral. She accepted the challenge and the sparring began in earnest. Natasha would gain the upper hand, before letting Eliot briefly overpower her. About a minute into the fight, Eliot flung an elbow into her sternum, another into her face, knocking her head back. *Nat’s not gonna be happy if he actually broke her nose.* Eliot twisted her around and put her in a headlock, showing Clint how easily he could break her neck. Natasha, blood streaming down her face, struggled against his grip, but out of view of the camera, she stuck her tongue out at Clint. *And everyone thinks I’m the immature one.*

Clint started yelling in panic, begging his tormenter to stop, that he would tell them anything but let her go. “LEGOLAS! MY SHIELD PASSWORD IS LEGOLAS. TRY IT IF YOU DON’T BELIEVE ME! STARK PROGRAMMED IT AND WON’T LET ME CHANGE IT. THAT SHOULD MAKE YOU FUCKERS HAPPY, NOW LET HER GO. PLEASE?”

Eliot shifted his grip a little and Natasha made her move, smashing her head backwards (*well that payback happened quickly*) and pushing her body upwards. Eliot backed off and Natasha went on the offensive, making quick work of forcing him into the corner beneath the camera and knocking him out “cold”. Clint waited until she moved behind him and tucked the small aids into his hands, before slipping out of the rope. Moments later, sound became a part of his world again and his bow was back in his hands. From his corner, Eliot gave him a half grin as he left the room.

“Legolas? Really?” Natasha offered him the other half of that grin and Clint forgot all the aches and bruises in anticipation of the destruction to come.
Bobbi sucked in a breath. “Well shit.” Everyone turned to stare at her. “Ookay, this just got hella more complicated in a hurry. Didn’t really think that was possible.” She sighed. “That,” she pointed, “is SHIELD tech. And there is no good reason for it to be in that safe, and plenty of bad reasons.”

Nothing was going according to plan. Likely ‘cause they didn’t have a plan, at least, nothing like the plans they usually had, full of redundancies and backups. They had to be extra careful now, with Nate and Sophie gone—it was too easy to get burned otherwise, juggling multiple roles without anyone catching on. But they’d never gotten to a plan, hell, he hadn’t even had a chance to do much of a briefing and even that was on the fly, when they were already in deep and scrambling.

Not that it was anybody’s fault really, except for his. He’d been the one to drag them across the country, intent on fulfilling the vague request of a text message. But the sender of that message was a completely different person than the one he’d grown to trust. He’d met his first superhero, and the guy was a disaster Eliot was hell bent on helping. Parker had nearly been killed, Eliot was flying blind with no cover, and Hardison couldn’t stop thinking about the idiotic thing he’d said to him earlier. He should apologize, but there was a strange woman on the comms, and besides, Eliot and Clint were busy earning Oscars down in that room.

He felt like he was in freefall. And no matter how many times Parker shoved him off the side of the building, down an elevator shaft, or through an air duct, he hated being in freefall.

But Kate. She’d asked him a question he could answer, with a bit of digging. Come to think of it, he could lend the mysterious Natasha a hand as well, by looping the footage from the security cameras. He stuck his comm back in, and gently shifted Kate out of his seat.

“Natasha, whoever you are, I’m givin’ you some cover.” Eliot’s recording had mentioned her, briefly, as Clint’s old partner. Kate and Tar—Bobbi took her appearance at Clint’s apartment—Kate and Tar—Bobbi took her appearance at Clint’s apartment without batting an eye. She’d saved Parker’s life. She held Eliot’s in her hands.

“Thank you, Hardison, that will make this faster,” she replied, voice level and punctuated by a truncated howl of pain. Not hers.

He sucked in a breath. “Eliot doesn’t have an alias. He’s just being Eliot, so um, could you…”

“Most of the men in this place have heard of me, or at least what I am, Hardison. We come from the same corner of the world. They will respect Eliot for surviving me.”

“Okay, that—that was ominous, I can appreciate a good ominous-ity.”

Kate, hovering over his shoulder, snorted.

With the security cameras on Natasha’s route taken care of, he refocused his attention on Kate’s problem. “Kate-girl, I can dig up all the dirt you want on your dad, but I can basically guarantee
you won’t like what you’ll know.”

“I don’t like what I know now,” she countered, “doesn’t mean I don’t want to know more.”

Damn, he liked this girl. “You ever wanna stop toeing the line and learn how to hack, I’ll teach you.”

Behind him, Bobbi muttered under her breath, “Oh please god, no.”

Kate smirked.

“Okay, what does your dad do?”

“He’s an investor. I don’t know that much more – we don’t agree on much.” She laughed bitterly. “I know, I know, typical rich biotch, takes her daddy’s money and doesn’t know where it’s coming from.” Her voice turned to steel. “Tell me where it’s coming from.”

“Girl, I don’t know yet! I mean, not everything. I just got these from Parker, and Parker just got them from that safe on Clint’s counter. Hell, I don’t know where that came from.” He knew so little. What was Eliot doing, going in when they knew so little?

“Oh, Clint stole the safe from the strip club because Penny asked him to.” Kate said, with a shrug.

“Hang on, who’s Penny?”

“Bad news,” Bobbi grumbled.

“Darlene Penelope Wright.” Natasha offered through the earbud. She didn’t give any other details, but there wasn’t much he couldn’t find out with a full name to go on. Maybe she knew that.

“She was married to a tracksuit? I think? IDK, Clint went out to buy tape and ended up buying her car, sleeping with her, stealing a safe from the strip club, smashing the car, and messing up the comic books that had the code to the safe.”

Hardison stared at her. “…’cause he went out to buy tape?” How was this guy still alive?

Bobbi barked out a laugh that sounded both annoyed and amused. “Typical. And I stand by my earlier statement, Kate. I want you in ALL my briefings.”

Kate looked back at the laptop, where Natasha was making short work of the tracksuits in her path. She moved with an efficiency and speed that reminded him of Eliot, with some extra acrobatics thrown in. That was more Parker’s style.

There was a knock at the door and a call of “room service!” Speaking of...

He got up and Kate grabbed his arm. “Did anyone actually order room service? That’s like the oldest trick in the book.”

Bobbi gave her a thumbs-up, waved him to sit back down, and headed for the door. “Good instincts. It’s not room service. It’s Parker.”

“Parker?”

“Parker.” Hardison confirmed, grinning with relief.

Bobbi laughed at Kate’s confusion and opened the door to allow Parker, wearing a maid’s uniform
and pushing a covered cart laden with food into the room. As soon as she closed the door, Parker lifted the cloth and Lucky emerged, wagging his tail. Kate yelped and kneeled down to hug the dog, clinging to his fur like an anchor. He could relate. All he wanted to do was hug Parker in the same way.

“Tara!? You’re back!”

Or they could cover *that* development.

Parker impulsively hugged the other woman as Hardison winced. Bobbi also looked distinctly uncomfortable, but he was just fine with that.

“P-Parker—” he began.

“Alec, you didn’t tell me Tara was back when we were on the phone. Or that Kate was here.” She released Bobbi. “You have interesting friends you never told us about.”

“Parker—” Bobbi began.

“Where are the spare earbuds? I gave Natasha mine because we’ve been going about this all wrong.”

She made for the table, full of movement, bordering on hyperactivity. “Yeah, Parker, I agree, but we need to talk about something else first.” In his ear, Clint screamed wordlessly. Natasha’s latest mark did the same, in a different key. Eliot said nothing. He forced himself back to the hotel room, trying to catch Parker’s arm as she passed, just to slow her down to a speed he could handle.

“No, listen.” Parker turned to him, unintentionally twisting out of his reach. “We fell into this, based on a bunch of assumptions and not a lot of information. We didn’t know what we were dealing with and then Clint fell into our laps and we didn’t — we didn’t understand. But now. Now I get it. No one is a client here. No one is getting rescued, because no one is a victim. We just have to trust each other. Natasha, Clint, and Kate are part of this team for this job, or we’re a part of their’s.” She glanced over at Bobbi. “And Tara, now that she’s back,” she added, easily, and Hardison winced internally again. She continued over to the table to find the spare earbuds and the others stood silently looking at each other.

Bobbi took a deep breath. “Parker. My name isn’t Tara, it’s Bobbi.” She said it in a rush and then stopped, waiting.

“Okay.” Parker said. She stuck the earbud in and bit her lip at the noises they were all trying to ignore.

Hardison stared at her. “Okay? That’s it?”

“Sophie isn’t Sophie. Why would Tara be Tara?” Parker tilted her head. “Were you spying on us? Like Eliot did on Clint?”

“No. I never reported anything about you guys and I never had any intention of doing so. ‘Tara Cole’ was a cover that I met Sophie under and decided to keep going when she asked me to work with you.”

“And you’re helping Clint with this problem. Like Maggie?”

Hardison blinked. He hadn’t considered the similarities between Bobbi and Maggie, but Parker had zeroed right in on them.
“Yeah, looks like we both have exes who are highly-skilled disasters.” She laughed, “I should call her and tell her that.”

“Did Nate know?” Her questions were calm and matter-of-fact; somehow the most incongruent part of this situation.

“I don’t know. He never accused me of anything, but it’s possible that was his game. It’s Nate.” Bobbi replied with a shrug.

“Do you have a codename? Like the Hawkeyes?”

“Mockingbird. I’m a spy, I infiltrate and gather information.” Bobbi’s tone was still cautious, but Parker seemed to be taking this a lot better than he had.

“Like this?” Parker went back over to her cart and lifted the cover of a platter to reveal, not food, but a large pile of manila envelopes. Bobbi pounced, grabbing a stack to sort through.

“Hello my pretties, come to mama!”

He couldn’t help it, the laughter bubbled out of him, and it was such a relief. It was possible she was being ridiculous on purpose, to defuse the situation, but he decided it didn’t matter.

Bobbi glanced up at their amused faces. “Oh come on, does no one else get a kick out of surveillance photos? Kate, you already spotted your dad in these, recognize anyone else?”

Hardison, still giggling, held up his hands in mock-surrender. He needed to check Natasha’s status, and he should keep researching Kate’s dad, and that Penny girl, but first– “You okay, Parker?”

She nodded, then, almost quicker than he could comprehend, she was in his arms, legs wrapped around his waist, face buried in his neck.

A few moments passed before she lifted her head and smiled at him. “Better.”

Kate stood up from petting Lucky to examine the large prints Bobbi handed her. She frowned as she studied each one. “That man.” She pointed to an average looking guy in a suit. “He was at a party my dad held…a month back.” She stopped. “Same night Grills died,” she whispered.

Bobbi glanced up sharply from studying the image. “What?”

Kate winced. “Clint was being an ass. He’d slept with Penny and then Jess got mad at him, and then Clint got mad at me, so I left and went to a party my dad was hosting. This guy was there. He started talking to me, and he was a bit weird — had a Polish accent maybe? I asked him where he was from, and he said he ‘came from Hell’, which was pretty overdramatic.”

Hardison’s head snapped up and Parker disentangled herself, returning her feet back to the floor and taking the image from Kate. “He looks a lot less crazy without the facepaint.”

Kate looked sick to her stomach. “I should have–”

Bobbi instantly grabbed her shoulder, ending her sentence before she could complete it. “Stop there. Don’t even go down that route. You are not to blame for the actions of a murderous psychopath.”

“But we talked! A lot. I told him who I was! We talked until the wait staff kicked us out and I went home and he–” she broke off. “God, I’m so STUPID.”
“Nah, you ain’t.” Hardison interjected. “Hell, I just found out a friend of mine had a whole secret life. You were fooled for a few hours and luckily, you ain’t dead. And Parker ain’t dead. And now he’s gonna have to worry about all of us.”

“Natasha already kicked his kneecap to bits.” Parker offered.

For all the times she said exactly the wrong thing, sometimes she came by the right one instantly. Kate straightened. “Good,” she snapped. “When do I get a shot at him?”

“Hold your horses, Hawkeye, first we need to know who’s yanking his chain. He ain’t doing this for funsies.”

Parker nodded. “Okay, so we have a Polish assassin—”

“Name, Kaziu, aka The Clown.” Hardison added.

“—who has killed a bunch of people for these crime bosses, but seems to work specifically the Tracksuits, who are definitely on the bottom of the food chain, compared to some of the sharks I’m seeing in these pictures.”

Bobbi held up a sheet with a surveillance image of a bald man. “This is the Kingpin. He’s not someone you want to mess with unwittingly.” She sighed. “Which is exactly what Clint’s been doing.”

“Nnooooot exactly…” Kate looked extremely guilty. “Unwittingly, I mean.”

Bobbi raised her eyebrows. “How ‘not exactly,’ we talking here?”

“So there was this gala…and a circus…and a lot of bad guys there, including the Kingpin and a number of other creeps I’m seeing here. And we went ‘cause Clint kept spotting something he called ‘vagabond code’ all over the place. But the circus people, they were stealing from the criminals as a long con—”

“Get invited in, rob everyone blind, and then vanish, hoping that since the marks are criminals they won’t call the cops?” Hardison shook his head, “That’s one risky-ass con.”

“Sophie’d be judging them so hard right now.” Parker muttered. “I mean sure, you steal from thieves, they’re less likely to call the police—unless they own the police—but then you’ve got people not at all concerned about the law ready to hunt you down. Thieves don’t like thieves stealing from them. It’s a professional insult.”

“Damn straight.” Hardison agreed. “So what happened next, Kate?”

Kate bit her lip. “Um. We stole from the thieves stealing from the thieves?” She glanced up at them with the same expression Parker gave him when she admitted to lifting a wallet and not returning it.

“Of-fucking-course he did.” Bobbi’s tone left no doubt in Hardison’s mind that this was not the first time Clint had done something of this nature.

“Yeah, so one of the guys was trained by the same guy who trained Clint. And he told Clint that people like them have a code, so Clint shot him. With a boomerang arrow.” Kate shrugged. “And then we stole all the money they’d stolen—oh yeah and a boat. Clint drove a boat.”

“In the future, when my ex-husband gets you into something like this, shoot him with a boomerang
“It’s occurred to me, believe me.” Kate sighed.

Hardison listened to the two of them discussing Clint’s issues, but he was more focused on the guy’s response. So he’d been a thief, run cons, and then went straight? And rejected all of that, the community, the unspoken rules. But then the guy goes and follows vagabond symbols, and steals from thieves, like he’s looking for trouble. Not to mention, Eliot, Parker, and him showing up and looking like they were running a game on him—or just Eliot turning up period. *We all have history.*

So that was Clint Barton. The guy who was trained to be bad and then redirected his talents. Like Eliot, like Parker, like him. *Well his head’s gotta be all types of messed up, loyalty-wise.* Hardison knew for a thief and a hacker, he was a pretty trusting guy. He’d get a good or bad feeling about someone and go with it. Tar—*Bobbi* had just thrown him for a loop, and that was nothing compared to the weird situation Clint was finding himself in.

“The Kingpin never has his fingers in just one pot, so the circus thing might not even be connected to the landgrab thing, apart from that fact that my ex-husband managed to piss him off *twice.*” Bobbi paused at another picture. “Gia Nefaria’s a completely different pot…” she murmured absently to herself.

Kate glanced over her shoulder. “That’s Madam Masque!”

“Well, yeah, but underneath the mask is Gia Neff, I should know, I was just, uhh…handling a case that involved her.”

“She kidnapped Clint in Madripoor and I whupped her ass and posed as her.”

Bobbi face-palmed. “I’m beginning to understand why people want you two dead.”

“Hey, no one said anything about killing me! Clint’s the one with a target on his back!”

“Y’all ever stop with the archery references?” Hardison broke in.

“No.” Bobbi muttered. “Get used to it. Hokay. Any other landmines I should know about?”

“Oh!” Parker dug into her pocket. “This was also in the safe.” She pulled a slim black doohickey, as Eliot would call it and handed it to him.

Hardison took it and studied it, perplexed. It had connector ports, but none that he’d ever seen before, and he’d seen basically *everything.*

Bobbi sucked in a breath. “Well shit.” Everyone turned to stare at her. “Oookay, this just got hella *more* complicated in a hurry. Didn’t really think that was possible.” She sighed. “That,” she pointed, “is SHIELD tech. And there is no good reason for it to be in that safe, and plenty of bad reasons.”

“What’s it do?” He flipped the thing over in his hands, stroking the smooth sides.

“That’s incredibly classified.”

Parker folded her arms and gave Bobbi a true Parker-stare.

Bobbi sighed. “It’s the data drive of an LMD – a Life Model Decoy.”
“They EXIST?!” Sure he’d heard rumors for years, but never a confirmation.

“Yes, they exist. You program that thing with all the info of how a person looks, moves, talks, behaves, as well as what they know – and it adjusts the robot to mimic that person.”

Parker face broke into a smile. “Like a forgery.”

Bobbi frowned. “Don’t know why, but that makes it sound even creepier. But yes, it’s basically a forgery of a person.”

“Can we make one?”

“Why?”

“Because the bad guys obviously want to, or evidence of it wouldn’t be in that safe.”

“Maybe? There’s some tech we need, but if Hardison and I can use that drive as a template, we might have a shot at it. But I don’t see what we’re going to do with it – not to mention we don’t have an actual LMD, just a data pack.”

Parker grinned. “Sure, but someone does.”

“You want me to build tech I didn’t know existed two minutes ago?” He could stop himself from bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Bobbi smirked. “Think you can?”

“Aw, hell yeah.”
She knew what it was like, living in a grey mist of morality and necessity. Of pretending she didn’t have a choice, because what is choice when there are no good options? She knew what it felt like, to look back and see a path that seemed destined. She was not surprised Eliot Spencer got lost. What she’d wanted to know, was if he would find himself again.

They jogged through the tunnels, Natasha mostly taking lead, while Clint covered their rear, though she signaled him if a tracksuit appeared ahead out of her reach. It was difficult to read his expression, with his face bruised and bloody, but she could glean his mood from his white-knuckle grip on the bow, his releases hurried, but not quite frantic. Her partner was drawn as tight as that bow, thrumming with pent up tension. Very well. She had not had a proper brawl in far too long, and these men needed to be reminded not to touch what was hers.

Hardison’s security cam hack had allowed her a relatively invisible entrance, enabling her to effectively incapacitate those she came across without alerting the greater force, even if Clint had announced her arrival with that stupid nursery song. Once in the room, she’d sacrificed the element of surprise, entered Spencer and Clint’s façade with a role to play, and a short timeframe to accomplish it believably. Her sparring with Eliot needed to be swift and brutal, not that he objected. It was…interesting to fight him after so many years of tracking his movements. Later, she’d welcome the opportunity for a true match.

Now, her true adversaries were scrambling, having fully realized their prize was loose, armed, and in the company of the Black Widow. Men from the underside of the former Soviet Bloc did not dismiss the Black Widows as rumors. They knew these women were not myths and prayed they never met one. She used that, ghosting up behind her quarry while they looked frantically in the other direction, tapping them on the shoulder and offering them her best feral smile before sending them to dreamland. She’d found many would give up; forget to struggle when they saw their nightmare so close.

But that was all background noise. Now that she’d retrieved Clint, the actions of the fight, of the destruction, became almost rote to her. Not for him; he had some frustrations to work out, and each tracksuit he took down was one less able to threaten his home. But she was thinking ahead—and as a direct result, behind—to what would come after this.

It had been the better part of a decade since Clint had called her, pretending to just need a lift after a job gone bad. He’d sounded wrecked and drunk over the phone, speech slurred and broken. She’d considered not going, still conscious of the twinge in her side each time she moved, a relic of their last mission together. She’d forgiven him, mostly, for that case of idiocy, but not enough that she was inclined to drive out to the suburbs to retrieve him from his own poor life choices.

Except he should have been too proud to call her after said idiocy. She’d expected another three and a half weeks, give or take a day or so, before he’d make contact. So she’d gone, found him unconscious against the side of a Walmart, clutching an arrowhead and a bag containing snack food. He hadn’t called SHIELD or the Avengers, so she didn’t either, uncertain of the terrain.
She took him to the closest ER, gave them one of their couples’ aliases, one she’d created independent of SHIELD. She’d told them he’d been mugged and fleshed out the lie as best as she could to match his injuries and the amount of time that seem to have passed. Hospitals didn’t care all that much, were used to people lying through their teeth about how they’d ended up there, but the less suspicious her story sounded, the longer it would take SHIELD to find them. She still didn’t know if they needed to run, but someone was going to be running from her.

Clint had woken up with a concussion, two gunshot wounds—one which had caused internal bleeding—several cracked ribs, various colorful bruises, a swollen thumb, and the news that Eliot Spencer was a mole.

Given that information, he should have called SHIELD immediately, not her. And since he hadn’t, she should have called SHIELD the moment she found out. But Clint didn’t want to talk about where he thought Spencer might run to. He gave all the details he could remember about the factory, the men who’d grabbed him, and the interrogator. He obstinately refused to talk about Spencer in any but the most general terms.

She’d long since become fluent in Clint Barton communication. He could talk a person’s ear off without saying much at all unless they could read into everything left unspoken. As he clamped his lips shut on the subject of Spencer, she heard: *I trusted him. I liked him. I gave him a choice. He didn’t choose me.*

He’d offered her a similar choice and she had chosen.

Since then she’d kept an eye on Eliot Spencer. Clint liked people, but that didn’t mean he trusted easily, and she’d come to rely on his judgment (in that regard at least — certainly not when doing the sniff-check on mysterious contents of tupperware in the fridge). Sometimes that judgement was flawed, but he had a knack for seeing people for what they were, even when they did not.

She and Clint avoided most of the inquiries into why one government agency was kidnapping and torturing members of another government agency. Neither of them wanted any part of that attention and Fury and Hill were happy to grant that request. It was all hushed up anyway, followed by a glossed-over lack of earmarks to the program. It was soon dismantled, redistributed, and never mentioned again. Those in the upper ranks found themselves shoved into dingy offices on worthless assignments and actively forgotten. Lower ranked officers and those they commanded were reassigned. That included Spencer’s commander, Vance, who came out of the mess with a promotion, a pardon for Spencer on the grounds that they were just following orders, and a task force, which she had to admit, proved impressively successful, if unorthodox.

She knew what it was like, living in a grey mist of morality and necessity. Of pretending she didn’t have a choice, because what is choice when there are no good options? She knew what it felt like, to look back and see a path that seemed destined. She was not surprised Eliot Spencer got lost. What she’d wanted to know, was if he would find himself again.

She watched grainy footage from security cameras — executions, interrogations, the past things his new partners knew but did not know. She read reports that may have been him and doubted what Clint had seen. But she’d noticed him start eschewing guns, dismantling and tossing them aside. She’d watched him stand over someone he’d just beaten and shake his head and walk away rather than finishing the job. She’d seen, by chance, in a report from someone in her network, the moment he hit rock bottom. And she’d watched him climb back up. Figure out what he could live with and what he couldn’t; clear that mist.

They’d come from such different places; beaten out a path for themselves in blood, much of it now old, caked, and dried dark brown. If he was anything like her, he could account for every drop he
spilled. He knew violence like she did, as a tool best used efficiently. Apply the correct pressure to gain prime results. Use others’ underestimation. She was stronger and he was smarter than either looked.

He had a handle on that crew before it was even a crew. She wondered how much of that was instinct, but the feel of that team called to her instantly. They shouldn’t work, but they did. She considered asking Fury, who had an eye for these things, what she was seeing, but decided against it. This was her project and it had been years since the incident which inspired it. It felt private to her now. Clint rarely asked, and she never volunteered the information to others.

Including Bobbi. After seeing her turn up undercover, Natasha considered the option, but decided against it. Morse could handle the team and she saw no reason to complicate things with her little project. Later tonight, she would need to explain herself, at least to an extent, and she wondered how it would sound. Like a spy, I suspect.

She nodded at Clint, a quick head jerk to suggest they head out. That was all it took. He returned with a nod of his own and they left, avoiding sprawled figures and over-turned tables. Clint, who would normally have been running his mouth the entire time, finally spoke, rubbing the back of his head and barely meeting her eyes. “So uh, thanks. I should get back.”

She arched an eyebrow and folded her arms. “Back?”

“To the building. I mean, I doubt they’d hit it tonight, but soon and I…” he trailed off in a shrug. “Anyway, Lucky’s waiting.” He glanced away, as if avoiding her gaze meant he could avoid her judgement.

“Actually he’s at the hotel, with Parker and Hardison, and Kate and Bobbi.” She moved past him before turning to see if he’d follow. “The only people missing are you and I. And Eliot, but that would be due to him staying behind in character after saving your life.” She saw the flash of guilt, quickly replaced by obstinacy, and took the direct approach. “Your plans suck, Clint. When you bother to plan at all, which it is clear you have not. Parker has something in mind and she already has Eliot in position. Hardison is building a fake SHIELD site, Kate just discovered that her father is involved, and Bobbi has just discovered I’ve been watching them—and her—for years. Do you still want to go home and miss all the fun?”

She knew he’d consider it for a moment—the draw of his bed and the temptation to wallow in his problems were difficult to refuse, not to mention his instinct to balk when he felt he was being pushed into anything. But she’d piqued his interest too much. Natasha smiled as he cast a quick look down the street and then followed her in the other direction.

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Eliot waited in the corner of the interrogation room, eyes closed and breathing regular. Sometime, after this job was done, he wouldn’t mind a chance to truly spar the Black Widow. She was better than him, probably. Been a while since he’d found someone who could claim that. The thought worried him. Not because of pride. And not because a lot of the people he’d considered better were dead now—though that was also true—but because thinking like that, getting cocky like that, was no good. In his world there was no best. There was only those capable of surviving and those not.

The ways people survived differed. Some used brutality, which he’d found to be effective in the
short-term, but had grown to hate the taste it left in his mouth. Killing someone did ensure they wouldn’t be around to kill you, but didn’t ensure your safety further down the road. Revenge was too powerful a motivator.

Some went the lone-wolf-with-a-side-of-paranoia route. He tried that too, on the dual logic that the only person he could trust was himself and he could not be trusted around other people. Eventually the cracks in this “logic” became fissures, and the construct shattered under its own contradictions. He’d lost the last shard of that reflection hurling a gravestone and hadn’t missed it since.

Others survived through trust. Easiest way to know someone wasn’t going to stab you in the back was having someone—or someones—watching it. He’d settled on this option. If there was another way, he didn’t particularly care to learn it.

Through the comm, he could hear the strip club dissolving into chaos. Clint and Natasha were wreaking havoc, and it sounded like fun. He wouldn’t have minded joining them, let off some steam, but the job was only getting started.

Hardison interrupted the noise Clint and Natasha were causing. “Hey Eliot, listen up. I’ve got our old dude on the security feed, heading your way, along with that homicidal asshole clown. He definitely ain’t walking right. And I’ve finally got schematics for these freaking tunnels—that safe was a jackpot, lemme tell you. I think they’re jumping ship; tunnel connects to an abandoned subway platform. Okay, they’re passing you…yeah he didn’t even stop. Don’t think he much cares for his employee’s well-bein’.”

“We got a plan?” he muttered quietly.

“Got one of those too!” Parker’s voice bounced through and he allowed himself a grin as she told him what she needed.

Eliot hauled himself upright, making sure he acted bruised and disoriented as he reentered the range of the camera. As he left the room, he could smell far too much cologne mixed with sweat and blood—the distinctive smell of bros at a strip club crashed by a Russian assassin and a pissed-off archer. He headed away from them, deeper into the tunnels, following O₂’s escape route.

Hardison guided him, giving directions at intersections, and barely sassing him at all, even when Eliot asked him how far ahead his quarry was.

“I ain’t looking at the Maurader’s Map here—sorry man, I mean there’s no cameras out this far, I can track you through the earbud, but not them.”

He was feeling guilty, which made two of them. Dammit Hardison, stop tiptoeing around. You were right, that’s what makes it worse. It wasn’t the time for that conversation, not with this many people on the comms. And besides, he’d reached a door. It was rusted and old, but when he cautiously pulled it open, it swung towards him easily and silently.

Eliot came face to face with the barrel of a handgun and reacted instantly, whipping his head to one side as he grabbed the gun, twisting it out of its owner’s hands and smoothly removing the magazine and emptying the chamber before tossing it away. In the brief struggle, one of his assailant’s knees had buckled and now only now did he stagger to his feet again. Eliot noted that he didn’t put any weight on his right leg. He also noted the smeared white face paint, with a circle around his eye and tear drop on his cheek. So this was the Clown.

Behind the Clown, stood O₂, on what seemed to be a subway platform. Eliot nodded to him and flicked his eyes back to the assassin. “Don’t like guns. Definitely don’t like guns in my face.”
The Clown’s lip curled. “Who is this, and what is he doing here?” He continued to hold Eliot’s gaze, but directed the question back to the old man.


The Clown whipped his head around. “Has he told you his name? Where he comes from? Who recommended him?”

Eliot broke in. “Think of tonight as the interview process. Now I’ve demonstrated a range of skills that seem like they’d be pretty useful to a guy like you. Now, I’m not saying you don’t have great help already—” he brushed past the Clown, catching him on his injured knee and the man gasped involuntarily. “—but if y’all need something temporary, I can lend a hand.” He gave the old man a smile Sophie liked to call “beatific.” Hardison liked to call it “scary-ass.” He’d learned it from Parker.

The Clown glared at him, but O2 tilted his head to one side, considering. “How you make Barton talk?”

“Well, you said he had a lot of mouth and not much brain, so I just let him talk. How’m I supposed to interrogate a deaf guy anyway? Besides, all interrogations fall into two categories.” Eliot spread his hands out to demonstrate. “You have the guys who know why they’ve been grabbed and are trying not to say anything, and you got the guys who don’t know why they’ve been grabbed, and they’ll talk, but nothin useful usually come out.” He shrugged. “Bro knew why he’d been grabbed, just let him ramble and he gets in the habit and won’t stop, especially not when there’s a girl on the line. Sure I got my ass handed to me, but I ain’t dead and I got the information. Plenty of time to kill ’em both later if you want.”

O2 wheezed another laugh. “Car arrive soon. Come with us, bro. Kaziu needs rest and I need muscle.”

Eliot frowned and folded his arms. He needed to make this guy work a bit harder than that if he wanted him to really value the relationship. “You got plenty of muscle. And I ain’t just muscle. I don’t come that cheap.”

“Good boy. Know your worth. Kaziu not just muscle either, bro. You fill his shoes till he walk right.”

Kaziu glowered at Eliot, but before he could say anything, the “car” approached. A subway car. Eliot raised his eyebrows, but followed the other two men inside, surreptitiously pulling the earbud out and sticking it in a hidden pocket. He’d hated Parker pulling that stunt when she went over to Clint’s, but Kaziu trusted him about as far as he could kick him with that leg and would be looking for any reason to prove his suspicions.

The interior looked like no subway car Eliot had ever been in. Instead it resembled a private plane, complete with leather armchairs, brass rails, and plush carpets. He glanced around as O2 and Kaziu settled themselves, Kaziu with a wince he tried very hard to cover as he extended his leg in front of him.

“You should get that looked at,” Eliot informed him, the paragon of helpful innocence. He threw in an entirely insincere smile for good measure.

“You should mind your own business,” Kaziu snapped.
Too late for that. He decided to stay standing, leaning nonchalantly against one of the brass poles. “Where we headed?”

The assassin’s lip curled. “As I said. Too many questions.”

O₂ turned his head slightly, possibly glancing his way. Does he ever take those stupid glasses off? “To Manhattan. To see partners.”

Eliot flashed another patronizing smile at his predecessor. He knew he was walking a fine line with the goading, but the guy had threatened to kill Parker. He deserved a hell of a lot worse than this and really he was resisting admirably from punching the guy’s head through the window.

Kaziu, voice tight, said, “You should not tell him so much. You don’t even know his name.”

O₂ turned his head more fully this time. “He is right. You have not told me name.”

“Neither have you.” Eliot replied. He wanted to avoid names for as long as possible. “When you tell me yours, I’ll return the favor. Not before.” If the Clown had heard of him, hopefully it was only the pre-Nate Ford version, who’d made a name for himself doing the same types of jobs the Clown did. He’d managed to remain relatively low profile since then, aside from that stint as a country star and a baseball player, in any case, but no reason to test his luck. There was the whole business with the Butcher, after all.

O₂ considered his terms. “Okay bro. You keep name. I keep name. We here.”

The car pulled to a stop. Both Kaziu and O₂ struggled to get up from the deep chairs. Eliot made a point of helping O₂. He didn’t know how loyal Kaziu was to the old man, and if the loyalty was mutual, but he needed to be helpful, to anticipate his employer’s needs if he was to carry through with his part of Parker’s plan, crazy as it sounded.
Chapter Summary

Hardison couldn’t hold back any longer. “Purposes? What were y’all’s purposes? Who the hell here hasn’t been spying on us? What have we ever done to you?”

“It wasn’t about you.” Bobbi and Natasha responded in unison.

Chapter Notes

Hey, we've finally hit the third act? part? My lazy way of identifying a group of chapters without actually having to come up with chapter names? Anyway. Thanks to everyone who's stuck around for this thing. There will be heisting soon, I promise.

Kate sat on the floor, her back against the couch. Lucky’s head occupied one folded leg, paws twitching in doggy dreams. Her other leg was balancing one of the files from the safe, but she’d switched her attention to the financials Hardison had dug up on her dad. She knew the numbers now, but she kept reading them over and over. Ventures of the Kingpin’s he’d filtered money to, private undertakings, the LMD project. Bobbi, curled up on the couch above her, had highlighted the seriously questionable stuff to show Kate what to look for, and then left her to search out more while she caught some shut eye.

Parker was doing the same, sprawled upside down in an armchair, feet in the air, head hanging off the seat. Kate raised an eyebrow at her position and looked past her to see Hardison watching her as well with the softest of smiles on his face. Reluctantly, Kate shifted the dog so she could stand up and moved over to him. “What are you working on?” she whispered.

“Making a fake SHIELD site look as real as possible. They need to think they got valuable intel thanks to Eliot questioning Clint.” He rubbed at his jaw. “Usually, before one of us goes undercover, we got a fake life, with IDs, backstories, web history, the works. I build that so when Eliot does something stupid, we’ve got a cover to fall back on. But this time—this time things went so weird so quick, I didn’t have that.”

“Clint and I made things weird?”

“Girl, anytime superheroes are involved in anything, things get weird fast. But this is mostly on us. We jumped before we looked, because I’m the one doing the looking, but so much of this stuff is analog and offline, so I didn’t see it. Didn’t realize how big it was getting till too late to course correct. So we’re taking down a giant consortium of criminals by the seat of our pants, using tech that was a myth until like an hour ago.”

Kate sighed. “Sounds familiar.”

“Yeah. I guess it would. And usually I’d be geeking out about it, cause it’s SO. DAMN. COOL.”
He picked up the data-pack tossing it from one hand to the other. “But Eliot went in without a parachute, basically, and took out his comm, damn him, so I don’t have a lot of options when it comes to keeping him safe. Least he gave me the signal first.”

“Signal?”

“Teeth clicking—sometimes use Morse, but we got a shorthand for stuff like ‘I’m okay, but these things might be found so I’m taking them out.”

“Yeah, I can see why you’d use a shorthand for that.” Kate remarked dryly.

“I can still track him with the GPS, but I can’t feed him any info.” Hardison switched windows, bringing up a map with a blinking dot, heading to Manhattan. “Only thing I can do from here is make him valuable, and that can help keep him alive. Got me?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure Eliot can handle himself though.”

“Oh, I know he can. Point of us being a team is that he don’t need to. But I think he forgets that sometimes. Or he forgets it goes both ways, in any case.”

“Both ways?”

“Yeah. Sometimes ass-kickers need protecting too.”

Okay, that makes sense. Like a lot of sense.

“Anything I can do? I feel useless and I don’t want to sleep. How are they sleeping while this is happening?”

Hardison laughed softly. “You get sleep where you can. Me, I don’t sleep much during jobs. Too much backend stuff and caffeine. Parker and Eliot, they can fall asleep in thirty seconds and be ready when you snap your fingers. Ain’t normal, but then Parker and Eliot ain’t normal.”

“Normal’s overrated,” Kate murmured, staring at the tiny blinking dot, “I didn’t think Eliot would be this, uhh, Clint-ish, though.”

“Generally, he ain’t. I mean, he’ll walk into a fight with five armed guys and take ‘em out with his fists, but he walks in with a plan. But we’ve all done jobs where things got personal, and when things get personal, people get reckless.”

And do things like take on the neighborhood mafia.

Across the room, Bobbi stood up, tapped Parker’s foot as she went by, and headed toward the bathroom, calling out. “Hawkeye, get the door, will ya?”

Kate glanced at the door. “No one’s at—” A soft patterned knock came from the door. She turned to stare at Bobbi. “Okay, Radar.”

Bobbi grinned and winked, before disappearing from view. Kate pulled open the door to let in Natasha, looking slightly mussed, and Clint looking— well, ‘mussed’ really wasn’t going to cut it.

“Clint, you look like one of Lucky’s chew toys.” That was putting it mildly, though it oddly reassured her to realize she’d seen Clint in far worse shape than this.

“Hello to you too, Katie-Kate,” he groaned and then paused mid-groan as Lucky bounced up, tail wagging.
Clint dropped to his knees and let Lucky begin licking his face. “Ow, gentle, don’t the taste for my blood, ‘kay? All I need is a vampire dog.”

Parker’s head suddenly appeared over the chair, frowning. “Don’t turn him into a vampire!”

“What? No!” Bobbi came out of the bathroom, first aid kit in hand. “Lucky isn’t going to turn into a vampire dog…” she trailed off, shaking her head. “And I thought my regular job had me saying weird shit. Clint, come here. Dog slobber is not going to help those heal.”

“Aw, dog mouths are clean!” He stumbled to his feet, reluctantly obeying Bobbi.

Hardison stared at him in horror. “Okay, that’s just wrong and nasty. And don’t get blood all over the couch. It ain’t nice for the maids and Eliot ain’t here to tell me how to get blood stains out.”

“Hydrogen peroxide.” Kate said instantly, and discovered she was part of a chorus with Natasha, Parker, and Bobbi. Clint and Hardison looked a little alarmed.

“Preferably for fresh blood.” Natasha offered, examining a splatter of the stuff on her sleeve. Kate doubted it was hers.

“Enzyme called catalase that’s in blood reacts with the hydrogen peroxide, breaking it down from H₂O₂ into…” Bobbi stopped, noticed everyone’s confused faces and sighed. “I was a biochemist first.” She glared at Clint, until he came over. “Hold still,” she ordered and started cleaning up the dried blood. “People use it as an antiseptic, but it’s really not strong enough at the concentrations they sell it in at the drugstore, so it just foams and stings, which make it seem like it’s working.”

“Ow! So why are you using it?” Clint demanded.

“I’m not! These are alcohol swabs and I said hold still. This one is going to need stitches.”

“Aw, Bobbi, just use the futzing butterfly swabs, okay?”

Kate grinned at the pair of them. Natasha had gone over to Hardison and was inspecting what he’d done. “Good work Hardison, that looks quite believable.”

“Do not question my talent, spy-lady, I got this.” Hardison was clearly pleased with himself. “And also, how do you know my name? I was letting that slide earlier, seeing as you just saved Parker’s life and was on the way to get Clint out while preserving Eliot’s cover. But before we go any further into this wormhole, let’s get this clear.”

Kate thought she saw a flash of worry cross Natasha’s face, but that couldn’t be right. Natasha didn’t get worried. Natasha went and solved the problem that would make other people worry. Okay, so that’s a stupid thought, Kate. Who says the Black Widow isn’t allowed to worry? But she does solve things. Like I should be doing right now. But how do I solve a problem like my father? She forced herself back to the present.

“…past decade, I’ve been keeping an eye on Eliot Spencer and any important contacts that entered his life.” Natasha was looking around the room, gauging their reactions, Kate thought. She did the same, trying to decide how she, the least connected to this revelation, would feel if it were her. Hardison, eyes wide, but somehow resisting the urge to say anything, was looking at Parker, who seemed irritated but resigned. Clint was not at all surprised, and mostly seemed pretty relieved that Bobbi had dropped the swab and was staring at Natasha in utter shock.

“You’ve been doing WHAT.” Bobbi gaped in disbelief at Natasha.
“Listen, Mock—” Clint began, but Bobbi shook her head.

“You should have told me!” She scowled, folding her arms.

“When?” Natasha inquired, raising an eyebrow. “During? After? There didn’t seem to be a reason to. Our purposes were different.”

Hardison couldn’t hold back any longer. “Purposes? What were y’all’s purposes? Who the hell here hasn’t been spying on us? What have we ever done to you?”

“It wasn’t about you.” Bobbi and Natasha responded in unison. They glanced at each other and then Bobbi looked away.

“I’ve already explained, Hardison.”

“Not to me.” Clint said, “I got it from Eliot, but that was in Eliot-speak. Or Eliot-lip, in any case.”

“And she hasn’t!” Hardison added, glowering at Natasha. Kate wished she had popcorn. This was like a four-person ping-pong game of secrets.

Natasha held up her hand. “Clint. Bobbi got involved with them a few years ago as part of a cover. I’m sure she can give you more details later, but this is taking too long and I—I should explain to them.” She turned to Hardison. “You were never the focus of my surveillance. Neither of you were, nor was Nate Ford, nor was, as you know her, Sophie Devereaux. I began watching Eliot after the incident with Clint. He’d infiltrated SHIELD, betrayed an agent, and almost gotten him killed. I saw to it the organization he worked for lost all power and funding.” She paused. “There are no official reports of my monitoring. Two people at SHIELD are kept informed, and Clint knew whatever he wished to ask. Which wasn’t much.” She shrugged and waited for someone to respond.

“You thought he was a threat?” Kate tried to imagine watching someone from a distance for ten years.

“I thought he was a person of interest.” Natasha left it at that, but Kate understood her to mean something more. After all, Clint had offered to vouch for Eliot. Like he’d vouched for Nat. So, more like personal interest. It was weird to think of Natasha in those terms, but then she didn’t know her like Clint did. He looked like the thought of Natasha spying on someone for a decade was run of the mill. Hell, it probably was.

“Fury and Hill know?” Bobbi broke the silence with a question that was more a statement. She sounded like she was weighing options.

Kate found herself talking. “Hill definitely knows something. She was deliberately not not saying nothing earlier.” Mentally reviewing that sentence, she was pretty sure it made no sense, but Natasha was nodding as if it did, so win for her.

Bobbi released a breath, coming to a decision. “Okay. I just got out of over five hours of debriefing and signing highly confidential documents swearing the information I knew would never leave that insanely boring room under pain of death. SHIELD’s a bit uptight about information leaks at the moment, Clint can explain that one, so what I am about to say does not leave this room under pain of your death. Hardison, do I make myself clear?”

“Why y’all looking at me for?” Hardison demanded, clearly irritated at being the one singled out.

“Because Parker and Eliot—who isn’t even listening right now—are masters at not sharing
information. You live on the web and I’m sure Natasha knows all the places you spend your time—even the ones I don’t.” She looked meaningfully at the hacker until he held up his hands.

“Okay, okay, I swear, nothing leaves this room. Pretty sure there’s gonna be snipers waiting anyway.”

“If you’re leaving through the front, I’d check out the top of the parking structure to the right.” Clint suggested helpfully.

Hardison eyed him warily. “Man, that ain’t at all reassuring.”

“Yeah,” Parker added, “besides, snipers are risky in broad daylight. Much easier in an alley. No witnesses.” Natasha nodded in agreement, slight smile on her lips. Hardison stared at the ceiling. It was entirely possible he was praying.

“Anyway.” Bobbi dragged the conversation back to the topic. Kate figured between Parker, Hardison, and Clint she’d had to rescue quite a number of derailed conversations. “I was not in some far corner of the earth without cell service, as some of you seemed to assume. Believe it or not, there are actually not that many corners of the earth, and even fewer are lacking in cell phones—especially untraceable ones. It’s a main way people in poorer countries do business and access information, and oh god now I’m going on completely irrelevant tangents, the point is that I was in L.A."

Clint gave her a perplexed look. “Okay, what’s in L.A.? Aside from palm trees and truly terrible drivers?”

“You don’t get to complain about anyone’s driving, and Gia Neff, aka Nefaria, aka Madam Masque. I believe you’ve met?”

“Ugh.” Kate groaned. “Madripoor, again.”

“Glass windows.” Parker said, out of the blue.

“Huh? What about glass windows? Do we need to give a run down on Madripoor?”

“Don’t need to.” Kate blinked at Hardison’s suddenly sharp tone.

“What do you mean I don’t need to?” she demanded, hands on her hips.

“I mean, I already know what went down in Madripoor. Black market auction for a tape that shows him,” he nodded at Clint, “assassinating some dignitary.”

“Eliot thinks it’s fake, though,” Parker put in, with a warning glance at Hardison.

Kate was rather pleased to see she wasn’t the only one glaring at Hardison. Clint looked pretty resigned, but Bobbi and Natasha looked pissed on his behalf. And they hadn’t even been there.

“Oh. That’s what you think went down in Madripoor? Wow, you suck at your job.” She ignored his affronted look and barreled on. “I followed Clint to Madripoor, because I don’t like it when people don’t tell me things. So I saw him get kidnapped by Madame Masque, and then I beat up Madam Masque, took her clothes and bought the tape at the auction while she was tied up in her room. And then I helped Clint escape and we jumped through a window in a really huge skyscraper, and didn’t die because Hill caught us on one of those sky-cycles, which, by the way,” she turned to Clint, the thought striking her, “you told me you had one ages ago and I still haven’t seen it. Or flown it for that matter.” She shifted back to Hardison. “So there. Did you get any of
that from your super hacking?"

“A bit. What’s a sky-cycle?” Parker asked.

Hardison was silent for a moment. “Was it fake?” he finally asked.

Clint finally spoke up. “Yeah. SHIELD had a problem with a mole. I was asked to help flush them out. The guy who actually took that shot—he was a SEAL, had a family, kids, and was doing his duty. Figured if something was gonna leak, hey, give ‘em a nice big target to shoot for.” He rubbed the back of his head and shrugged. “Least I could do.”

Hardison’s eyes flicked back to the little red dot on his screen, before turning back to Clint and giving him a nod of acceptance. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a smile grow on Parker’s face.

Bobbi, in the tone of someone who was reaching the end of an extensive rope, asked, “Can we please, get back to the point. My god, you people make it so difficult to commit treason.” She glanced around to make sure she had everyone’s attention again before continuing. “Gia Neff’s operation in L.A. consisted of a large number of LMD’s—an older model she and her father had clearly gotten their hands on and managed to replicate, apparently to make rich people look young again. I—”

“Laid waste?” Natasha suggested diplomatically.

“Blew shit up?” Clint suggested, less so.

“Yes. To both. I hacked into their system, copied all their files and accounts, and blew up the house and all the decoys in it.” She grinned. “It was a pretty awesome fireball. Not in my top ten, but definitely not bad.”

“See that’s the secret. Enough for the fire department to show up, but not the army!” Kate found herself giggling at how proud Clint sounded.

“Yeah, sport, cause you never got the army called on you. Never. Or the National Guard, the Coast Guard, the SWAT teams of multiple counties…” Bobbi listed on her fingers. “Anyway, I thought I got it all. SHIELD was monitoring the mission, obviously, and agreed. But since there’s an LMD data pack that was hanging out in that safe, someone had a standby out here. Maybe more than one.”

“So the question is who?” Parker stood up. “Hardison, where’s Eliot?”

“In Manhattan, it looks like he got there by subway, but it’s not a public route. There are a lot of tunnels that were built but never became actual lines, and I think—cause he ain’t talking in my ear, so this is all guesswork—that they got some private car. They ended up at some fancy skyscraper down in the financial district.”

“He’ll try to get in contact as soon as he can, but it might not be for long, so we need to have a plan for him.”

Kate snapped her head up. “Wait, I thought you had a plan? You told Eliot to get in with them and get them talking about the LMDs.”

Parker looked at her, bemused. “That’s not a plan. That’s a talking thing. A conversation. A plan involves steps and an end. Preferably with money at it.”
“So Eliot’s winging it with no earbud? Because he thinks it might be seen? Isn’t that a smaller risk?”

Bobbi shook her head. “If Eliot thinks the earbud was a risk, it must have been a big risk. He should have kept his hair longer.”

Eliot had longer hair? “How much longer?” Kate glared as everyone else burst out laughing.

“Hardison, after this, find that stupid Japanese soda commercial.” Bobbi said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he grinned. “Parker, you wanna continue, or we gonna talk about Eliot’s long, silky locks some more?”

Parker huffed out a breath. “So, the plan is, we forge Clint.”

Clint’s head shot up. “Hang on a sex—sec—we do what now?”

Chapter End Notes

So I gave Kate’s LA adventure to Bobbi, not that I don't love Kate detectiving in LA, but that timeframe was NOT working out and Bobbi needed to be SOMEWHERE. yay fanfic freedoms!
Chapter Summary

Now that he had a foot in the door and the only person in any current danger was him, Eliot could relax and enjoy his role as the inside man.

Now that he had a foot in the door and the only person in any current danger was him, Eliot could relax and enjoy his role as the inside man. He’d prefer to have the earbud in, connected to the larger group as Parker formulated a plan for them on the fly, but he trusted her balance on that high-wire more than he’d ever trusted Nate’s. He had enough to go on for now.

They exited the car onto a small platform, and for a moment, he was certain he’d entered a miniature version of the Moscow Metro. New York subway platforms were just not this nice. Of course, this one wasn’t public. This one had money behind it.

He swept his glance across the marble pillars and chandeliers hanging from arched ceilings, letting his appreciation show. While deep-pocketed employers occasionally liked to have their wealth acknowledged, the subcontractors were the ones that liked to flaunt it, to demonstrate the power they held by association. O₂, with his mafia of bros wielding baseball bats, was small-fry, trying to play with some very large fish. Even here, in the guts below the seat of power, he looked small and out of place.

Kaziu, who, Eliot was sure, usually needed to shorten his long stride to match his employer’s slow progress, had to take full advantage of the glacial pace to even keep up at his hobble. Eliot smirked in satisfaction at the number Natasha had done on that kneecap. The Clown spent the time removing smeared facepaint with a package of make-up removing wipes.

“And what’s with the facepaint? Are you a sad clown?” Parker had asked. The smirk grew difficult to contain. Damn, this was better than punching the guy through a window. The Clown was known as one of the most fearsome killers from the Soviet Bloc—which was saying something, given that he’d just sparred with the Black Widow. And then there was that thing with the Soldier, years back... Anyway, this guy might have a reputation, but now he could barely keep up with an octogenarian dragging an oxygen tank, and he still had a bit of greasepaint on his chin.

“You, uh, missed a spot,” Eliot pointed out, still the paragon of helpfulness. Kaziu attempted to scrub at his chin in a dignified way. O₂ ignored both of them, coming to a stop by the brass doors of an elevator, polished to a high sheen. Kaziu found the missed paint in his reflection, taking the opportunity to straighten his suit as well. With the paint gone, he looked more as if he belonged here. Eliot doubted he’d come from money, but he’d grown accustomed to its existence in his life. He obeyed the old man, stayed slightly behind him, in the position of an underling, but a trusted one. He’d been the person chosen to retrieve Clint’s aids, and when that failed, even injured, he was the one to escort the old man away. Whatever their relationship, Kaziu was valuable, and he knew it.

No wonder he hated Eliot for imposing. Eliot could hear the slight accent when he spoke, a distinctive lilt to the consonants that indicated he and the old man, with his much heavier accent, came from the same region. The same city, if he wasn’t mistaken. Probably recruited. Probably
started as a street kid with nobody and nothing, given a chance to prove himself. He studied the pair of them. The ages worked. Twenty, thirty years ago, O₂ would have been a boss in his prime, but not so young that he still felt immortal. Sure he had a son, but Kaziu wasn’t meant to be a son, regardless of how loyal he’d no doubt proven to be. He was a weapon.

Eliot had played that role before. Didn’t much care for it. He wondered if Kaziu felt the same, particularly now, hobbled, with his possible replacement standing beside him.

They rode the elevator without speaking. Eliot could feel the frustration and disgust radiating from Kaziu and refrained from goading the man more. He didn’t need him taking matters into his own hands. They stood behind O₂ like good little lackeys and Eliot studied the control panel beside the door. It had one button. Apparently this thing was a one trick pony. From a security standpoint, it wasn’t as impractical as it seemed. Limiting the number of access points meant the limiting the number of surprises. You knew where people were getting on and off, which considering some of the stunts they’d pulled in the past using elevators, was a wise and annoying decision. Course, that didn’t account for the way Parker tended to use elevators. Eliot allowed himself another small smirk.

The elevator dinged softly, finally, and they stepped out onto plush carpet, dim lighting, and blocky leather chairs. A waiting room. A fancy one, but definitely a waiting room. A large pair of double doors loomed from the other side of the room.

“Wait here.” O₂ ordered him, confirming his assumption. The order was directed at him, not Kaziu. *Not entirely replaceable, then.*

Eliot nodded and then, as an afterthought, asked, “Hey boss, is there a bathroom I can use?” He gave a little shrug, making the request seem as innocuous as possible.

The old man, already moving towards the double doors, with Kaziu limping at his heels, waved a hand to the right. “Down there.” He disappeared into the next room. Eliot caught a glimpse of a long oval table with shadowy figures seated around it. How cliché.

He strode down the hall, scouting for security cameras before casually reaching into his pocket and retrieving the earbud. It went into his ear as part of a smooth motion to brush back his hair. The bathroom was empty. He listened to the voices for a moment, identifying Parker, Hardison, and Tara—who was now being called Bobbi. Oh, *that* was who Circus had mentioned back at the apartment. If he admitted that wrong assumption to Clint, he’d never hear the end of it. If he didn’t mention it, he might never hear the story. What “messy thing” had cost Circus his hearing? How the hell had those two ever been *married*? Actually, come to think of it, that second one made a lot of sense.

He listened to a snarky comment from Clint, and a sarcastic response from Kate. Was that everyone—no, wait, there were the low, measured tones of Natasha.

“Hey, I’m here,” he murmured.

“E-Eliot! Hey man!” Eliot realized he was grinning at Hardison’s effusion. “I’m putting you on speakerphone, since you’re the only one still out and I’m still working on getting one of Clint’s aids wired for this. How much time you got?”

“ Few minutes, or till someone comes into this bathroom, so shut up for a sec.”

“Hmph fine, Grumpy Cat,” Parker muttered.
“Don’t call me that, Parker. Dammit Circus!”

“Aw Eliot, it’s your own fault for making the face. Constantly.” He sounded exhausted, but less stressed than before the whole torture session. That was very Clint.

“Shut up, Circus,” he ordered, and ignored the giggling that had to be Kate. He told them about the conversations on the subway, his assessment of Kaziu and O₂, and Bobbi quickly explained where she’d been and what she’d been doing.

“So, we’re gonna make them forge Clint.” Parker broke in almost before Bobbi had finished.

The fact that this wasn’t the craziest plan Parker had ever come up with indicated he needed to recalibrate what he considered crazy, but before he could launch any objections, the door to the bathroom opened, and a short, balding man wandered in. He looked slightly startled to see Eliot.

“Oh! You must be the new muscle the old man hired.” He stuck out a small, moist hand. “Derek Bishop.”

Eliot took the hand, noting the lack of callus, and made sure to give a bit too much pressure on the squeeze. “Pleased to meet you.” He didn’t offer his name. “If you’ve heard of me already, they must have gotten straight down to business in there.” He went casually over to the urinals. Some men found holding a conversation while pissing to be intimidating, and he was willing to bet Derek Bishop was one of them. In his ear, Bobbi was asking Kate for information about her father, though Eliot was confident he could read him easily. His estimation of Kate rose several notches higher. Kid had to put up with this whiny dick?

“Um. Well yes, we were waiting for his update into the matter.” He was carefully not looking at Eliot. “It was quite the update, hmmm.”

Kate, in dour tones, informed him that her dad liked to hear himself talk, but she doubted the guys in the league he was playing in now were particularly interested in what he had to say. Also that based on her conversation with Kaziu at her dad’s party, Eliot was totally right about him, and how did he do that?

If Kate followed them back to Portland, pestering them the whole way, Eliot decided he wouldn’t actually mind all that much.

Natasha, sounding very much like Sophie, said, “Eliot, lead him into talking about the problems they’ve had.”

“Seemed like a productive night to me.” He zipped up and headed for the sinks.

“Hah. You think Barton still being alive and now with the Black Widow involved is productive? First the disaster in L.A. and now this, this, calamity.”

Eliot shrugged. “I fought the Widow tonight. She got lucky, but I think I could take her, if she crosses my path again. There’s a line she won’t cross if she wants to stay SHIELD’s pet. I have only the restrictions you place on me. What happened in L.A.?”

“Don’t damage my reputation,” Natasha murmured, low and amused.

“Oh you know, just years of work and billions of dollars, up in smoke. All because of SHIELD. And here I am, not getting any younger, and thanks to all this stress, aging faster most likely. The decoy program was supposed to do the opposite.”
Eliot leaned casually against the wall and raised his eyebrows. “Decoy program?” He pretended to think for a moment. “Wait, SHIELD was rumored to have something called a decoy—type of robot that looked like a human?”

“Yes, yes, any human you want, as long as you have their biometrics. But basically everything was blown up in L.A. last night, and now Barton isn’t dead, and the Avengers will come down hard…” he shook his head. “Not to speak ill of your employer, but his vendetta with Barton has caused far more problems that it is worth. And he has the others agreeing with him!”

Eliot considered this. “It got you a SHIELD login, that has to be worth something.”

“Hah. Yes, until Barton reports the breach and they reset the system, or whatever those technical types intend to do. We’re downloading this as fast as possible, but…” he trailed off.

Eliot hadn’t actually considered that these guys would think they had a limited amount of time on the fake SHIELD site. Hardison apparently hadn’t either, but told Eliot he was “on it”, whatever that meant. “You have a decoy left?”

“Two, but only one has a datapack. The other went missing.”

Ah. So, the others didn’t know about the contents of the safe. Interesting. “Sounds to me like all you need is for Barton to disappear.”

“Oh yes, and risk more wrath from the Avengers? That’s a brilliant plan. He’ll be lying low, after tonight. We won’t even know where to find him.” Man, you really don’t know Circus. The guy was just gonna go home. Bishop laughed bitterly, continuing, “Well, my daughter might know, but she’s infatuated with him—teenagers, hmph—and too busy playing around at being his sidekick.”

“Your daughter…is Barton’s sidekick?” Eliot ignored the raging of Kate in his ear.

“Yes, well she somehow got it into her head that this should be her teenage rebellion. Become a superhero! She can be so childish.”

“The old man tell you what I do?” Eliot decided to steer this away from the touching father/daughter moment that was not happening, if only so Kate would stop telling him to punch the guy. If he didn’t need him, he’d be happy to do her the favor.

“Not exactly. He said you interrogated Barton and got him to talk quite quickly.”

“That’s some of what I do. I’m a retrieval specialist. You need something, I retrieve it. Sometimes that’s information, sometimes it’s a body.” He grinned. “One time, it was a rare baseball card. People want all kinds of things.”

Bishop studied him. “You think you can track down Barton?”

Eliot gave him a single shoulder shrug. “Sure thing. And I can make him disappear. But y’know what’d be better? If no one noticed.”

The other man tilted his head, and then finally got it. “You mean, replace him with a decoy?”

“Yeah, I mean, I figure his biometric data has to be on the SHIELD system, right? You build a Barton, the Avengers are gonna take a while to figure it out, and in the meantime you get an inside man. Plus, Old Man finally gets that building signed over to his guy. Problems solved.” He could see the cogs churning in Bishop’s brain.
“Build a Barton…hmmm.” He nodded to Eliot. “Very, very nice to meet you. I hope we will have more business together in the future. I assure you, I pay handsomely.” He hurriedly shook Eliot’s hand and practically ran from the room.

Eliot waited until the door had swung shut behind him to wipe the sweaty residue of the handshake on his leg, murmuring to the others. “The hook has been set.”
Chapter Summary

“You need something from me, Clint, but I’m not going to know what that is until you ask. Not one of your strong points, asking for help, now is it?”

“Not really.” Understatement. He was great at understatements.

Clint walked home in the too early hours of the morning, bow in hand and dog by his side. His shoulders ached from being tied for so long. Hell, everything else ached as well. One eye was still swollen shut, making him and Lucky a matching pair. Bruised ribs, bashed up knee, no skin left on his wrists, split lip, way too many bruises and cuts to count, aw hell why bother counting any of it really. Just another day in the life. No internal bleeding, no stabbing pains, no broken bones, he was fine.

*Because you got your hopeless ass rescued.*

The dark streets were mostly quiet; that odd period after the bars closed but before the coffee shops opened. Lights were slowly flickering on in windows. Not the rushed panic of being awoken in the middle of the night, just regular people getting ready to start a regular day. Cooks, nurses, janitors, truckers…all rolling out of bed long before dawn because that was what they had to do.

The third floor corner window of the tenement at the end of the street illuminated. That would be Margie. Must be four-fifteen then. She woke up at four everyday, like clockwork, but she took the extra fifteen minutes before turning on the light – her own quiet pocket of time. She’d told him that while putting an extra donut in his bag with a wink; said she’d seen him walking home hours before, and if he wasn’t going to have sleep, at least he could have sugar. He liked her logic.

Across the street, second floor, two windows in. Ron was running late, he should be at the docks by now, but if he took a bottle to bed, he never heard the alarm. Ron had a name for that clock – Alan, that was it. Alan was the shrillest, loudest clock he could get, but some mornings it wasn’t enough. Ron liked to name things. Had a name for his hat, his bed, his TV—if you talked to Ron without knowing this, you either got the impression that he was either crazy or had a lot of roommates. Clint figured he was just lonely.

Apartment above Ron’s was Rosa, who must have been stomping around hard to wake him up. She liked to make noise in the morning, she’d told Clint one time when he’d helped her lug a load of washing up the stairs. She was under five feet, but made up for it in volume. She would stomp through her bedroom, bang pots in the kitchen, all to get her lazy husband out of bed. And Ron, down below, if he was still asleep. Somehow, Ron would wake up to Rosa, if not Alan. Clint had asked her if her next door neighbors complained, but apparently they’d moved out. Rosa had mentioned soon she might have to do the same – rents were being raised left and right.

He’d made this walk hundreds of times. Bone-tired from fighting some big bad, the moment he turned this corner something would loosen in him, like the moment a bow is unstrung, the tension released. Shadows in windows became reassuring reminders of humanity, rather than threats to be assessed. Protecting the world from aliens, giant robots, and megalomaniac scientists seemed impossible, but if it gave Margie her fifteen minutes of silence at four AM, then hell, that was good
enough for him.

But Margie and Rosa and Ron and Simone and Grills weren’t being threatened by aliens or crazy scientists, but with guys in vans swinging baseball bats. And for all that he’d shoot a god in the face, he couldn’t stop a bunch of guys with a limited vocabulary. He couldn’t protect this street, his building, or his friend. He was losing.

The fight wasn’t lost; it had gained three criminals, two spies, and an archer.

He wasn’t stupid; he knew the value of a team.

He just didn’t know what he brought to it. Eliot had said he should use them like any trick arrow, but he told an arrow where to go, it did what it was designed to do. Hell, if anyone was the trick arrow here, it was **him**.

*Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.* He shoved that niggling voice back. The important thing was the building, or rather, the people in it. He’d promised them. And if Parker’s plan went to shit, if everything hanging in the balance crashed and burned, he’d fall back on his Plan B: stand out front and shoot anyone who challenged him. The tracksuits would get this building over his dead body. That was the only outcome he could live with.

*Figuratively speaking.*

He scanned the surrounding buildings as he approached his door, but saw no unusual silhouettes, no small movements of a person ducking out of sight or flattening their back to a wall. He wondered if Natasha was shadowing him. If so, she’d said nothing — in fact she’d said nothing for a while now. He was, however, hearing weird grunts and muffled noises.

“Hey Hardison?”

“Hey Clint, how’s the reception?” Hardison’s voice came through his aids. Back at the hotel, he’d griped about the fact that they could all talk to each other, and the guy had grinned and stuck out his hand for one of the aids.

“S’good man, you on your way?”

“Uh, not yet—” he paused, then in an undertone, “Parker-Parker, hold up girl I’m only doing five things at once, quit climbing on me.”

Clint began to question the benefit of hearing everything. “Uh, guys?”

“Hey Clint.” Parker this time. “Hardison, stop being such a baby. I’ve harnessed you up tons of times.”

“Guys, is there any way to not hear what you’re doing?”

“Uh no, not without, you know, taking them out or turning the volume down, it was a quick fix, I didn’t install an interface to filter various noises or anything — why?” He made a soft oomph noise. “Parker, girl, does it have to be that tight? I can’t feel my—”

“Because I don’t want to hear—whatever is going on? Is anyone else listening to this?”

Parker answered, sounding slightly irritated, “Eliot’s earbud is out again, till creepy clown guy goes away, Kate’s asleep, Natasha left, and Bobbi’s having a conversation on her phone that we are not supposed to eavesdrop on about guard rotations.”
Clearly eavesdropping then.

“So I’m the only one who gets to listen to you guys, uh…”

“Put Hardison in a completely safe-lightweight-totally-will-not-break-I-designed-it-myself harness for our exit route, because someone refuses to use a parachute with me?” Parker huffed out.

Clint felt his brain do a U-turn from one scenario he didn’t need to be hearing to a completely different scenario he didn’t need to be hearing. “Are you guys breaking into Stark’s AGAIN?” The first time, he’d suggested it to get Parker on Jarvis’ radar. Sure, she could avoid cameras and laser beams, but nobody avoided Jarvis.

Things I shouldn’t mention now that we’re working together…

“Clint, you think I just keep a mapping system for a mythical robot I didn’t know existed in my carry-on luggage?” Hardison asked, incredulous.

“I said I could do it alone, but since I don’t know what we’re looking for—”

Clint winced. So that was why Bobbi was on the phone. There was no way this would be officially sanctioned, so she must be sweet-talking someone, probably without them realizing it. “Where’d Natasha go?”

“Man, you’re the one she hasn’t been spying on for years, how should we know? She just left. Said she would handle a diversion for the Crim-Con.”

“Crim-Con?”

“Criminal Consortium,” Hardison announced. “I made it up.”

With Natasha, it could mean anything. “Pretty sure after this, she’s gonna be spying on me too. Think I blindsided her twice with this mess now.” I suck at being a work-husband. “How long do you guys need? For the stealing?”

“We’re not stealing, we’re borrowing…”

“Two hours, tops, including travel time.” Parker sounded brisk and business-like.

“Hey man, what do you want out of all of this?” Hardison’s question came out of left field.

“Huh?”

“I mean, we ask all our clients what they want. It ain’t always what we think it is. You’re not a client, but we still should’ve asked.”

“Dunno. The original point was to stop Ivan from being shitty to the tenants. Y’know, stand up to the bully and he backs down?”

“Heh. Your daddy teach you that? My nana always said fight smart, not stupid.”

“Nah, old man was too busy being the bully.” He cleared his throat, surprised at himself for the honest answer. “Uh...so I only bought the building so he couldn’t kick people out of their homes. Ask any of them and they’ll tell you I’m a crappy landlord. But, then I got used to the idea of it being mine. So I fought for it. But it ain’t mine. Not really. Some things aren’t yours just ‘cause you put down a duffle bag of money. Just like, some things aren’t yours because you steal them.”
“Yes, they are.” Of course Parker would argue the point.

“Then why do you help people get back what’s stolen from them?”

She didn’t give him an answer. Just as well, because he wasn’t sure how to explain. Some things were just earned.

He looked up and down the empty street. “Summer’s just about here and everybody used to gather on the roof, just hanging out, enjoying the weather and the company. Now they’re scared. Grills was murdered just to prove they could. I tried to buy the building so I could protect them, but I can’t. Might be a freaking Avenger, but I can’t make one lousy building of good people feel safe.”

Hardison let out a breath harsh enough to be audible. “Man, no wonder Eliot likes you. Not all problems get solved by punching and shooting things.”

“No his fault.” Parker sounded more like she was talking to herself, rather than joining the conversation.

“I’m not saying it is—”

“It’s his brain’s fault,” she continued over Hardison. The clarification didn’t make Clint feel better.

“Gee, thanks for that, Parker. Love it when people call me stupid.”

“No dummy, I’m not calling you stupid.”

“Parker…”

She left out an exasperated growl. “Fastest way to get past a security camera?”

“Shoot it with an arrow. Putty if you need to block the lens, shock if you’re hoping to short out something.”

Hardison jumped in. “System’s on a closed loop, probably. Find the line and hack in. Then you got eyes and control.”

“Oooh I like this game!” Clint had to grin hearing Bobbi back on the line. “Get ‘lost’ and wander into the security room. Give the guards something else to worry about. Parker?”

“Air vents. Or some other route that didn’t take me past it. Lots of ways to avoid a camera.”

“Okay. What’s wrong with my brain again?”

“Nothing. It just doesn’t work right.”

“PARKER…”

“—For the problem he has. Look. Bobbi goes to the guards because she can talk her way into and out of anything. So that’s her first choice because it gives her the most options.”

“Yeah, and if talking doesn’t work, then I can move on to the hitting.”

“Hardison finds the back door into the system, probably accessing the line by pretending to be something he’s not.”

“Babe, did you just call me a trojan?”
Parker ignored him. “Clint sees a trajectory and launches a projectile along it.”

“Like that time Eliot just threw a rock.”

“Right. If there wasn’t a clear trajectory, he wouldn’t need to shoot anything because the camera wouldn’t be an issue.”

“Okay, so how does this make me stupid?”

“It doesn’t. It just makes you smart in the wrong way. You don’t plan; you account for the factors you’re aware of and then aim and fire. And you’re very good at that. But it means that you don’t know what’s next until you’ve travelled that trajectory.”

“So Hardison’s a trojan and Clint’s literally an arrow?” Bobbi sounded intrigued. “This explains so much.”

“Thanks, Birdie.” Clint muttered dryly.

“No problem, Sport, but she does have a point.”

“Yeah, the point is I suck.”

“No, your brain chemistry sucks, but you don’t. If you sucked at life as much as you think you do, you’d be dead. That goes for any of us. I mean, granted, I have my own death certificate, but my point stands.

“Parker’s correct, but not clearly explained point, is that when you are this good at something, you will think along those lines. It’s habit. So I’m going to think along the lines of manipulation, whacking things with sticks, and blowing shit up because that’s what I spend ninety percent of my time doing. Hardison is going to think in terms of back doors, passwords, and yes, crazy disguises because that’s what he spends all his time doing. You should see Eliot grift. The guy survives on his homeboy charm and the knowledge that the moment his cover is blown he gets to start punching things. He’s not comfortable till he’s got some blood in his mouth.

“You’ve been living with a bow in your hand and a façade ready for much longer than I’ve known you. Which means you have a specific way of solving problems. And sometimes it works. And sometimes my method works, and sometimes, Eliot’s, Hardison’s, or Parker’s does. There’s a reason you went and invented a ridiculous amount of trick arrows and it isn’t because you’re an idiot or you suck. It’s because different tools get different jobs done.”

He let out a breath. “Thanks, Birdie.” She was giving him too much credit for being too stubborn to know when to quit, but even if he didn’t deserve it, he liked that she thought he did.

“No problem, Sport.”

“Can we go steal things now?” Parker demanded, impatient.

“Hang on, where are we bringing this stuff? I’ve got something that looks like the program they need to code you, and I encrypted it so they’ll need to mess with it. Eliot hasn’t signaled a ‘go’ yet either, so we got a little time. But, we’re gonna need a place in Clint’s building to set everything up. Not your apartment, obviously.”

Clint considered his options. “While you’re around, you wanna fix a satellite dish?”
Judging by the look on Simone’s face when she opened her door, he was going to need to offer more than a fixed satellite dish. “Aw crap, I woke you up.” Why hadn’t he thought of that? It was way too early/late to be knocking on the door of a mom with two kids.

Simone stared at him in alarm. “Clint, what happened to your face?” she gasped, and dragged him inside the apartment. Oh, yeah. That.

“Aw, don’t worry about it, the tracksuits jumped me, but it’s not bad.” He felt his lips with the tip of his tongue and tasted blood. So that had split again. Great.

“You know you have blood streaming down the side of your head, right?” She folded her arms and tilted her head, studying him.

“Uh, a cut must have opened up again. Bobbi said it needed stitches.” He reached up to investigate and blinked at the amount of blood on his hand. Stupid head wounds. Simone looked even more worried. She handed him a kitchen towel—a dark one—and he stared at it for a moment before realizing what it was for. God, he needed sleep. “Sorry I woke you up,” he said, holding the towel to his head.

Simone nodded at the cup of coffee and the book at the kitchen table. “You didn’t. I get up early so I can have some quiet before the boys are up. Want some coffee?”

He decided then and there that this world did not deserve Simone. He certainly didn’t. “If you have some…um more? Please? Yes?”

“Clint, sit down before you fall down, and tell me what’s going on?”

He obeyed. She set a mug of coffee in front of him and he didn’t care that it was too hot and stung his cuts. The sharp bitterness and caffeine rekindled something in his brain, but he took another moment, hands wrapped around the warm ceramic. Simone sat with her own cup and watched him over the rim, waiting.

He told her, well, basically everything. It was hard to explain some of it, but he got the gist of the Leverage crew across, and what had happened that night. Lucky lay at his feet, asleep. I wish I was a dog. “So I’m avoiding my place until I get ‘caught’ there. I think? M’sorry, the plan’s convoluted and involves a robot me, and it sorta made sense before this, but now it sounds extra crazy.”

“Your entire life is crazy, Clint, not just that plan, but that doesn’t mean both won’t work out.” She smiled. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

“Huh? I don’t—”

“You need something from me, Clint, but I’m not going to know what that is until you ask. Not one of your strong points, asking for help, now is it?”

“Not really.” Understatement. He was great at understatements.

“Mine neither,” she admitted, then leaned back in her chair and waited.

“Okay. So Bobbi—my ex—and the guy, Hardison, they need a place to set up some equipment. I can ask Aimee, or someone else, but I figured I’d ask you first, because he’s a genius and can fix that satellite dish I broke.”

She laughed softly before shifting into a more serious tone. “It’s not going to endanger my boys?”
“The stuff they’ll have won’t, but it might get crazy a bit later.” As if it hadn’t been crazy around here already. Great place for kids.

“Good thing it’s my day off, I’ll take them to the library after school.”

“Look, Simone, I’m sorry. About…well, everything. Maybe I shouldn’t have done anything. I just…”

She blinked, surprised, and sat forward again. “Clint, let me tell you something. Getting evicted is one of the scariest things that can happen to a kid. They learn that their parent cannot protect them, that there are bad people out there and they can take what they want. Those men threatened my boys. You stopped them. Then you paid my rent. Then you went and bought the entire building…”

“Sorta.”

“Sorta, but it’s a ‘sorta’ you kept fighting for. And you’re welcome here anytime, not just when you’re bleeding outside my door at five AM. You don’t need to apologize, and you don’t need to bribe me with fixing that dish, though it would be appreciated.” She smiled. “Go crash on the couch till your friends get here, or the boys wake you up.”

It suddenly felt easier to breathe, even with the bruised ribs. “Yeah. Okay. Thanks.”

“I need a favor.”

“If this favor has anything to do with Barton and Bed-stuy, the answer’s no.”

“Maria—”

“Don’t you ‘Maria’ me, Natasha. I’ve done what is in SHIELD’s purview. What Barton does on his days off is his business. When those things happen to be spending a lot of probably illegal money and starting a one-man turf war, that is definitely not SHIELD’s business.”

“There are other outcomes at stake.”

“There are always other outcomes at stake. None that I know of motivate me to give up my plausible deniability. I enjoy not perjuring myself in front of Congress, Natasha. It makes them squirm.”

“You think a turf war will end in a senate hearing?”

“It’s Barton. I’m not ruling it out.”

“Clint is focused on a single building. It’s an admirable target, but he and those tracksuits are not the only one’s invested in this. I’m looking at a bigger picture.”

“And you did not call asking for a favor.”

“I will owe you. I don’t offer that lightly.”

“Whatsoever you are asking, if you can’t accomplish it yourself, it costs more than what you are
“offering.”

“Then let the haggling begin.”

“First I need to know what we’re haggling over.”

“Audits.”

“This is why I enjoy working with you Natasha. I was expecting you to request a fully armed battalion to descend on Barton’s block.”

“That too.”

“Ah.”

“I’ll take a SHIELD helicopter, including personnel, in lieu of the battalion.”

“And the audit?”

“Audits. Official ones. I’ll send you the list of companies. It needs to begin tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow as in, actually tomorrow, or tomorrow as in, when the sun rises in two hours?”

“The latter.”

“Let me guess. These would be companies belonging to the Kingpin?”

“Among others. As I said, I have a list.”

“The number of strings I’ll have to pull, the people I’ll have to wake up—I’ll need to incentivize it.”

“According to a lawyer friend of mine, they’ll have enough for a RICO case.”

“This lawyer friend have a fondness for horns and run-down neighborhoods?”

“No comment. You love waking people up in the middle of the night.”

“True. But these people are smart, they’ve hidden their shit well. The auditors won’t find anything. They never do.”

“They will if they know where to look.”

“And where’s that?”

“After tomorrow, I’ll have that information.”

“End of day tomorrow.”

“Fine.”

“We’re not done. This is still worth more than a favor, Natasha.”

“If everything goes relatively as planned in the coming day, you’ll have one of the two remaining LMDs unaccounted for returned to you. I will locate the other one.”

“Agreed. What else?”
“Natasha. What else?”

“My full records of the activities of the Leverage crew.”

“You already provide—ah. The full records. That would make interesting reading. What’s the catch?”

“Educational purposes only. No prosecution.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Unless they come for us.”

“Hence the value in education.”

“You spent ten years monitoring Eliot Spencer for your own reasons. And now you’re willing to give him and that crew up? If they find out—”

“If they find out, either you will not have upheld your end of the bargain, or you have another mole. I trust neither of those will be the case.”

“‘Trust’ is a funny word to be using here, Natasha.”

“If they learn SHIELD has even more on them than they are aware of, I will not be their only target. And Alec Hardison alone is a formidable threat. I have my reasons for the term. Do we have a deal?”

“Yes. And you still owe me that favor.”

“And you still owe me a chopper. You’ll know when to send it.”

“I suppose I don’t have to ask where. All this for a building?”

“It, too, is a matter of trust.”
He'd forgotten this. Each person he worked with felt slightly different, operated slightly different. Adjusting wasn't too hard—mostly cause he usually didn't bother all that much. Same as an arrow: account for slight variations in windspeed and angle, but put enough force behind it and the thing would fly true regardless. Still. He liked the specific feel of working with Eliot, who'd grumble and mutter and always come through.

The sun woke him up, which was weird because early morning sun wouldn’t reach here—oh crap. He groaned. “What time is it?”

He only got indistinct low noises for an answer and opened his eyes—ow, eye, ow, but it did open—to see Bobbi’s lips moving. Right, he’d turned down the aids before passing out. He fiddled with them as Bobbi signed “10 AM.”

Shit. “Why didn’t you wake me up?” he asked, carefully rubbing his face.

“From what Simone said, you were basically asleep when you got to her door. Do I need to explain the chemistry of adrenaline crashes, or are you just going to recall them from extensive experience?”

“I should be help—” He paused, realizing he could hear Kate elsewhere, talking to someone.

“—Daddy, Clint’s being such a butthead. I’m so done…well he got grabbed by that mafia group last night…yeah, and they beat him up, and the Widow had to go rescue his ass. And now what does he do? Says he’s going back to the building. Yeah, like how dumb is that? He’s gonna get himself killed and I just don’t care anymore. I can’t do it. Can I come over for dinner?”

Bobbi had her hand over her mouth, holding back giggles. “Attagirl, Hawkeye,” she told her. “Listen, after you get done with your chauffeur duties, I want you off comms completely.”

Kate hastily ended her phone call, voice tight.

“Whoo boy, Bobbi’s gonna get an earful.

“What? Why?” Kate demanded. “I don’t need protection and if you so much as utter the word ‘young’…”

“Oh please, you’re a Young Avenger and you’ve been surviving being associated with Clint just fine, I know you can handle yourself. But lying to family is hella tough to pull off, even when they fucking well deserve it. We need your dad convinced you are nowhere near this building, so he doesn’t get cold feet. If possible, we’d like him to spill secrets to you. I know you can do it, but I don’t want you distracted by six other voices in your head.”

Birdie had a point. “She’s right, Katie-Kate.” He’d futzed up Bobbi’s life before by bringing her family into it and no one had deserved that outcome. Hell, ol’ Barney was proof enough that lying to family got complicated fast.
Kate blew out a breath. “What if I need to tell you something?”

“You’re a millennial, you live on your phone, use his assumptions as a cover.”

From outside on the fire escape, Hardison muttered, “Ain’t nothing wrong with living on your phone. Y’all a bunch of luddites.” He poked his head through window. “Look who’s back with the living! I’ve got everything set up, and the dish is fixed. You should really aim better, man.”

Clint scowled. The arrow had been a misfire due to the intrusion of a baseball bat into his stomach. But Hardison was grinning, and there was no way Clint was taking the “grumpy cat” title from Eliot, so he let it slide.

Speaking of, now that Katie was off the phone he could hear Eliot making his own call. “Found him, boss. The dumb-ass went back to the building. Guess some guys never learn. Want me to take him out now?...Okay, sure, your call, I’ll sit on him till you get here.”

Phone call over, he spoke to the group. “Hardison, they think they’re about four hours out from having a bot.”

“They think that cause I want them to think that. They gon’ think whatever I damn well tell ‘em to think.”

“Dammit, Hardison, when is it gonna be ready?”

“Whenver Sleeping Beauty here gets his ass in gear and puts on a show,” Hardison jerked his head at Clint.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m moving. You try getting beaten up all night.” He pulled himself upright, groaning. Stiffened muscles moaned in protest, but hey, why start paying attention to those now?

“Nah thanks, I’ll do my fighting from behind a screen. Leave that shit to you and...(GRUMPY CAT),” he said, mouthing the last two words. He tried to indicate a cat with his hands, but gave himself bunny ears instead. Out on the fire escape, Simone burst out laughing.

“Hardison…” Eliot had to be somewhere nearby, watching them. Clint couldn’t resist standing in view of the window and signing in exaggerated motions: hand clawed in front of his mouth for grumpy, before pinching his index and thumb together, other three fingers sticking straight up, as he pulled his hand to the side of his mouth. Cat.

“Seriously, Circus?”

“Man, show me that again!”

Clint grinned, repeated the motion, and said offhand to Eliot, “You know the building to your left offers way better cover. I mean if you wanna be realistic and all.”

“Show off,” Eliot muttered. “Only guy who’s gonna spot me up here is you.”

“A good performance is all about the details.” He turned to see Bobbi desperately trying to stop giggling.

“Just remember I get to break your neck later.”

“Yeah, pay attention to the details, then, could ya? Don’t want to end up dead cause someone forgot to account for torque.”
He'd forgotten this. Each person he worked with felt slightly different, operated slightly different. Adjusting wasn't too hard-mostly cause he usually didn't bother all that much. Same as an arrow: account for slight variations in windspeed and angle, but put enough force behind it and the thing would fly true regardless. Still. He liked the specific feel of working with Eliot, who'd grumble and mutter and always come through.

Simone stuck her head in through the window, next to Hardison. “You have interesting friends, Clint.” She winked at him and climbed through. “More coffee, now that it might actually help?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” As he drank coffee and ate the bowl of oatmeal Simone handed him, Eliot, Bobbi and Hardison filled him in on the progress of the job. Eliot’s hook into Arthur Bishop had worked. The rest of the consortium was on board with the Decoy Barton plan. He’d been invited into the inner chamber, much to the annoyance of both Kaziu and Bishop, who’d tried to say the plan was his idea, but apparently no one had bought that. Once the meeting had ended, Eliot left to “find” Clint, hence why he was hanging out on a rooftop across the street. He didn’t ask Kaziu where he was going, but Eliot figured he’d spend the morning taking care of his leg, before things got interesting this afternoon.

Lifting the equipment from SHIELD had gone off without a hitch, which did not surprise Clint in the least. In the midst of Bobbi telling him about it, a woman with long, dark hair and holding a bundle of red and yellow cloth, sauntered into the apartment. “Eliot, you the only one watching?”

“Unless someone’s better at it than he is,” Clint muttered under his breath.

“Shut up, Circus.” Eliot response was almost rote, by this point.

Parker pulled off the wig, and shook out the bundle, holding it up. “This the right thing? Finding anything in your apartment is impossible, Clint.”

Clint eyed it, worried. “Bobbi, how dead am I going to be?”

“Oh, very.”

“Super. This is a great plan, guys. Just great.”

“Hey! It’s necessary.” Parker insisted. She cast about, grabbed a backpack, and kissed Hardison briefly.

“Luck, babe.”

“Who needs luck?” She waved and headed out the door.

Bobbi was unpacking an impressive amount of tech from a couple of duffle bags. “Clint, lend a hand?”

While Hardison had fun stringing along whoever was trying to crack his encryption, he and Bobbi moved Simone’s coffee table out of the way to accommodate a ring of cameras and a black plastic sheet, which Hardison said was basically like a Dance Dance Revolution pad and would record how he shifted his weight and moved his feet. Hardison did some fine tuning and fiddling with the cameras, while Bobbi set up the actual program. Clint almost resisted the temptation to stand in the window and make rude signs at Eliot for fun. Almost.

What the hell, Eliot’d get his payback in a minute.

Over the next hour, they made him do every movement imaginable, all four of them laughing
“This is really not that funny,” he argued as Bobbi gasped, “Pirouette!”

“Jumping jacks!” Simone yelled.

“Flip it! Flip it good — No, backwards!”

“Fall down. Harder, Circus, a good performance is in the DETAILS.”

“Shoot two arrows! Okay now three! Now four, now under your leg, now behind you — up above!”

He fell to his knees gasping and glared at them. “Gah, this sucks.” It didn’t though, even bashed up as he was. He could feel a grin splitting his lip open again, but he didn’t care. He stood up and went to the edge of the mat. They wanted an acrobat, well dammit, they’d get one.

He performed a routine he only half remembered until he fell into it, tailoring the twists and flips for the smaller space. He wasn’t carrying a bow—Hardison said it would screw with the data—but he knew exactly the position he would have held it, how the quiver would have felt across his shoulders, the shafts in his fingers. He finished, gave it a performer’s flourish and bow before straightening. “That good enough?”

Hardison was staring at him. “Damn, dude. No wonder you and Parker hit it off. I should set up a laser maze for you to race through.” He reviewed the footage. “Yeah, that’ll do it.”

Simone applauded. “Very impressive.”

“Okay, Hardison and I have about an hour to build this virtually and let them find it, you need to go show your face in your apartment, and Eliot will be heading over shortly to murder you. Sound good?”

“Awesome.”

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Noon on a weekday in downtown Manhattan was like being in a candy store. If the candy bins wore business suits and the candy was money. Which was better than candy, obviously. Parker made herself not skip with excitement. She could have easily lifted bulging wallets out of back pockets, Rolexes from wrists, not to mention the large purses hanging from the arms of perfectly done-up women.

Okay, okay, so she lifted a few things. For practice, that was all! Nothing big—just a couple of Amex Blacks, a wedding ring stashed in a pocket (silly place to keep it anyway), and briefly, the debit card of a cleaning woman—Elena Rodriguez—who people kept cursing at as she tried to clean up someone’s lazily tossed lunch. Didn’t even land close the can, come on people, aim is not that hard. She swiped the cards through Hardison’s compromise on her lifting, her very own card reader. Alec might object to her stealing money—at least the kind that smelled amazing—but he had no such qualms about information. She could toss the cards, or return them, as she did with Elena’s, and later she and Hardison would play their own version of a shell game. Where’s the money, where’s the money, where’s the money, not in Grant Dixon’s account, that’s for sure...
Around her people walked briskly, talking into bluetooth sets as they rushed out for lunch meetings. Parker, brushing against people as she moved against the flood, finally found a target—a petite blonde woman, ID card almost falling out of her bag. Offices in the same building as their consortium of criminals. Perfect. She veered slightly, making a flustered-looking young guy move out of her way, and bump into the target. The two apologized and the man tried to make awkward conversation. Parker took the opportunity she’d created to snag the ID as the woman tried to shut the guy down. If she realized it was stolen, she’d could think that he had done it, but more likely she’d assume she left it somewhere, or it had fallen.

“Got a pass, I’m heading in,” she reported to Hardison and Eliot. And everyone else. It was a strange sensation, having a larger team again. They weren’t a family the same way the five of them had been, but they didn’t feel like outsiders either. They felt like their own strange family. That was good, she decided.

She entered the building purposefully, swiping her stolen ID and giving a brief smile to the security guard as she passed. As she navigated the building, automatically turning her face away from security cameras and deliberately drawing as little attention to herself as possible, her mind was mostly elsewhere, performing a mental review of the job’s necessary compartments.

First. What they knew. For fun, this was in Alec’s voice in her head, since they’d never had a chance to do their typical rundown.

Okay people, listen up. First off we got O₂—that’s Eliot’s name for him, I do not know what he’s called. Dude doesn’t talk much, uses an oxygen tank, wears all white, and he’s got those cool slatted shades—they are not stupid Eliot—He’s got his fingers in a lot of pies, but ain’t actually that powerful—You can see just fine through them, Eliot, you gonna let me finish? All I do. All I do, can’t even let me finish a briefing.

So. O₂, he’s got a whole gang of guys, the Tracksuit Mafia, but there are three big players. Or at least there were. First was Ivan. He was Clint’s landlord till Clint “bought” the building. His mama lives in that building with that puppy Parker bugged for some reason. She’s letting people get in and out without Clint’s knowledge, and by people I mean creepy-ass clown guys who murder tenants. Bad mama. Clint got him deported, so he was out of the picture, but I’ve spotted him on a flightlist under an alias heading back into JFK, so he’s back in town. Next up is O₂’s son. He ran the strip club and the gambling room in the back, but had to take a break after his wife shot him, sold Clint her car—Eliot why does it matter what type of car? He crashed it immediately! Okay fine, fine, it was a bright orange 1970 Dodge Challenger, you happy now? No, of course not, you ain’t never happy and now you get to be thinking of a wrecked Challenger. Well, just remember all the times you made me blow up Lucille.

Where was I? Oh yeah, she sold Clint her car, hooked up with him, convinced him to lay waste to the strip club, steal a safe, and then ditched him after he messed up her way of opening it. Oh, after lying to him about it blowing up the contents if he got the combo wrong. Damn, she’s cold. I have no clue what her angle is here, but she’s cold. And finally we got a weird-ass Polish clown “from hell” who shoots people, but ain’t no match for the Black Widow. I don’t know if he’s a match for you, Eliot, you ain’t fought him yet! He goes by Kaziu and seems to actually be pretty valuable to the overall Criminal Consortium — or CrimCon as I’ve named it. Don’t you go mocking that name Eliot, it is not a stupid name — He’s killed at least eighteen people to get this block of buildings cleared of tenants, including Clint’s friend Grills. He’s smart, deadly, and probably a psychopath, so Eliot should be able to make friends if he weren’t such a Grumpy Cat.

It looks like the CrimCons agreed to let O₂ and his lackeys kill Clint, who should be an off-limit target, but Eliot’s given them a new plan: Build-A-Barton. Which still involves killing Clint—sorry
Clint—but also involves a sweet robot. Also in play are Kate’s daddy, contender for worst father of the year, who’s helping fund the Life Model Decoy project run by the Nefarias—Gia Nefaria and her father. Gia likes to wear a mask and go by Madame Masque which is not very original and has anyone noticed that all these people make Parker look normal?

Her mental version of Hardison’s briefing done, Parker turned her head over to Nate.

Okay, so we need to look at everyone’s goals, right? The Tracksuit guys, you know, they’re small-time and they work on a simple system of retribution. Clint, he’s pissed them off, he ruined their plans for the building, he ruined their strip club, he drove away their business, he even took their dog. He basically been stomping all over their turf and no matter what they do, he won’t leave. So what are they gonna do? If they want to preserve their honor and their image with the other small fish in the area, they need to make a gamble and kill him. But they can’t just up and do it, he’s an Avenger and a SHIELD agent which means powerful friends and big trouble for their powerful friends. That’s the important thing. These guys are small time, but they made themselves useful to the big fish. Big fish who made it this far by being careful, but Clint’s been pissing them off too, with that stunt stealing from them at the circus. They want him gone, but they don’t want to get their hands dirty. If the tracksuits do it and take the fall, they get to remain hands-off, but that hasn’t worked for them. So they need another option, a better option, and that, people, is what we’re going to provide them with, mmhmm.

Sophie took over.

But it’s not only about helping Clint get these people off his back, is it. These people are ruining lives and literally shooting people in the head for not giving up their homes. All for profit. We need to stop them from hurting more people. We need to give people their homes back. Can we do that?

Eliot, gruff and practical, broke in.

How’re we gonna do that, Sophie? They sold them, and moved on, those buildings are mostly empty, ‘cept for Clint’s, and Clint can’t run a whole block of buildings while off being a hero. Who’s gonna do it if we manage to get them back? Not to mention, these guys are bad guys, real bad guys. And they are protected. People know they’re bad and they still aren’t touched, so how’re we gonna get to them?

Parker grinned.

We are going to steal it all. Steal Bed-Stuy from under their noses. They decided to be all careful and go analog and it might be driving Hardison up the wall, but that means they have to deal with ME.

She slipped into a supply closet. Thanks to a cable tapped by Eliot earlier, Hardison had access to the internal network of the building and gleefully located the building’s blueprints, thrilled to have a chance to hack something. She had her route memorized: Reach this supply closet, climb through the air vent, right, left, left, second right, two more lefts and she’d reach the elevator shaft that only reached the top floor. The elevator and its entrance and exit may be monitored, but she only needed the shaft. Eliot had also placed a camera, which Hardison had monitored for hours before giving Parker the all-clear.

As she made her way through the vents, Eliot was getting licked to death by the puppy she’d met a day ago. She smiled, half listening as Eliot grumped about the dog, but apparently kept petting it as he and $O_2$ sat in the living room of Ivan’s mother, LMD standing dormant in the corner, waiting for their chance to grab Clint.
“Don’t worry Ma’am, I promise I’ll take care of him without getting a speck of blood on this nice rug of yours…”

“I’m pretty fond of this neck, Spencer, you better not break it…”

“Guys, I did not have a lot of time to program this thing, it might glitch, I’m just saying, I don’t do miracles, people…”

“Don’t worry, Hardison, Clint glitches all the time anyway…”

“Gee, thanks Bobbi…”

“Clint, she’s not wrong, and by the way this thing is AWESOME…”

“Don’t crash it, Katie-Kate…”

“Also don’t be seen…”

“You guys sound like my parents…if my parents sounded like parents…I’m disguised, remember?”

“Yeah, totally not looking forward to explaining this one to Jess…”

“You’re so hopeless Barton…”

“Yeah well, somehow the plan to save me has ended up with me playing dead in a dumpster…”

“Not a dumpster, you’d be found in a dumpster. Eventually.”

She reached the elevator shaft and judged the distance of the leap to the access ladder. Easy peasy. She launched herself out of the vent with a tiny shriek of glee, and caught the ladder before her stomach even had a chance to drop. A quick scramble up the ladder led her to another vent, this time on the floor she wanted. More twists and turns and here was her exit.

Robbing the top floor of a business building in the middle of the day normally didn’t qualify as a good idea, but their targets had been up all night, and had long since departed to get some beauty sleep. She slipped through the halls, quickly locating the conference room, and more importantly, the room off to the side full of filing cabinets and a computer with no network access for the documents that were digital. One of Hardison’s devices went into the USB port and started to work on cracking the password and gaining access. She raided the filing cabinets first, the work of a second to pick the simple locks. Jackpot. Flicking through the files, she grabbed deeds, bills of sale, everything relating to the Bed-Stuy development and the LMD program. She scanned for a safe, but there didn’t seem to be one. Too cocky by half, not that a safe would have kept them…well, safe.

She loaded everything into a backpack—analog could be such a pain to steal—and returned to check on the program. It was in and almost done downloading everything on the terminal. She made one last sweep of the conference room, retrieved Hardison’s doohickey and spoke briefly for the others. “Done, heading to the roof.”

“Ready.” Kate responded, sounding giddy, but controlling it.

The roof was only a short staircase away, and contained a helipad, but Parker’s escape route was nothing so boring as a helicopter. Instead, Kate swooped down on a purple—well, Clint called it a sky-cycle, but it basically looked like a jet ski that flew. She was dressed in skintight red and yellow outfit complete with a mask.
“Jess finds out I borrowed the costume she left at Clint’s place, I am dead.” Kate muttered, but she couldn’t contain her glee for long. “Ready for a ride?”

“Can I drive?” Parker stared at the machine hungrily. Over the earbuds came a chorus of very emphatic NO. She rolled her eyes and climbed on board behind Kate, who gunned it for the edge and let it freefall for a moment before swooping up and away. Parker screamed with delight. Nothing was going to ruin this day.
He had not expected to catch a strange thief lurking through their domain, but it did not surprise him. Vexed, yes.

He was sitting in a doctor’s examination room when his phone buzzed. The doctor didn’t blink, wouldn’t blink ever again, and Kaziu stood, testing the support his new knee brace offered before checking the screen. He frowned. It was flashing a motion alert for the camera he’d hidden in the conference room. This was odd, as it should have been empty; there’d been no signal to gather, which indicated someone was sneaking. The video feed showed a figure, stocking mask pulled over her face, but the blonde hair falling over her shoulders was unmistakable and his lip curled in anger and frustration. He was across town, too far away to prevent what she was about to do.

The motion-enabled cameras he had installed upon being invited to join this group were mostly intended as a precaution against the other members. He was under no illusions about their purpose and value within the group, their status as hired muscle, tolerated with a seat at the table to keep them happy. Any organization of this sort required foot soldiers, eager to do a master’s bidding without too much concern for the consequences. He himself did not care for that role, or the disrespect that accompanied it. He’d immediately set about proving himself to be invaluable. He worked for the old man, true, and remained loyal, but he would not be taken so lightly, written off as a freak, content to kill when ordered. He was not only that.

He’d gathered information for them, investigated business dealings, served as a proxy when required. He had worked his way into every nook of this venture, all while gathering information on them as well. Sending Penelope in as bait for Barton had worked almost too perfectly, allowing him to gauge to the level of involvement the Avenger was willing to commit to. Barton’s willingness to leap first, ask questions later, even in extreme circumstances, pleased him. Such a man was easy to lead along. If one is stubborn as an ass, apply both carrot and stick liberally. The safe residing at Barton’s was preferable—he could access it essentially at will, and none of their partners would have considered looking for it there, not when Barton had been caught with the safe in his hands; arrested and booked for his actions at the club. It should have been returned to the club, or kept in evidence, not given to the man clearly stealing it. But it was not difficult to find the correct palm to grease. Not everything is accomplished through violence. Barton did not seem to question why the safe ended up in his possession at the end of the day. The perks of being an Avenger. People just give you things and you assume you deserve them.

That incident also gave his boss another reason to demand Barton be killed—a necessity the others were unnecessarily squeamish about. The man was a man, nothing more. They were aiming to be more than men, and did not wish to be reminded of the ease of mortality when it came to one of their own world. An enemy, certainly, but he was character of note to them, a threat, and thus to be respected.

He had not expected to catch a strange thief lurking through their domain, but it did not surprise him. Vexed, yes. He had not had a chance, since their first encounter the previous night, to investigate this girl further, but she was a shard of glass he needed to remove before it cut too deeply, and now had that possibly already happened?
He did not panic. Panic was a sensation felt by those with something to lose, and he could barely remember a time when such a feeling applied to him. Not since Janek.

His phone buzzed again, another camera alerting him as she passed it, leaving by the roof access. It showed him the girl, pulling off her stocking cap as she hauled a backpack full of her plunder across the helipad. She disappeared from the frame. A moment later a shape swept past and stopped halfway out of the frame as well. A woman in red and yellow, with black hair, riding a type of flying machine similar to what Masque had encountered with SHIELD in Madripoor. This one was purple. Briefly the woman turned and he saw the mask covering her face. Spiderwoman. The gossip rags had blared she and Hawkeye were an item. They had also confirmed illegitimate love children, domestic abuse, addiction scandals, and plenty of affairs on the side...which he supposed the last one wasn’t entirely false, considering Penelope. Tabloids had their uses, if taken with an ocean’s worth of salt. She apparently had decided to get involved, along with the Widow, and whoever this thief was. That was another sloppy misjudgment on his part. He had assumed, given Barton’s previous history, that he would refuse to involve others in this scenario. Particularly given its illegal nature. Barton tended to flagrantly flaunt the law when it suited his purposes, but his compatriots were less willing—or so he’d thought. Clearly some of them were getting involved in outright robbery on his behalf.

His phone buzzed yet again, this time the old man informing him that Barton was dead, his neck cleanly snapped by the new, nameless, muscle. Another shard cutting deep, if for more personal reasons. The method confused him as well. Snapping a man’s neck was intimate. It required either the element of surprise or a substantial struggle, and given Barton’s training, seemed an impractical choice. Perhaps the archer’s injuries from the previous night—

He froze, about to step over the corpse of the doctor, as several other shards of information assembled themselves. The night before, he had returned to the strip club before the Widow arrived, had found the old man watching the video feed of the new muscle breaking Barton’s fingers. The man’s technique was unimpressive; so unoriginal that it came as a surprise when Barton appeared to break, even if he hadn’t given anything up until the Widow was in danger. Hearing reports from the men left behind to bear the brunt of the Avengers’ fury, they had mentioned Barton shooting, punching, grabbing, and making any number of motions a man with broken fingers would have avoided. If his fingers weren’t broken…

…he and the new muscle the old man had hired were working together…

…the password information and the SHIELD site it led to must be fake…

…which meant Barton had a hitter, a hacker, and a thief helping him…

…and he was definitely not dead.

Put into that perspective, there was only one obvious conclusion, and the fact that it had taken him so long to come to it disturbed him.

He sighed. He disliked the common complaint that people couldn’t get good help these days. That was untrue. He was good help. Utterly invaluable. No, it was that the people who made this complaint were undeserving of the help available, unwilling to acknowledge their expertise. He was, however, very fond of another common saying: If you want something done right, do it yourself.
Chapter Summary

“What does your Polish friend do, anyway? Did I mention he’s gorgeous?”

Before dinner, Kate plastered a smile on her face, preprogrammed her eyes not to roll, and unchecked the sarcasm box in her vocabulary. At least that was what it felt like. She was pretty sure the BartonBot was acting more normal. On Bobbi’s insistence, she’d removed the earbud after dropping Parker off. It felt strange, not having the others in her ear, but Bobbi wanted her off comms, focused on any clues her dad might drop. She’d have argued the point, that she could totally concentrate on screwing over her father while listening in, but Clint had actually backed up that call, like a weird responsible adult person. That was the kind of behavior she needed to encourage in him. So tonight she would be daddy’s girl. Ugh.

She chose a not-purple sundress, something yellow and flowery from the back of her closet. Something darling Daddy had bought her, though she supposed that was really everything in her closet. The thought infuriated her and she shoved it away for the moment. She needed to keep this pretense up a bit longer.

Her father spent most of the salad and soup courses talking about his business dealings, in the vaguest terms possible. “One of my investments was going quite well. We’ve had some serious setbacks, however, and I’m not entirely sure it can recover.”

“Oh? And what investment was that Daddy?” she asked, keeping her tone intently interested.

Across the table, he was not responding as she’d hoped. “Oh, nothing for you to worry about, sweetie, I’ve got it all handled. Managed to redirect the remaining assets into a much more promising venture.”

Okay then. Be a patronizing ass. Kate considered a change of tack. She deleted the smile and rechecked the sarcasm option. “Oh, and which promising venture would that be, Daddy? That one investment? Or is it that other investment? Oh!” she gasped, upping the sarcasm further, “I know! It’s a totally different investment. God, I’m just so dumb, I can never keep them straight, what with all the complicated proper nouns you use.” She folded her arms and glared at him.

“Katie, dear,” her father began, but this felt good and she knew what to say next as if she had a script written for her.

“Daddy, I’m here making an effort to learn about you, and what you do. I’m tired of jumping from hobby to hobby, and tired of people treating me like I’m some stupid little girl playing at being a superhero. Everyone thinks I’m Hawkeye’s sidekick, including him, and I’m done with it.” She leaned forward. “But that doesn’t mean I came here to be patronized as well. Now are you going to talk to me like an adult?”

“To what? You incorporating your daughter into what you do? No one you work with has their children involved in their business? Or only the boys?” She glared at him. “Is that why you won’t...
“No! I actually work with a father and his daughter and they make a good team. Well, the girl is a bit flighty for my taste, completely failing to compensate for...distractions...but that’s beside the point. What I do—It’s not that interesting! It’s boring, sweetie, I promise.”

Wow. Me and Bobbi qualify as ‘distractions’? Gee, thanks Dad. Not that he’d known I’d been in Madripoor...not that he ever asked where I’ve been, what I was doing.

“Dad. Maybe I should be the one to decide what I find boring. I can tell you that listening to you talk without any specifics is boring. It sounds like this: ‘Hi Dad, guess what I did today! I went places and I did stuff, isn’t that fascinating?!’”

He sighed. “Yes, I do see what you mean. But you have to understand, this is sensitive information that I am entrusted with.” He shrugged his shoulders. “My hands are tied.”

No, Clint’s hands were tied last night while your partners were beating him up.

She decided it was time for a slight reveal and switched on her eyeroll. It was an impressive feature. “Dad. I know you work with the Kingpin. I talked to this Polish guy—at least I think he was Polish...gorgeous, Eastern European type?—at one of your parties, and he let some things slip.” She twisted a long strand of hair around her fingers. “He was interesting and didn’t treat me like an idiot—which I appreciated. We talked about how this city has grown, and he told me stuff about the project you are working on in Bed-Stuy, which I think is awesome. Clint made it out to sound like this horrible thing, but you guys want to come in and improve the neighborhood—make it a destination people want to actually visit and shop in. Clint’s stuck in the past, but you and I aren’t, and it sounds like your partners aren’t either.”

He stared at her. “He told you all of that?”

She nodded, eyes wide and innocent. “Sure, we talked until the wait staff kicked us out. I didn’t tell Clint about any of it. I wanted to think about it and make up my own mind. And I have, that’s why I’m here.” She smiled at him. “What does your Polish friend do, anyway? Did I mention he’s gorgeous?” More playing with the hair.

Her father fidgeted. “He solved problems. Katie, you should stay away from him. He’s not a good—what do you kids call it? A rebound?—Yes, he’s not a good rebound. Why must you always fall in love with these men? They aren’t good for you.”

Okay, maybe the hair thing worked too well. Are you kidding me? Why does everyone seem to think I’m in love with a guy just because I’m friends with him? Spoiler alert: Yeah. NO.

She forced herself not to roll her eyes again. “Solved?” she asked, genuinely confused by the past tense and not going to touch the rebound comment with fifty-foot pole. “He doesn’t anymore?”

“He’s been off his game for some time, him and the group he works for. I don’t foresee them being a part of the operation much longer, really. They have one last chance to prove their value to our organization, and if it falls through, we may be forced to cut them loose,” he said casually, before taking another bite of his steak. “In fact, we may need to hurry this along, sweetie. I have a meeting with them soon.”

Kate decided the end of this couldn’t come fast enough.
The only gamble, Kaziu decided, as he kicked a shard of mirror and sent it skittering across the floor, was making Barton choose. They were in what had once been a dance studio, before he’d encouraged the owners to move on. He’d liked this wide open room even then, relished the satisfaction of smashing a mirror, the crash of the glass dropping to the floor. Shards from his last visit crunched beneath his feet, pairing with remembered shouts, screams, supplications. She’d been a tiny woman, fierce at first, even when he’d destroyed the first mirror. But she gave up the studio for her husband’s hands. It was rather sweet really. Elsewhere perhaps he would still play and she would still dance and teach. They were no longer his concern.

What would Barton sacrifice? He too had a choice between a person and a building. Both clearly meant something to him. He didn’t know how Eliot Spencer, former hit man, and current muscle for the Leverage crew knew the Avenger, but Barton had a compulsion to save people, would likely come to save this one.

He would wait until it was handled to inform his compatriots there had been a mole. He could taste the sentences already, mild with rebuke that they could be so trusting.

He hurled Spencer, barely conscious from the tranquilizer dart he’d shot him with, head-first into one of the mirrors. His skull connected so solidly, Kaziu was briefly uncertain if the crack he heard was bone or glass, but then the mirror’s reflection segmented exponentially, spidering outward as Spencer shook his head trying to clear it. Something dropped from Spencer’s ear. Ah. That would be important.

He lashed out with his bad leg, using the good one for support, and letting his foot connect full force with the side of Spencer’s head, crushing him back against the mirror again. This time it shattered in earnest and his prey fell with it, glass slicing him as he lay there stunned, groaning. Kaziu stooped, palming and pocketing the tiny comm unit for the moment. Working quickly, he dragged the other man across the glass littered floor and tied him to the barre as he came around. Spencer kicked out forcefully, ignoring the shards of glass embedding themselves in his flesh, but now that Kaziu knew who he was dealing with, he was prepared and glided out of the way.

In his line of work, legends flared up and died with a mundane regularity. Typically, the dying was of the literal sort, for obvious reasons. Even careful operators were not immune to the stray bullet. (Well, most of them, anyway.) Sometimes the death was spectacular, giving the regulars in dank dive bars the world over fodder for months of gossip. Mostly, it was just a job left unfinished. Fodder for years, that was.

Eliot Spencer had left a job unfinished. Kaziu did not know details, did not care much for the gossip of old men who’d expected to be dead decades before. But he had been a legend, standing at the side of Damien Moreau, more than just muscle. Kaziu could relate. Until he’d disappeared. There had been rumors, of course, that he’d died, that he’d gone insane, that he’d gone soft. Each tale contradicted the last. He still had a price on his head—prices, in point of fact—and if Kaziu had happened to cross his path then, he would have happily arranged for his delivery to the Butcher of Kiev, a rival of the old man’s organization, sure, but deals could be arranged. They had not crossed paths. Until now.

In the light of hindsight, he did wish he’d paid closer attention to the whereabouts and activities of Eliot Spencer. There’d been talk of a new crew, based in America, and he’d disregarded it as outside of his purview. He’d heard about the end of Moreau and wondered if Spencer had a hand in it. The best jobs are done from the inside, after all. But years had passed, and he shook the thought.
off as idle folly. He’d chosen patience himself. Why cause such a shake up when all he had to do was wait? True, the wait was beginning to grind on him…he’d expected the old man to be long dead, not determinedly tottering around, dragging that damn oxygen tank and becoming fixated on foolish vendettas, which he insisted on carrying out in convoluted ways…Kaziu took a breath. He could still be patient.

Two years ago, he’d caught wind of a deal gone south. Something to do with a computer chip. A defector from the Ukrainians swore his men had fought Spencer. That he’d been part of a team which also included a hacker and a thief. Kaziu had been mildly intrigued, but the man knew so few details, much less than he’d promised to trade for protection. He would not be available now for verification, not after the failure of that job.

Perhaps defected was an appropriate term for Spencer as well. Given that, he’d survived admirably until now. Kaziu had no intention of allowing him to survive this. Both he and Barton would die here. If Barton made the right choice. He liked the parallel of Barton rescuing Spencer from torture the night after Spencer had done the same for him. It fit well with the mirrored walls, a reflected action, though this time the outcome would be different, shattered. Barton could choose the other option, return to the apartment building, defend it and leave Spencer to die, but he knew the archer too well for that. Carrot and stick.

He played with the segment of mirror in his hand, twisting it to catch the last afternoon sun streaming through the window. It flashed blindingly into Spencer’s eyes just as he opened them. The bloody thing growled, more animal than human, in Kaziu’s opinion. Between the mirror and the blood and sweat dripping into his eyes, he must have been mostly blind. He thrashed his legs again, clearly hoping to catch him off guard, but soon ceased, panting.

Kaziu studied him as the man stilled. “Wise decision. The more you struggle, the more you bleed. You might cut something important.”

Spencer spat blood and glared at him. “What do you want?” he growled.

“From you? Exactly what I have. Blood. Bait. No pretenses.” He would not have minded cutting him more intimately, feeling the bite and parting of his skin for himself, but he was cautious. Spencer was not his target, not yet, as much as he had been an irritant. His target would come. He would be patient.
Chapter Summary

People like them, people full of cracks and holes and hairline fractures, held themselves together with distance, with isolation. It felt safer, but it was stupid.

He awoke in pitch darkness, in a cramped space so small he was curled in fetal position. The air was musty, smelling of varnish and pine sap, and plenty of his own rank sweat. He almost panicked, before he remembered this part of the plan, a plan he’d agreed to. That recollection made him question his sanity briefly. Whatever he was trapped in had wheels, small ones which hit every single bump of the surface they were dragged across. Old, cracked asphalt, if he had to guess, but then most of his neighborhood was old, cracked asphalt. And I want to keep it that way. Okay, so that wasn’t entirely true. He’d love it if the potholes—ow, fuck, that was one—and the cracks would be filled, or better yet, repaved. But he wanted it for the people living here, not at their expense. And the world was a shitty place that didn’t work like that, so he’d take the bad asphalt.

Whoever was dragging whatever he was in wasn’t doing it gently, so he was going to lay his money on Eliot. It could have been a tracksuit, but that would mean Eliot put a lot more faith in the tracksuit’s lack of curiosity about the supposedly corpse-ified version of Clint Barton than Clint Barton himself was willing to grant. It was impossible to hear anything over the roar of the wheels, so he focused on keeping his teeth from rattling straight out of his skull and waited.

Finally the movement stopped. Blurred voices filtered in and it took him a minute to realize they weren’t speaking English. Ukrainian? Something with plenty of Russian loan-words. He could barely pick up Eliot’s low growl, but got enough to guess it was him and one tracksuit. Hell, there could have been a bunch of silent guys too, but how the hell would he know?

There was a harsh metal rattle, slightly more movement and then the case slammed to the floor without warning. OW. Seriously Eliot? More metal rattling and then he was alone—probably.

He could hear Hardison and Bobbi bickering about the bot, apparently unconcerned that Eliot had just knocked him out by pretending to break his neck. Day in the life. It was weird listening to them argue about tiny details in his behavior. Weird enough that after a few minutes of it, he turned down that aid, leaving it high enough that he’d pick up anything loud and violent, and took a nap.

He awoke again when the container shifted and someone tapped an “ALL CLEAR” in Morse code, before several dull thunks echoed through the space. Light suddenly blinded him and he blinked blearily up at bubblegum pink hair, a face full of piercings, and a perfectly arched eyebrow.

“Hey Clint, comfy in there?” Aimee plopped down next to him.

“Oh, yeah, actually. Hey.” He yawned and carefully unfolded himself. Ow. Okay, so maybe not the greatest nap spot. “You didn’t have to come to, uh...wherever this is, and let me out.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you’re definitely gonna get yourself out of a double bass case in the middle of a storage locker. Can totally see that happening.”
“Hey, I used to be in the circus! I could know tons of escape techniques—hang on, a bass case?” He took a better look at the thing he was sitting in. “Huh. Where’d he get it?”

“You mean the hot girl who knocked on my door and asked me if I had anything large enough to hold a six-foot-tall, undismembered body?” Clint winced. Parker. That would be Parker. “Or the hot guy who insisted on drilling subtle air holes in it, before I tossed it on the curb,” she continued, “or the other hot guy that wandered by a bit later while I happened to be looking out my window, frowned, grunted, and picked it up and carried it back into the building.” She grinned. “You have some pretty cute friends you don’t invite over much, Clint.”

“Didn’t have them to invite over before uh…yesterday? Day before?” Man was his internal clock messed up.

“And now these brand new friends are talking to your neighbors to find something to hide your not-dead body in? That’s some leveling up. Oh yeah, Simone packed you a lunch, or well, dinner.” She handed over a paper sack and a thermos.

Clint inspected the contents. Two peanut butter and banana sandwiches, carrot sticks, and a milk carton. The thermos held coffee. Something about the whole thing made his throat close up and he took a sip of the coffee, still hot, and damn strong, to make his voice work again. “Guess she thinks I’m one of her kids,” he huffed. He couldn’t really think of anything else to say, or a greater honor.

“Well, I offered to stop at Mickey D’s on the way over, but she said you eat too much crap, so yeah, looks like.” She snagged some of the carrot sticks from the baggie and chewed while he ate a sandwich and looked around.

There wasn’t much to look at. Metal roll-door, concrete block walls, the case he was sitting in, and Aimee, munching on carrot sticks and probably giving him a chance to get his head back together.

“Where are we?” he asked, suddenly realizing he’d run out of sandwich.

“Still in Bed-Stuy, one of those storage rental places. Hardison and Parker explained what was going on when they came to inquire about containers. Robot you is back at your place, but it’s staying in your apartment. Simone and I made sure the rest of the building knew to keep their doors and windows locked in case something went down.”

“What’s robot me like?” Considering the thing was programmed by his ex-wife and a guy he’d shot at two days ago…

“Actually weirdly accurate? I knew, and it was pretty impossible to tell.” She thought for a moment. “Oh yeah, he can’t pronounce ‘sec’ or ‘fuck’ right.” She added as an afterthought. “Says ‘sex’ and ‘futz’. Which is weird.”

“What’s weird is you finding that out,” Clint muttered. “What happened to the bass?” It wasn’t all that hard to imagine Aimee strumming away at a giant bass, in some hipster coffeehouse.

“Sitting in my closet, waiting for me to get my shit together and go back to Julliard.” The coffeehouse image popped like a balloon. She waggled her fingers at the expression on his face. “Classically-trained failure, that’s me.” She shrugged. “Now you’re probably gonna ask me to play sometime, yadda yadda.”

He shrugged back, “Others would probably like it.” He waved a hand at his ears. “Deep sounds aren’t really my thing. I like the case though. It’s cozy.”

“That’s what Parker said. Hardison was looking at her like she was nuts, and put air holes in it. She
didn’t argue with him though.” He had to look carefully to find the holes. Probably a good idea, really. No idea how airtight it was otherwise.

That reminded him. “Just a sex, let me check in with the others…oh futz.” He groaned as Aimee cackled.

He upped the volume on the aid and listened as additional voices filtered into his head. “Hey guys? I’m back with the living. What’s going on?”

Bobbi jumped in first. “You got any places that don’t have a crick in them?”

“It looked cozy!” That was definitely Parker.

“Ughh, no way, no how,” Hardison tuned in, “Clint, man, how’d you survive that?”

“I uh, took a nap? Parker’s right, it was pretty comfy, after Eliot stopped dragging it through what felt like a gravel pit. Tell Simone thanks for the food and the coffee.” He paused. “Eliot back with the old guy?”

“No, Barton, he is not.” Clint’s head snapped up. That wasn’t someone on their team. That was the Clown. “He is with me. He has been with me for several hours now.”

Clint felt his heart speed up. This was bad. This was very, very bad. He opened his mouth to reply, but Parker beat him to it.

“I want proof he’s alive.” Her voice remained level and emotionless; not an easy feat when the life of someone you care about is on the line. He would know.

“Why? This is not a negotiation, Parker. This is merely a courtesy.”

She didn’t hesitate a moment longer. “Earbuds out. Destroy them NOW,” she snapped. Clint winced at the feedback of others being destroyed, but kept his in. Never was good at following orders.

“How pointlessly proactive,” Kaziu muttered, apparently to himself. “You promised my employer a dead Avenger, Spencer. I see you’ve been living up to the rumors, rather than the legend. Eliot Spencer, gone soft. That Avenger, just a human, and still so very much alive.”

“And still listening to you blather on and on and on. Do you ever shut up, Clowny McClownface?” Okay, so mocking the crazy murder-clown that had Eliot was probably not a great response, but who was he to argue with his mouth? Beside him, Aimee was gesturing wildly, silently demanding a status update.

“Barton.” The creep sounded like a cat in cream. Is that even the saying? Is the cat standing in cream? I guess they could be? Note to self: ask Nat about cat/cream idiom. She’s got like, a mental encyclopedia of that shit.

“The one and only. Well, I guess not technically, but I’m the only one wasting my time talking to you.”

“I have your friend. At this rate, it will be a number of hours before his blood-loss becomes a concern, but I’m getting bored. And he needs an education on how to torture someone creatively. His demonstration with you, merely demonstrated a distinct lack of imagination.” There was some other sound, behind Kaziu’s voice. Too far away or garbled for him to make out. Dammit.
“You lack a distinct imagination. Wait. That doesn’t sound right. Whatever.” *Think, Barton, think. Where would he keep Eliot?* “The creepy clown shtick is so old. And you don’t even make an effort. Most of your creep-factor isn’t even clown-related. I tell you man, that’s the thing about a shtick. You gotta go big or go home.”

“Well that does explain some of your costume choices over the years.” *Ouch, low blow.* He could barely pick up more vague sounds. Eliot. Eliot must be yelling something. Or growling more like. *Like I said, deep noises, not really my thing.* He glanced at Aimee, who must have pieced together what was happening. She no longer looked confused, just very worried. *They are her thing, though.*

He pointed to the earbud, then held up a finger. “Tell me why I care? Spencer and I aren’t exactly what you’d call friendly. He left me for dead in a Walmart parking lot. *Wal-futzing-mart.* So why exactly should I stick my neck out for him, when I could just head on back to the building I’ve spent months keeping your *bros* out of and finish the job once and for all?”

He yanked the hearing aid/comm unit out and shoved it at Aimee, who caught on quickly, and stuffed it into her own ear, wincing. Right, that would seem loud to a hearing person. She mouthed *(WELL?)* at him.

*(LISTEN.)* *(EL-I-OT?)*

*(OH!)*

She paused and then frowned. *(…Hate about circuses?)* *(Fun-houses.)(Fun-houses…WORST.)* She paused and abruptly swallowed, face going pale.

Clint nodded in comprehension and held out his hand for the comm, mouthing his thanks. He had an idea of what she’d just heard. *(Sorry.)* He put it back in and cut off the Clown’s demonstration that he could talk a person’s ear off while torturing someone. “Yeah, sorry man. Sounds like you set up a real nice trap. Maybe even made a big banner that said TRAP on it in giant letters. I mean, I’m not known for my subtlety, but I’ve gotta say, you’ve definitely got me beat. Have fun with your new plaything. I’m sure you assassin types get along famously. Don’t kill him too quickly, he’d find it insulting.” He dropped the aid to the ground and stomped on it hard.

“Sorry,” he repeated, this time aloud.

“For?”

“For making you listen to that. I couldn’t—”

“You know where he is?”

“Somewhere with mirrors, probably close. The dance studio that shut down about a year back seems like a good bet.”

She blinked. “Oh! Fun-house!”

“T ook Eliot to a carnival once. We never went in the fun-house, but it’s pretty obvious.” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

“You can stop saying that, you know, I’m sure I’ll get over the nightmares someday.”

“Different ‘sorry’. I should go back to the building. Job’s blown, everything’s blown. I should be there to protect it. And everyone. It’s my responsibility. But—”
“You are there.”

“I have to—”

“Clint, if you’re not there, who’s that I saw walking into your apartment? You got an identical twin? Likes to say futz and sex a lot?”

“Uh. Right.”

“We’ll be fine. Better if you take care of this asshole.” She swallowed. “I don’t want to think about what’s happening there right now.”

“He isn’t going to kill him. Not yet.”

“You think that makes it better?” she snapped, just this side of losing it, but she didn’t.

Clint bit his lip. “Sorry.”

“STOP. SAYING. THAT.”

“Right. Sor—okay.” He didn’t try to tell her it was reassurance for himself. That Eliot wouldn’t be dead. That he’d be in relatively one piece. That he’d trust someone was coming for him. Instead, he ran his hand through his hair, considered his complete lack of weaponry and muttered. “God, I wish I had a bow.”

“Oh! Futz, I’m an idiot.” Aimee bent and unzipped a fabric panel on the upper inside of the case. Inside rested his bow, unstrung, and quiver full of arrows. She shrugged, voice still shaking slightly. “It’s where the bow normally goes. We thought it should get put to a similar use. It was supposed to be funny, but now everything’s gone to shit.”

The laugh began small and bubbled up and he couldn’t have stopped it if he tried. Everything had gone to shit and here he was having a giggle-fit because a girl had put a bow in a bow hold. “S’okay, funny doesn’t stop when things get shitty.” he told her when he had his breath back. “Thanks. I’d kinda forgotten that.” He paused for a moment, turned back. “Are you going back?”

“Yeah. It’s my home, and if I’m gonna lose it, I’m at least gonna be there when it happens.”

He patted his pockets and came up empty. Shit, they’d taken his phone. Probably hoped it had Avenger contact info. As-if. “It’s not safe.”

She folded her arms. “I’m a bike messenger in NY-futzing-C.”

“Okay, point taken. Can you give them a message for me? Tell them I’ve gone to get Eliot. Tell them I’ll get him back.”

She nodded. “Pretty sure I can handle that job. Can you handle yours?” It didn’t come across as antagonistic, just worried. He would have preferred the other. If he couldn’t, he’d lose another friend to the Clown. And he’d just gotten him back. He shrugged. “If not, tell them ‘sorry’.” Both the gesture and the word were futile, but it was all he had.
There was a moment, a brief instant, where she thought the pressure resting in the base of her skull, the area where she stuffed all her fear and doubt for the times when there was no room for it in the rest of her head—when she needed to focus, to think, to act, to decide—would burst forth, unable to be shoved away a moment longer. She closed her eyes for two heartbeats. In the eternity between them, she went to the ice cave.

It was, unsurprisingly, cold. Remembering that cold, the tears frozen on to her cheeks, snot on her upper lip, was how she reached the ice cave. She didn’t come to ice cave to remind herself to be cold. She came to remind herself that that was okay. In the corner lay a dead man—Alan, his name was Alan—but she’d come to terms with his presence. In front of her stood a living one—he was still living—and they’d come to terms with themselves. The discomfort of the tears and snot vanished and she stood clear-headed and clear-eyed, facing Eliot. “It makes us…us,” he said. She nodded once, sharply, and her heart beat again, and she opened her eyes.

“What the hell did you do that for?!” Bobbi was yelling in frustration. “Parker, do you know how many hostage negotiations I’ve done? I know you guys only think of me as a grifter, but this is my job. You should have let me do it!”

“No.” The word tasted cold and final, and she bit it off. “He wasn’t going to negotiate. We have nothing he wants.”

Alec’s hands were shaking. In a moment, he would pull himself together and come up with a plan to rescue Eliot. It would be ridiculous and she would love it. Then she would refuse it. “Hardison. I need tracking data.”

“Right, on it.” She heard his fingers fly over the keyboard, and turned back to Bobbi, who had her own ideas, own way of handling things, and it might work, whatever Bobbi was thinking, but they had no time to debate this.

“This is my job. While we are on it, I call the shots. You’re the only hitter now. Can you handle that?”

The other woman waited a beat before nodding. “He won’t know what hit them.” Her smile was vicious.

“You aren’t going after the Clown.”

Bobbi blinked. “But—”

Hardison interrupted. “Got it. It’s still on. Can’t tell you if it’s with Eliot, but looks like the Clown hasn’t destroyed it yet.” He took a steady breath and continued in a rush, “I’ll send the bot—”

“No. We aren’t blowing our cover. Bobbi and the bot are staying put.”

“Parker, our cover is blown. Totally kaput.”

“He’s right.”

“NO.” Why did she keep having to say that? They were wasting time. “Does Clint still have his phone?”

He tapped the keyboard a few times. “Nope, still in this building, they took it off him.”
“Text Kate.”

“Look, not to go all Ackbar or anything, but it’s a trap. You want to send a teenager in to deal with a trap set by a murder-clown and baited with our boyfriend? I love Kate, but she’s—”

“Hawkeye. I’m sending in Hawkeye.”

“The teenage one!”

"Don't let her hear you say that," Bobbi muttered.

“This isn’t up for debate. Do it and stop arguing with me.” She winced internally. The cave wasn’t for Alec. It was hers, and maybe Eliot’s, though it was likely she just found him there each time because she needed the reassurance that the choice she was about to make didn’t make her bad. It was just a piece of what made her…her. Eliot, she was sure, had similar places, with similar meanings.

Did the Clown have an ice cave or something like it? He’d said he came from Hell, had stated it, calm and deliberate. His cave would be filled with bodies; some put there by him. Would it have someone else? Someone alive? Who saw him, all of him, beyond the facepaint and façade? No, she decided. Not likely. He was alone in that.

This will work.

“Sent.” Hardison snapped. “She was already on her way. From Manhattan. So Eliot could be dead by the time—”

“Alec, Clint will be heading there, as soon as he figures out where he needs to go.” Bobbi put a hand on his shoulder and caught Parker’s eye, jerking her head at Hardison.

Bobbi was right, she should be the one reassuring him, but she couldn’t be that Parker right now. She had to be this Parker. So she nodded, adding, “He isn’t going to kill Eliot. Not quickly. He’s going to make it last as long as possible. Eliot is bait and dead bait is pointless. He wants Clint.”

There was a time when she could have said that without it hurting. She might not have recognized the pain on Alec’s face when she said it, either. That was the trade-off. You don’t get one without the other, not if you’re whole.

“Oh, okay,” Bobbi said, and Parker recognized some of that ice in her eyes, as well. “I’ll give you that. Honestly, I’m way more worried about us. Clown’s expecting one Hawkeye and he’s getting two, hopefully. But our cover’s blown wide open. He must have heard enough to know what we’re doing. This could get ugly.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. I don’t think the Clown told them anything.” Now that Kate was on her way, and Hardison and Bobbi weren’t openly rebelling, she could take a moment to explain. “He’s a messed-up guy with a messed-up past, working for people he can run circles around. And he’s been watching them screw everything up! He survives by being a step ahead and we got the jump on him. So he’s doing things his way, to be sure no one can mess him up. He intends to kill Clint, because he has his orders, but he wants to do it his way. He won’t tell them till the job’s done.”

Hardison and Bobbi were both looking at her now, unsure if she was right, but hoping she was. She hoped she was too. She was basing all of her assumptions on the idea that the Clown was broken. Like she was broken. Like Eliot was broken. Like Clint was broken. People like them, people full of cracks and holes and hairline fractures, held themselves together with distance, with isolation. It
felt safer, but it was stupid. Because if you’re alone, no one else can help you put yourself back together. She and Eliot and Clint had people, had family willing to pick up their pieces, and reassemble them.

Nate always said to give the mark what they wanted. It blinded them to the obvious. He had Eliot already and Clint would give himself. She knew that, just as Bobbi seemed to, that it would barely register as a choice.

She glanced down the street. A pack of tracksuits were heading in their direction. In front strode the newly-returned Ivan, Mr. Bishop, and Madame Masque, coming to see O₂ and their “creation”.

“Is the Barton-bot ready to go? They’re going to order it to come down. To prove it’s a robot and that they have control.”

“Yeah, it’s ready, but Parker, you could look at this another way. We have a robot that’s programmed to fight. We send it to Eliot’s location…I can get him out! I can rescue him. This thing getting shot won’t matter! It’s not a person, it can’t get hurt!”

Hardison’s last shot. Solve a problem with tech. Nevermind the con and the pay-off, he just needed Eliot safe.

“No.”

“Parker, Eliot’s being tortured right now. You get that right? They ain’t sitting around having a nice cup of tea while they wait for Clint to get there.”

“Eliot’s been tortured before. Keep the bot where it is.” She kept her voice flat. It was easier to say with her voice flat.

“You did not just—”

“Yes. Alec. I did. I said Eliot’s been tortured before, and he has. We finish the job. Jobs, remember? We were asked by Tara—Bobbi—to look into Ivan. We were asked by Kate to help Clint. We were told by Eliot that no matter what, he was staying to see this through. And now you want to blow that? He’ll be furious if you do it, Alec.”

“How can you risk him?” he asked, his voice tinged with desperation.

On a certain level, she didn’t understand the question. This wasn’t truly about her. The Clown barely knew she existed, was only aware of her as a thief. This was about Eliot and Clint, and the choices they made. Her only choice in this matter was to inform Kate as a contingency and keep her part of this crew on track. Eliot, she knew, would view this as part of the deal. Part of the choice he made.

But that wasn’t Hardison, who spent all of his time with computers and was still the most human of them all. He wasn’t broken. No wonder he didn’t understand.

“Because I was broken! I was broken and Archie remade me like you programmed that robot, but he didn’t fix me. But you. You and Eliot and Nate and Sophie—you are helping me fix myself.”

“And Clint was broken! I don’t know who remade him, but someone did, for a purpose.” She paused, biting her lip and glancing at Bobbi, who gave her a tiny, sad nod. When she continued, her voice was softer. “And Bobbi and Kate and Natasha and even Lucky, are helping him put himself back together, even if he doesn’t feel like it all the time.
She was pacing and she knew she sounded insane, but now that she’d started, she needed to finish, to make him understand. “When you’re built to be something, rather than someone, you think you can feel pieces that are missing, but you don’t know what they are. And no one tries to fix them, because they don’t see them as necessary. To them, you’re a success. So you tell yourself that too, because you are good—you’re the best. They’ve made you into the perfect thief, or marksman, or murderer. But sometimes it feels like a lie.

“Kaziu, he was broken and remade too. But no one helped him find those missing pieces. No one helped him become whole. They just took the parts they wanted. So he seems strong and scary, but he’s not, because he thinks he can do this by himself, but we are so much stronger than him, because we know we can’t.” She was breathing fast and hard, and she felt like crying, but that was for later.

Hardison was watching her and she couldn’t read him, not in the slightest. Less than a breath later, he was standing and she had her face squashed into his shirt as he whispered, “Okay. Parker, I trust you, don’t think that I don’t. I just. I can’t lose either of you. You know that.”

She stepped back. If she stayed there, she would start crying and that was for later, when Eliot was back with them and he’d get all gruff and embarrassed. “You could. But it’s not going to happen today.” She looked out the window again. “Here they come.”
Chapter Summary

“MAN, YOU REALLY TAKE THIS CIRCUS THING TOO FAR. THE WHOLE CLOWN THING, AND NOW MIRRORS?”

Chapter Notes

heads up, warning for blood.
(I'm very very sorry Eliot, I just love torturing the characters I love the most?)

The interminable dinner with dear Daddy ended for the same reasons dinners with him had always ended, or never happened, or were postponed into never happening: he had a meeting.

Kate was certain she’d heard the line “I’m sorry sweetie, I have a meeting, but later…” out of his mouth more times than any other phrase he uttered to her in her entire life. Or perhaps it was just the one that had always hit the hardest. People are targets in more ways than one, she thought, and then mentally kicked herself for being soppy. This time, she knew what the meeting was and she intended to be watching it go down. Just one thing she had to do first.

With her father out the door, it was simple to slip into his office and login to his computer. His password was her birthday, always had been. It was probably supposed to be sweet; a secret indicator that he was always thinking about her. But she’d watched him type it hundreds of times, a rote annoyance to bypass before accessing whatever he was interested in. Which wasn’t her.

She may have used more force than absolutely necessary, jamming Hardison’s USB drive into the slot. Least his had more than 32 MB on this thing, Clint. Hardison had told her the drive would take care of copying everything, he just needed her to access the computer. She didn’t exactly intend to go on an active hunt, but so little in this mess had been digital—she opened a drawer and started rifling through files, while the drive did its thing.

If she expected to find anything super illegal or suspicious, she quickly abandoned that idea. Her dad wasn’t that stupid. Instead, amidst files for warranties, receipts, and other useless paper, she found one labeled “Katie”. It contained pictures of her. Some were the perfect; stylized portraits he’d insisted they get once a year, because sitting perfectly still and smiling through gritted teeth really encompassed their relationship. She hated those pictures, hated the way his hand rested on her shoulder, appearing to her in the chair. She hated the progression: her mother in the first ones, barest hint of a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, then just the two of them, then his new wife, far too young. She’d agreed to one of those last, before refusing to sit for any more.

Underneath the perfect, fake pictures were surveillance photos. Her shooting arrows with Clint, joking with Eli, some argument she didn’t remember with America. Ironically, she liked these better, regardless of the implications—except the implications were creepy as hell. Disgusted, she shoved the folder back in the drawer, grabbed the drive, and stalked out of the room. Time to do some creepy watching of her own.
As she headed out the door, she remembered the comm unit, and tucked it back in her ear...

…and very clearly heard Clint talking to “Clowny McClownface”.

 Fuck.

It was tempting to keep listening, figure out what the hell was going on, but there was no way to do that while weaving through incredibly noisy lower Manhattan, and she needed to move. Tucking the comm away again, Kate bolted out of her dad’s building, jumped on the Vespa, and wove through the late afternoon rush hour traffic, ignoring the blaring horns and cars screeching to a halt. She’d never get from Manhattan to Brooklyn at this rate, but luckily she had some alternative transportation lined up. Stark Tower was only a few blocks away and she drove the scooter straight up to the side entrance used by the Avengers.

“Jarvis!” she yelled, stumbling as she got off the Vespa. Need to calm down, breathe, don’t get carried away by the adrenaline. “Jarvis, it’s Hawkeye—one of them—I need to retrieve something I left here a few hours ago?”

A disembodied voice echoed from some hidden speaker. “Of course, Miss Bishop, the elevator will take you to the landing pad.” A door swung open, and Kate walked straight into an oversized elevator. Then again, if the Hulk was regularly coming to call, it would be a necessity. Her phone buzzed. A text from a number she didn’t recognize read:


Translation: The Clown had Eliot, apparently in that dance place two blocks over from Clint’s, and it was a trap. Duh. Okay, this looks bad, but not up shit creek bad. Clint’s probably talking the guy’s ear off in hopes of distracting him. Shit. I need a bow. Shit-shit. Clint might need a bow. It’s gonna be a really sad rescue if two Hawkeyes both turned up lacking the tools of the trade. “Uh, Jarvis? Does Clint keep weapons here?”

“Quite a number of them. Usually where they can be tripped over.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Awesome. I need to grab two. And a bunch of arrows.” The elevator abruptly stopped, went down slightly and dinged. She exited into what was clearly an armory. Sweet. She grabbed two sleek, collapsible bows, and two quivers of arrows before jogging back to the elevator, and Jarvis moved it upward.

A minute later, she rocketed off the landing pad and towards Bed-Stuy.

“I don’t like what I see...”

The first thought Eliot had as his head cracked against the mirror, was of a sardonic, whip-smart, blonde kid with little respect for authority. She’d reminded him of someone. Impossible not to, once he got dragged to that carnival. So he’d put a random skillset he’d learned years before to good use, and he’d earned her confidence and trust.

Eliot did not believe in fate. Fate precluded choice and he was defined by the choices he’d made. Passing Clint’s array of carnival hacks on to Molly was not fate, just a good time to use skills he’d
acquired.

He did not believe in redemption. The choices he’d made were not erased by future choices. Going into the house of mirrors concussed and groggy did not absolve him from his actions in the parking lot, or any of his actions since.

He did not believe in karma. There was no karmic connection between his choices with Clint and his choices with Molly. At the time, he hadn’t been thinking about karma, or redemption, or fate. He’d not been thinking much at all. His focus had narrowed to a singular point. She needed him and he would not let her down.

Now. *Now* he was having some serious second thoughts on the subject. Getting your head smashed through another mirror, by another Eastern European hitman, just when you’ve decided to try and repair the trust between you and a sardonic, whip-smart blond guy from a carnival, is the type of circumstance that suggests maybe there is an all-powerful force in the universe. And they have a very strange sense of humor.

He wasn’t laughing.

He felt sluggish and scattered, fighting what felt like a losing battle with consciousness, but he hated losing, hated losing control, so he shifted his torso, slicing his shirt, embedding glass in his skin, giving himself a fulcrum. Pain can be an excellent source of leverage.

The Clown was announcing his presence to Parker, and raw terror washed over Eliot. Was she in the room? Only person he knew that could enter a room and he wouldn’t know, never knew, until she’d turn up next to him, or above him, or on top of him, completely unaware that when he’d tell her not to do that, it was because he was afraid he’d hurt her, on instinct. But she wouldn’t have cared; the possibility that he would hurt her never registered, because it was his job to keep her safe. The last time the Clown threatened her, he’d been too far away and now he was too close, bound and bleeding, and *damnit* Hardison was right, they weren’t safe around him—

Comms. The crashing wave of panic retreated and he understood fundamentals again. The Clown had his earbud. Parker and Hardison were not here. The asshole was just taunting them.

Eliot watched as Kaziu winced, making the distinctive face of someone whose eardrums have just been subjected to comm feedback. Good Parker, get offline. Don’t negotiate for me.

“…Eliot Spencer, gone soft. That Avenger, just a human, and still so very much alive…”

*Damn straight. So you know my name, huh. That why you shot me with a tranq gun from a distance?* He’d call him a coward, but it had been a smart move. No wonder he was so out of it.

“Barton,” Kaziu said, excessively pleased and no longer addressing Eliot.

Aw fuck. *Don’t do it, Circus.* Eliot let his head drop back against the cracked glass, which was a mistake. The room spun wildly, his ears roaring. God, he hated concussions, hate carnivals, hated clowns, hated fucking funhouse mirrors—

In this twist of not-fate, he was Molly. He was the bribe, the bait, the reason somewhere a freaked-out Hardison was referencing Star Wars, because Hardison reverted to pure geek when he was scared, while Parker would slice off her emotions, trying to make the most rational decision.

And Clint? Clint would come flying through that door. It might not be the most rational decision, but when was Clint rational? He’d come, if he knew where to go.
But plans change.

“MAN, YOU REALLY TAKE THIS CIRCUS THING TOO FAR. THE WHOLE CLOWN THING, AND NOW MIRRORS? YOU KNOW WHAT I HATE ABOUT CIRCUSES? FUCKING FUNHOUSES. ALL THOSE MIRRORS WITH THE STUPID REFLECTIONS. SERIOUSLY? WHY? SO YOU CAN LOOK AT YOUR FACE WITH A BIG ASS NOSE AND NO CHIN? THAT’S NOT A TWISTED REFLECTION MAN. YOU JUST HAVE TO LOOK IN YOUR OWN DAMN MIRROR TO SEE SOMETHING TWISTED. DON’T NEED A FUCKING FUNHOUSE FOR THAT. WORST—”

The first shot hit the mirror right next to Eliot’s left ear, exploding glass outward and he tried to shield himself with his arms, his ear ringing and at least temporarily useless. The second shot hit high above his head, sending large shards cascading down on top of him. In the movies, people rarely seemed to get that cut up from leaping through windows, but movies lied. He could feel glass digging in, slicing and dicing, every time he moved. Some of it had gone down the back of his shirt when he’d ducked his head. Even if he got the chance, he couldn’t use the wall to brace himself without risking severe lacerations. He breathed hard through his nose, assessing his options.

The Clown carefully picked up a few pieces of glass and wandered a distance away. He seemed to see Eliot as a mildly interesting toy, while he waited for the main event. “That was remarkably unsubtle.”

“Don’t get called subtle much,” Eliot gritted out, aiming for conversational and missing by a mile.

Kaziu flicked one of the shards of glass lightning quick. Eliot instinctively shifted, dodging enough that it lodged in his shoulder rather than his throat. The movement caused another piece to slice ferociously into his lower back. He grunted and continued breathing, waiting for the next projectile.

“Barton did not seem particularly interested in rescuing you. Something about a Walmart parking lot?”

Eliot forced himself to laugh. “Man, you are a helluva lot more than ten pounds of crazy. Barton ain’t gonna come for me.”

“Then why all the yelling?” He sent another piece flying, low this time, aiming for Eliot’s groin and the femoral artery. Eliot sacrificed more of his skin and a bit of his flesh to twist forcefully out of the way, could feel the glass in his shirt abrade his back as the piece thudded into the meat of his thigh.

“I like to piss you off.” His breath and voice tangled into a snarl in his throat. Keep him talking. “Or didn’t you notice that earlier?” He let his head fall to one side, staring up at the guy through a curtain of hair and blood.

“You rescued him,” Kaziu pointed out. He flung another long, wickedly pointed piece, aiming front and center.

Eliot didn’t try to avoid this one, no point. He tightened his core and prayed to no one in particular that it wouldn’t punch through the muscle wall of his abdomen as it struck. “And you’re banking on what exactly? Karma?” Okay. Pretty sure his internals would remain internal for the time being. Glass cut easily, but it didn’t have too much weight or momentum behind it. Kaziu would either
have to get closer to stab, or throw a helluva lot harder. “Barton’s a stubborn asshole with a grudge. If you had any observational skills, you’d have noticed that.”

“Then why?”

Eliot tracked as his captor wandered off to the side, selecting more ammunition. “Look man, my crew got hired to take out your boss. Clearly the job went south.” A small piece zinged past, opening a long cut on the inside of his raised arm. Blood welled up and ran down, into his armpit. It itched, somehow more irritating than the other sources of pain.

Kaziu seemed to consider this, trying to discern if Eliot was lying. Good luck. Sophie hadn’t taught him how to lie, she’d taught him how to believe a truth. And he was giving this asshole some very believable truths. They maybe weren’t true as of the last 24 hours, but what was a day versus a decade? If he could keep this up, keep Kaziu talking, guessing, (and sure, yeah, hurting him, what else was new), then Parker could work out a new plan. Hardison could implement it. Guy had a goddamn robot programmed to fight. They’d figure something out. His job was to keep the muscle occupied.

If I have to do that with my hands tied, fine. Try me.

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Clint took the rooftop route towards the old dance studio, trying to focus on warming up stiff muscles and not focus on whatever Kaziu was doing to Eliot. He’s a tough sonofabitch, he’ll hold on till I get there, and be pissed as all hell for needing the rescue.

He almost underestimated the space between two rooftops, landing on his toes on the very edge and windmilling his arms before he could regain his balance. Lucky. Eliot would laugh himself sick if Clint fell off a roof rather than getting thrown off by him. Joke’s on you, I’ve fallen off more roofs than you know. This whole mess started ‘cause I fell off a roof. Sorta.

Damn, Eliot had wormed his way into his head in a day and a half. He’d done the mental conversation thing since he was a kid, since the first time the world went silent and people stared every time he tried to talk, words too loud and off-sounding. He’d talked back at Barney, at the social workers, at the Swordsman, sometimes the words slipping past his lips, mostly locked up tight, pressure against his eyes. By the time Natasha was a constant…Natasha was his confessor. All those mental conversations were hers and he’d forget what he told her and what was silent. He was certain she’d figured out more than he ever said. That was Nat for you.

Eliot had briefly replaced his one-sided mental arguments with Nat, back when the concept of having a mental argument with Nat was only slightly less painful than an actual argument with her. After—everything—it had been hard to fall out of the habit. For days, weeks, he’d tangled Eliot and Nat in his mind before he’d finally managed to banish him. Ten years later, the impulse was back, just like that, joining Kate, and sometimes Jess, slowly, achingly replacing Bobbi.

What not even a hi? Kate demanded and he jumped, realizing that hadn’t been mental, just displaced. He twisted his head to the right to look at her, hovering on the sky cycle.

“I’m down an ear,” he muttered as an explanation.

Kate glanced at the bow in his hand. “Well, looks like I’m up a bow, where’d you get that one?”
“Aimee got clever.” He looked down the street. A block over, shit was probably going down at the apartment building and he should be there. That was his mess. But then this was his mess too. Was anything connected to him not a mess? “He’s in that old dance studio.” He nodded in the general direction, “Wasn’t dead when I headed out.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Yeah, Hardison texted, genius. They know us too well. We going in?”

*Katie-Kate don’t ever change.* “I am, first.”

“Clint, don’t be an idiot—”

“Nah, listen, I tried to throw him, but he’s expecting me. You might be a surprise.”

“So you’re going to draw him out and I’m going to go in for Eliot.”

“Doubt that’ll work. More like, I’ll go in, he’ll try to kill me, and you come in a rescue us both.”

“Clint, this is a terrible plan.”

“It’s an awesome plan. Give me like two minutes.” He started moving before she could lodge more complaints. It wasn’t that she was wrong, she was definitely not wrong, but he was hoping that walking straight into the trap would have its own element of surprise. Who would really be that stupid? *Me. I am definitely that stupid.* Down the fire escape and across the street.

He drew an arrow [explosive tip] and rested it lightly on the string, approaching the front door. Still a good distance away, he sighted and released. The door exploded with a bang that blasted painfully through his remaining aid. *Great, I’ll hurt myself before I even get to the psycho holding my friend.*

He dashed through the door and charged up the stairs, *almost* hurling himself around the tight landing corner before checking his momentum as a barrage of gunfire rained down the stairs. *Well, that was almost really bad.* He loosed another arrow [putty] up the stairs and the gunfire ceased.

New arrow [explosive tip] nocked, he charged up the second flight of stairs, avoiding the machine gun clogged with putty lying on the landing. Be really stupid if he got stuck in the stuff. He paused a moment outside the closed door, then kept moving, climbing halfway up the third flight to get a good angle, before loosing the arrow at close range down towards the door. The shockwave shook the building and even with only one aid he could hear the cacophony of breaking glass and Eliot screaming “*DAMMIT BARTON!*”

*W whoops, that may have been overkill.* He leapt the wall of the staircase and flung himself through the smoking hole where the door had once stood, instantly falling toward the left in a roll. Bullets whistled in the air above his head. In the corner by the window stood an old upright piano and he dove behind it, the only spot of cover in this wide open room. *And now I’m literally cornered. This is exactly where he wants me. Helluva job there.* He wasn’t exactly sure what Kate was going to do or when she would do it, so he leapt up briefly, firing a single arrow [regular tip] past the Clown striding towards him, pistol raised.

The Clown smiled. “Missed me, archer.” He slammed the piano into Clint, pinning him to the wall and fired a shot clearly meant to go through his skull, but Clint managed to jerk his head to the left just in time. The gun’s report blasted through his aid and he struggled to free himself before the second shot came. His ear kept ringing and he winced. He could still hear—kinda—but if he lived more than another 5 seconds that was going to get annoying real fast.

Kate smashed the sky-cycle through the window, head down to avoid the flying glass. The Clown
whirled at the noise and found himself face to face with a very bloody, very pissed-off Eliot.

“He didn’t miss.” Eliot snarled, throwing the severed rope that had previously bound him into Kaziu’s face. He snatched the gun, dismantling it in the space of a heartbeat, before bodily grabbing the Clown and throwing him across the layer of glass covering the floor.

The man skidded, and found his feet with almost preternatural grace, glass slicing his clothing and his palms. He pulled another gun from somewhere in his coat, and aimed it at Eliot and Clint, who finally managed to shove away the piano and ducked down as Eliot charged forward.

“Nuh-uh, my turn.” Kate loosed an arrow [net] as Clint resurfaced and fired a final shot [electro]. The Clown fell to the floor in spasms as Eliot reached him and gave him a few hard kicks for good measure. Clint came around the piano to stand shoulder to shoulder with Kate and Eliot, staring down at the twitching figure.

“Sorry.” Clint said finally. “About the glass.”

Eliot huffed out a breath. “Fucking mirrors.”

Kate glanced around at the ruin of the studio. “I wonder what the others are up to.”
Chapter Summary

“Ready?”

“Oh yeah, I’m so ready to scream and hit people.”

“Then let’s go steal building.”

Chapter Notes

Aaand we're back. Ended up rewriting a bit. And by rewriting, i mean, writing three and a half more chapters, because i can't leave well enough alone. but it's much better now, I SWEAR.

She stood by the window, not really caring if any of the people—Ivan, Mr. Bishop, Madame Masque, or the six Tracksuit Draculas accompanying them—saw her. They didn’t care, had never cared about the residents of this building. Well, Ivan probably cared about his mama, she couldn’t forget that. The others—Simone, Aimee, Deke the architect, Grill’s father, and all the rest—they were insignificant.

She remembered thinking the same. She loved things that could not hurt her, not really. Money did not hurt. Nor did falling, even when she missed the landing, broke bones, tore ligaments. Pain did not hurt. Hurt was the sound she’d listened to Grill’s father make while she traversed the fire escapes two nights before. Hurt was that flash in Nate’s eyes every time he saw a little boy; the stab she felt at seeing an upended bicycle wheel spinning lazily. People hurt. Nothing that powerful could be insignificant. Could be discounted.

Eliot would be in pain right now, but he wouldn’t be hurt by it, not really. He'd be hurt if something happened to her, or Hardison, or Bobbi. He’d be hurt if Clint or Kate died rescuing him. That was what she needed to save him from. And she would.

Before he’d been murdered by Eliot, Clint had patrolled the building, stopping to talk to his neighbors, tell them what was about to happen and give them a choice. They had chosen.

She took a deep breath, released it, and reviewed her options.

Clint wasn’t here now. Plans A-D involved Clint’s appearance, sometimes in disguise, sometimes not, depending on other factors. Plans A-G involved Eliot. Plans C-F included Kate. Three hitters off the table. Four, if she counted Natasha, but Natasha hadn’t been on the table for today. One hitter-not-Eliot left.

She glanced over her shoulder to Hardison and Bobbi, tried not to expect Eliot there, calm and collected, and spoiling for a fight. “Ready?”
Hardison nodded, holding out a school binder. “What they’re gonna have the Barton Bot sign is a quitclaim. Means he renounces all claims on ownership to this building. Nice ‘n’ simple.” He waved the binder. “What I got in here looks basically identical, but it’s a grant claim transferring ownership from Ivan to Clint.” He winked at her. “And the other things you asked for.”

“Should be an easy-peasy switch for Parker,” Bobbi commented, twisting her torso to limber up. Parker couldn’t decide if she liked her outfit, skintight and dark blue, with a white front. Bad for thieving, but maybe good in a fight? Move fast and the colors would play tricks on her opponent’s eyes. Too slow and that white would be a big target. She hoped Bobbi moved fast. She liked Bobbi. She was a good replacement for Tara; could still grift well, but doubled as a hitter.

“Yeah, I ain’t worried about the switch. But trick is Bishop. He’s a registered notary, which is handy for them, and sucks for us, cause if he reads them, he’ll know the difference.”

Bobbi grinned. “Plenty of ways to distract a man trying to read a bit of boring legalese.”

Hardison got all squirmy, like he did when he didn’t like what Parker was planning. She ignored him for the moment and shot a look at Bobbi. “By hitting him or hitting on him?”

She shook her head. “Generally my two go-tos, but we stick you in that black wig we grabbed for Plan E and you’ll make a pretty good Kate.”

Plan E had involved Parker being Spider-Woman. They weren’t doing Plan E, much to Hardison’s disappointment. Parker decided she should find a costume after this. Hardison would love it and Eliot would laugh.

“Jus’ pointing out the obvious here, but Parker’s a damn sight whiter than Kate.”

“No shit. We’re not going for perfect match, we’re going for emotional manipulation. Bishop might be in the running for Shitty Dad of the Year, but he will be worried about Kate showing up. Either because he doesn’t want her ruining things, or because he’d actually worried about her safety—in his own way.” She gave the wig a final adjustment and nodded. “You look nothing alike from close up, but it’ll do for a trigger. You know what to do when you’re close.” She tucked a tiny syringe into her hand and Parker vanished it up her sleeve.

She took the binder from Hardison and checked the contents to be sure it was in easy reach. “I’ve got the easy job. Once I’m gone…”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep ‘em busy.” Bobbi smirked and stretched to touch her toes.

“You got six tracksuits and I’m pretty sure Ivan and the mask woman can hold their own. So, uhh, don’t die?”

He got an arched eyebrow in response. “You, don’t break the robot.”

Time to go, before her hitter and her hacker went after each other. She took a deep breath, felt the cold air of the cave, and cleared her head. They could do this.

“Ready?”

“Oh yeah, I’m so ready to scream and hit people.”

“Then let’s go steal building.”
Step one: Confuse the mark.

“How fucking DARE you sleep with my husband, you selfish cow!” Inwardly, Bobbi winced at the number of outrageous things she’d managed to stuff into that sentence. But hell hath no fury like a woman scorned and all that crap, so she took the route of stupid cultural shorthand, screaming in overdone rage at the slight figure with long dark hair, who clutched a binder full of papers as she hurried down the stairs, trying to escape Bobbi’s wrath.

Bishop, et al had just entered the foyer and were starting up the stairs when Parker plunged into their midst, running smack into the man. Papers, both his and hers, went flying as they tumbled to the ground.

Bobbi launched herself forward, hands curled into claws. God, this is such a stereotype, I am disgusting even myself. Tracksuits tried to close ranks and contain her as Bishop, looking suitably terrified at the superhero harpy that had descended upon them from above, hurriedly grabbed papers and tried to hustle Parker out the door.

“Please, please let me go! I just want to go to class! Please!” Parker cried, and actually did a fair job of the voice, pitching it high and anxious as she handed him the file she’d picked up and he rifled it quickly, pulling out one page of college-lined paper and handing it to her. “I believe this one’s yours, girl, now get out of here! It isn’t safe!” She fled out the door, pausing for the slightest instant to give Bobbi a thumbs up.

Bobbi bared her teeth. “Any of you fucks remember the last time you fought me?” She didn’t know if any of these guys were the ones in the van that day, but hell, either way, she’d be happy to punch them some more.

“Bro, it’s that scary lady, Bro!”

“Seriously Bro? Just hit her, bro!”

There are upsides and downsides to fighting in a stairway.

Upside: Narrow. They had numbers on their side, but she could use the smaller space to her advantage, especially since large men wielding bats and chains would frequently end up hitting each other instead of her.

Downside: Uneven terrain. If she’d been on the offense, her higher ground would be an asset. But she was on pseudo-defense and working toward multiple ends. Dammit Eliot, this would be easier with two people.

But screw that. She’d gotten them involved, gotten herself involved (dammit Clint), and in addition to all that she was still on mission, of all things. Madam Masque seemed currently content to hang back with Bishop, occasionally glancing down at her tablet, checking in on the Barton Bot.

Okay. Time to fly, Birdie.

She turned tail and ran up several flights of stairs, Tracksuit Draculas hot on her heels, Ivan urging them onward. Bastard’s probably got a gun and is staying back so he can use it to protect himself. Means he won’t shoot me yet. Another upside of stairs: she was probably in better shape than they were. She dashed upwards, shouting imprecations and curses, goading her attackers after her.
When she glanced back, the old man had emerged from the apartment of Ivan’s mother, and was slowingly climbing the stairs alongside Bishop and Madame Masque. *Good, I’d hate for you to miss this.*

Between the third and fourth floors, Grill’s dad appeared above them and began hurling empty bottles down at the tracksuits. “*You killed my son! My son!*” He screamed and her heart broke for him in a distant place in her chest, far removed from the minutiae of the fight. Other residents appeared and started hurling things as well. She spotted Deke and Archie armed with what looked like a hockey stick and a U-Lock. They’d asked for cooperation, but begged the residents to stay safe. This looked not-safe.

*Fuck it. It’s their building too. They’ve more of a right to be in this fight than I have. Least I can do is help them do this properly.*

“Go! Go! Go! Be ready for incoming!” she shouted, shoving them back into the hallway. Deke, looking terrified, grabbed Archie and Grill’s dad—shit, what was his name? Lawrence—and pushing them ahead of him. Lawrence fought, but they got him through the door, and Bobbi had room to make a stand.

**Step 2: Eliminate the cronies. Bro-nies? No, let’s not go there.**

Down below, she’d gone the catfight route, playing to the expectations of a jealous woman whose hubby has been cheating. It made no sense in context, but who needed context when you have ready-made assumptions? She still wasn’t going to give them any (context, that is), but now her game had changed. Even if they did know her as Mockingbird, they had yet to understand it intrinsically.

Her hands went to her battle-staves and she knew her smile was feral. But she’d had a long week. Time to work off a little steam. She twirled the staves and whirled, becoming a flashing dervish in the center of chaos.

The first one to come at her didn’t see the stave in her hand until it was far too late to prevent it from connecting solidly with his temple. He went down, causing the second to trip over his deadweight. She gifted him with a kick beneath his chin and he tumbled backwards, falling into Bishop and sending them both rolling down to the landing. She kept a fraction of her awareness on them as she engaged the next pair, sending one flying past her into the hallway to be taken care of by furious residents, while she took on the last three.

One went down easy. The other two, looking alike enough to be brothers, were more careful and worked together well. Finally, she managed to separate them, pitching one through the open door to the hallway and hearing a loud CLANG. She glanced over her shoulder to see Aimee, holding a cast iron skillet.

“Came up the fire escape. No way I was gonna miss this,” she panted, grinning. Behind her, Bobbi caught a glimpse of Lucky, pinning a tracksuit down and snarling. *Wasn’t he up in Clint’s place?* Bobbi shrugged it off, pretending to ignore final tracksuit approaching. “Things go okay?”

“So far. If they stop going okay, he said I’m s’posed to tell you ‘sorry’.”

“Always the romantic. Have someone monitor the fire escape. We don’t need surprises.” She whirled, slamming one baton into the guy’s knee, and the second into his temple as he came down. *Surprise.*
In the sudden stillness, the soft, high-pitched whine Bishop made as he staggered back up the stairs sounded incredibly loud. He looked like a wreck, suit rumpled and torn, limping, his breathing harsh and ragged. Sweat poured off him and he blinked furiously, as if attempting to clear his vision.

Which, to be fair, he was. There were plenty of ways to distract a man, but personally she was quite partial to the biochemical variety. He’d never noticed Parker dosing him in the confusion of their collision. It was a cocktail of Bobbi’s own design, and reasonably mild in small doses, merely intending to heighten anxiety, blur vision, induce a bit of vertigo. It was possible, based on his reaction, that Parker had gone a bit overboard when she injected him. Bobbi wanted him distracted, not about to keel over from a heart attack.

“Are all your men this fucking incompetent or just the ones you choose to guard us?” Masque demanded of Ivan.

He shrugged and pulled out the gun she’d known he must be carrying. “Stop. Or I’ll shoot.” Bobbi rolled her eyes and snapped her leg out and up in a gesture she could practically trademark at this point. The gun went flying across the landing and hit the wall behind her. She ignored it, and the tiny, shout-y Eliot in her mind, furious that she would leave a weapon in play. Shut up, I know what I’m doing.

Masque charged forward, and Bobbi barely had a chance to block her first onslaught. I’ve just taken out six guys, you walked up a flight of stairs at the pace of a ninety-year old man. How is this fair?

She ducked and gave some more ground, waiting for a good opening. Her original assignment, which, Bobbi was beginning to think, was the initiation of some incredibly convoluted planning on Hill’s part, had been to neutralize the threat the Neffs posed, with regard to the stolen LMDs. She’d mostly handled the LMD aspect of that job, but Gia had slipped through her fingers, apparently straight back to New York, because Clint wasn’t the only predictable one around here. Greatest city in the world. Ha.

“Come running back to daddy when your villa blew up?”

“Oh please, like you can talk. Here you are, picking fights in the building your ex doesn’t own? Don’t you have your own battles to fi—”

Something small and metal smacked into her temple and she went down and stayed down. Bobbi could have sworn the thing flew back up the way it came.

The hell was that? No time to wonder about that now. Ivan had managed to retrieve the gun. Good. This would have looked really stupid if she’d actually managed to win.

Step 3: Hand off the baton.

This was the tricky bit. A rush job on an LMD was at the very least 4 days. That was barely enough time for a team of SHIELD techs to program, test, and launch a generic decoy that looked and behaved like a reasonably normal, well-adjusted adult. An LMD meant to imitate an existing human being from scratch? Said SHIELD techs would demand two months at the least, but do it in one if it was Fury requesting it, and they were given enough amphetamines to make up for the sleep deprivation.

She and Hardison had built the Barton Bot in four hours. It wasn’t autonomous. It wasn’t meant to withstand close scrutiny. It looked like Clint, moved like Clint, and sounded like Clint, but it was a
This hadn’t seemed like such an issue earlier, before Eliot was compromised and the Hawkeyes headed off on a rescue mission. Clint was supposed to be “dead” in Simone’s apartment, voicing the Barton Bot and calling the shots for Hardison. Eliot was supposed to be lurking in the hallways, taking out tracksbuits she pitched at him. Instead she had civvies and Hardison was in sole control of a circus-trained archer robot. What could possibly go wrong?

“BARTON. I HAVE YOUR WOMAN.” Ivan called out.

Call me someone’s “woman” again and you can have my foot in your scrotum. Free of charge.

Footsteps thudded down the stairs. Clint the Barton Bot hurtled into view and Bobbi wondered how anyone could believe that was the real thing. It was so obvious. She was pretty sure Hardison had combed its hair.

“Barton. Tell your woman to stand down or I shoot.”

“Te-Tell my woman? Have you met my woman?” If I had something even approaching a normal life, Hardison-speak in Clint-voice would be surreal. Instead it barely crossed the threshold of strange. The tone and inflection were Clint’s and they were down to one native English speaker and he wasn’t exactly paying attention. Hopefully anything blatantly not-Clint coming out of the bot’s mouth would be overlooked.

Ivan frowned. His remaining back-up were two men who, for two very different reasons, were having difficulty breathing currently. He cocked the pistol.

Oh, so you don’t want to shoot me. You can’t tell if that thing’s the real deal, or if it’ll obey you with the Madame down. God, what a terrible bluff.

“Okay, okay, okay. Look. I’ll do it. I’ll sign the stupid building over to you, just don’t. Shoot. Her.” Bobbi blinked at the amount of passion in the bot’s voice. They were operating on a completely acceptable rendition of the plan. She didn’t even feel particularly threatened.

But it wasn’t Clint standing next to her. It was, in essence, Hardison, and he hadn’t been there when Parker was held at gunpoint the previous evening. He hadn’t been there when Eliot was grabbed. He was here now and he was in his element, handling tech and running his mouth. She was lucky he didn’t blow it by grabbing the gun out of Ivan’s hand. Come to think of it, Clint might have tried that, the idiot.

Okay. I’m calling you Bartison, so I can remind myself what to expect.

Ivan stepped closer and Bobbi braced herself, letting his punch connect solidly with the side of her head. It was nowhere near enough to knock her out, or even down, but Ivan ran a strip club, and he was making assumptions again. He’d hit her where any bruises could be covered by hair and he’d moved fast, directly into her space as an intimidation tactic. If she’d wanted to, she could take him out, kill him easily. It was a safe bet that many of the girls he’d done this to in the past had gone down with one hit. Not because they were weak, but because it was smart. Stay up, someone’s going to hit you again. Go down, they feel powerful. She gritted her teeth and went down, praying Bartison wouldn’t freak.

He didn’t. He caught her.

Bartison scooped her into his arms, so her head was against his shoulder. “You okay?” he asked in the barest whisper.

“I love stereotypes. You?” she murmured back.

“This is literally the whitest I’ll ever be.”

“Ha. Thanks for not flipping out.”

“Haven’t seen anybody take Eliot out with just one punch. Why would you be any different?”

“Damn straight.”
The most advanced piece of tech I’ve ever gotten my hands on, and it’s sitting in an apartment waiting to sign a damn piece of paper. Not cool. So not cool.

He’d spent the wait familiarizing himself with the Barton Bot’s systems—after recording a loop of non-activity for Madame Masque to monitor when she had a chance. Not that it sounded like Bobbi was giving her much of a chance.

“Daaamn woman.” He didn’t have a clear visual, sitting up here in Clint’s mess of an apartment twiddling his thumbs—literally; it helped him hone the bot’s dexterity and fine motor skills—but he did have infrared vision, both medium and long wavelength, combined with some seriously refined sonar tech. How exactly does this thing handle the cooling for the MWIR? Stirling cycle? Ugh, Sterling. At least we’re not dealing with Sterling. Maybe it’s a liquid nitrogen system. Or they made a seriously advanced microbolometer. Or alien. It’s SHIELD, could always be alien. This thing could see through walls, was looking through several layers of wall and floor to give him a visual on the fight as Bobbi, one many brilliant purple and yellow forms, beat up the other purple and yellow forms.

Sensors throughout the bot picked up minute vibrations, transmitting some in a human auditory range of frequencies—like having ears all over your body, ‘cept that would be weird and wrong and jus’ nasty—while also giving him the full spectrum to study for surprises outside the range. He had so much incoming data he barely knew what to do with it.

Outside the building, a figure was moving swiftly, if a bit oddly up the fire escape, ascending vertically, rather than on the diagonal, as they would with stairs. Parker, then. There was something removed and effortless about her ascent and he paused just to watch the shifting colors of her form.

A moment later, she poked her head and then the rest of her through the window. “Hi Clint, I’m here to get lucky.”

“Get lu—Oh. Lucky. As in the dog. Hang on—Parker, girl, you know it’s me, right?” No amount of data was ever going to give him a handle on Parker.

“Well, of course it’s you, who else would it be?” Lucky abandoned his corner for watching and growling at the not-Clint to lick her face.

“Right. Okay. How do I sound?”

Parker gave him a perplexed frown. “Like yourself. C’mon, Lucky.” She slipped back through the window onto the fire escape and the dog followed.

Hardison made the bot stare after her in confusion. Displaying emotions were handled by a variety
of shortcut keys and he took the bot into the bathroom so he could make Clint’s face cycle through happy, sad, amused, angry, and the more refined options of sarcastic, overwhelmed, bewildered, and oh-shit-Bobbi’s-got-a-gun-on-her-this-looks-bad.

Parker’s orders were to keep the bot where it was. By which she meant, don’t go rescue Eliot and blow the whole con. And he was doing that, even if every thought of Eliot made him feel like there was no oxygen in Simone’s kitchen. But now he had another hitter in trouble and she was only down a flight of stairs.

Don’t blow the con.

Okay. He wouldn’t blow the con. He just had to take someone out without them realizing it.

Arrowheads. He grabbed the case he’d been looking at—damn, the day before yesterday, seriously?—and scanned the contents. The bot knew them immediately, categorized them into “BOOM”, “delay”, “move”, and “misc”. This is what happened when you let Clint help program his own robot. “Misc” included some of the weirder varieties. What the hell was a boomerang arrow?

No time to wonder. If it worked, it would come back to him right? A true boomerang needed wingblades for lift and a shape that allowed it to exploit gyroscopic precession, which meant this thing was not really a boomerang. So it was something that acted like a boomerang, but functioned mechanically. Good. It didn’t need the shaft then, just the arrowhead, which was about as long as his finger. Okay. Time to see how well Mecha-Hawkeye aimed. Gonna be real ironic if this thing’s a shit shot.

Out the door, down the hall, onto the landing of the staircase, before he thought to check in on Bobbi. The gun was no longer pointed at her, instead it was on the ground and she was circling Madame Masque, breathing hard. He could actually see them now, a level below, and he hung back, not wanting the bot to be noticed. He could also see Ivan’s feet inching toward the gun while Bobbi had her attention on the masked woman.

This was why Eliot always stripped the guns. Always. But Bobbi had gotten it away from him once, so Hardison focused on Madame Masque. They needed Ivan and he’d prefer to have her out of the picture. None of the others would know what the bot was supposed to be doing, and they’d just have to trust that her protocols would hold. Ha. For those to work, she’d have needed an actual LMD, not a very-clever-if-he-did-say-so-himself forgery. As it was, her command protocols were deadweight code he’d have needed to interpret in human terms and re-parse back to the robot interface and there were a million other things he’d prefer to be doing than be a puppet with a puppet. Screw that. She was goin’ down.

The Barton Bot’s fingers rolled the boomerang head between them, transmitting data about weight, size, temperature, and material. Everything a human might judge by touch, but in exact detail. He gave his target, did a quick calculation about how hard he wanted the thing to hit—he wanted her down, not dead—and let the bot do what it’s inspiration was programmed to do. Hit things from a distance.

The device zinged through the air, struck Madame Masque on the side of her head and reversed its course, returning immediately to the Barton Bot’s hand. She dropped. Hardison commanded the robot back out of sight in the stairwell.

Ivan had gone for the gun again, but now he was the only fighter left, so Hardison forced himself to wait until he yelled out, “BARTON. I HAVE YOUR WOMAN.”
Yeah, like she couldn’t kick your ass to next Tuesday. He sent the Bot to the stairwell door, opened and slammed it loudly before heading downstairs to “bargain” for Bobbi’s life.

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Kate’s daddy did not look good. Underneath his blazer, his shirt was soaked with sweat and with all the extra sensitive tech at his command, Hardison knew his heart rate was well into tachycardic range, his breathing labored, anticipate movements wavering and unpredictable. He went immediately to Clint’s kitchen, grabbed a mug from the counter, filled it with water, and began gulping it down. Two-point-three seconds later he gagged and sprayed brownish liquid everywhere. Coffee. Very old coffee. If any had touched him, Hardison could have analyzed the chemical composition and identified any new life-forms. He’d stayed well back. No way he was letting that stuff near this beauty of a machine.

“Gotta think before you drink, bro.” Clint the Human had more than a week’s worth of coffee mugs sitting out with varying ages and levels of coffee inside them. If he’d written down results, it could be considered science. As it was, it read more as depression or executive dysfunction. Bishop drinking it, on the other hand, that was shadenfreutastic comedy.

Clint the Barton Bot deposited Bobbi onto a chair, as gently as he could. She was still playing dead to the world, giving their marks more leeway to treat the bot as an LMD (how they would see it), rather than a person (how a dumb blonde version of Bobbi would see it).

Do superheroes ever get confused about who knows their identity and who just accepts that the masked guy they save the world with all the time is a cool dude? I’m getting confused just figuring out how to play a robot version of a superhero who tends to play a dumber version of himself. Clint, your life is a mess, and I’m not talking about the coffee mugs. Least the coffee isn’t Irish.

He tucked the thread of that thought away for later. Ivan kept his gun trained on Bobbi and the bot, glancing around the loft. “Where’s dog?”

“Who care where dog is?” O2 muttered. “Dog not here, dog not problem. Dog was here, you have to shoot dog. Waste bullet. Already waste too much time.” He pointed at the Barton Bot. “You sign papers, or she dies. Is clear?”

“I sign over the building, we all get to leave in peace, yeah?”

“You don’t sign, will be in pieces, bro.” O2 responded. “Bishop. Stop having heart attack and bring papers over here.”

Bishop grabbed his files and staggered over, still coughing and wiping at his eyes. As he passed by Bobbi, she surreptitiously slid out a foot, and he tripped, falling into the old man, who nearly lost his balance. Ivan hauled Bishop back upright, muttering some very not nice things in Ukrainian. Hardison knew it was Ukrainian because the bot helpfully translated it, in precise detail.

Ivan signed where Bishop pointed and Bishop shoved papers and a pen at the Barton Bot and it took them, sensors informing him they were damp with sweat. Ugh. I ain’t even actually touching them and that’s disgusting. Parker’d managed the switch just fine though. He signed the blanks Bishop pointed to.

“Here,” he croaked. “Here. Date here. Initial here. Sign here. Initial—” he paused to suck in air noisily, face turning even redder, “all of these. Sign and date here.” Hardison commanded the bot, marveling at Bobbi’s concoction.
“Happy now?” He shoved the documents back, putting too much force into the motion so the bot’s hands hit Bishop’s chest. It wouldn’t have been enough to knock him down, if the man hadn’t already been off-balance, and had Bobbi’s foot conveniently placed behind him. With those factors in play, the man landed hard on his ass.

*I might feel bad for you, if you weren’t a terrible human being, and a terrible father, and a terrible businessman providing funds for terrible people. But since you are all of those things, Imma sit back in this cozy kitchen of the single mama you tryin’ to kick out and watch you flop about like a fish in a boat. And I ain’t done with you yet. This is just phase one, asshole. Brace yourself for phase two, Codename: Lobster. Cause you in boiling water.*

Bishop scrambled to his feet and retreated to the counter for a flat surface to sign and notarize. Luckily, he did so before glancing in one of the mugs beside him, and abandoning the papers to vomit into the sink.

“That better be the side with the garbage disposal.” Did Clint have a garbage disposal? X-ray vision told him no. Whoops.

O2 shuffled over to the counter and grabbed the papers, before any further harm could come to them. “She still out?”

Ivan kicked Bobbi’s foot. “Looks like.”

“Good. We done here.” He beckoned, and Ivan and Bishop hurried to follow, slamming the door behind them.

Hardison gave the bot a giant grin. “Rise n’ shine, Sleeping Beauty. Paperwork is done and I hear villagers with torches and pitchforks coming up the stairs.”

Bobbi stretched and cracked her neck. “Question. What took down Madame Masque?”

“Oh that. Used Clint’s boomerang arrowhead.”

“Oh, that’s very Bartison.” *Damn, her name’s better than mine. “Why?”*

*Because I didn’t like the thought of you outnumbered with a gun in the mix, but that was stupid. And I know you can handle yourself, but in the moment I panicked. “Because, boomerangs?”* Bobbi arched an eyebrow at him, and he made the bot shrug helplessly. “Hey, what can I say? Age of the geek, baby!”
Through the headphones, she picked up the distinctive clack-click of a magazine sliding into an uzi pistol. Finally, the babusya was on the move. Time to join in the fun.

Natasha leaned against the front wall of Clint’s building, the hoodie of her black sweatshirt hiding her features as she stared down at her phone, drumming the fingers of her left hand to the beat coming through her headphones.

Except there was no beat. No one looks twice at an apparent millennial disconnected from the world through music and technology, loitering outside a random apartment building. She’d watched computers rise and infiltrate the world far more innocuously than any secret organization. It disturbed plenty of her compatriots, particularly those accustomed to using advanced technology. It was one thing for them to have it, quite another for the general population. Why, if anyone on the street could access the technology to take down governments…

Natasha considered herself an opportunist. She trusted people to be people, regardless of the tech that surrounded them. At a given moment, 40% of humanity might be connected to the internet. The vast majority of that percentage were casual users, probably upwards of ninety percent. Another nine or so percent might identify themselves as experts without truly recognizing what that meant. Ubiquitous access to technology when she required it was worth the less than one percent of people who could do some true damage.

People like Alec Hardison tested that theory. But it made standing directly outside the target of her surveillance, while listening to a live feed of the bug Parker had planted on the collar of a puppy, possible. Plus, she’d just managed to beat her old high score on Fruit Ninja. Thanks to a smartphone she’d trash after tonight and Parker’s impulses.

She herself would not have bugged a puppy on a whim. Without the bug, she would not have the slight amount of information that she did on Olena Banionis, building resident and undercover tracksuit informant. Ukrainian, in her seventies, some special forces training, currently helping her son by providing an access point into the building, though she’d lived there prior to anyone wanting to buy the building off Ivan. It was her home. She wore a necklace with a gun pendant; a blatant reminder to her son that she was not to be dismissed or discounted, even while she played the role for everyone else. Natasha doubted he’d gotten the hint.
Through the headphones, she picked up the distinctive *clack-click* of a magazine sliding into an uzi pistol. Finally, the *babusya* was on the move. Time to join in the fun.

Through the door and up the first flight of stairs, where she almost tripped on the puppy, trying to follow her mistress. Natasha juked left, then right, as the puppy yipped and the old woman whirled around, spraying bullets down the staircase. She was already halfway up the wall and shoving off, her outstretched foot landing squarely on her foe’s neck, the other foot kicking the gun away as they went down together.

Natasha rolled off and came to her feet, scooping the gun up in one hand and the puppy in the other. “<Get up>,” she spat in Ukrainian. “<Name>?"

“<Fuck you>.”

*Babusya* it is, then.” She shrugged. She was Olena according to her green card, but referring to her as such could give away how little she did know. Only certain names had power. The demand had been a gauge of cooperation, but she hadn’t expected much to come of it. People forced to fight for a captor were more likely to immediately offer up information when captured. Sometimes. “Up the stairs. Go.”

She didn’t argue, knowing she was caught. “Mitzi? My dog?”

Natasha bared her teeth. “*Nyet*.” She enjoyed the flash of anger on Olena’s face at her use of Russian. She might consider herself removed from that bad blood, but she certainly wasn’t above using it.

Up two flights of stairs, they found the remnants of chaos. Lucky had a tracksuit pinned in a corner, while Parker directed Deke and Archie as they tied up the others as they came around. Behind Lucky, Lawrence, Gilbert’s father, was pressed against the wall, muttering over and over “they killed him, they killed him, they killed him.”

Natasha felt a cold, clear wave of terror before she caught Parker’s eye and got a minute shrug. Not Clint. Not Eliot. No one was dead. Today, at least. She understood, then, and stepped over to stand in front of him. “Yes. They did. And they will pay.” She deposited the puppy in his arms, not giving him a choice in the matter. Sometimes choice was not better. “This *malyshka* needs a new home.” She unclipped the collar and handed it to her captive. “That, you can keep.” Perhaps she would not find the bug for a time. Natasha would not mind if she did find it, and was forced to wonder how it had come to be there.

To Parker, she said, “The blind alley across the street. She’s expecting a delivery.”

Parker nodded, sharp and certain, before sprinting down the stairs and out of sight.

Mara, the young mother from the floor below, carefully skirted Deke, Archie, and their project, to hand Natasha a length of hemp twine. She glanced at it, and raised her eyebrows.

“Archie’s got a bunch, said he makes bracelets during writer’s block.”

“Your child is safe?”

She nodded, lips thinning. “Simone came by and offered to take her along with her boys.” She surveyed the stairwell. “I wanted to help.”

“Help?! Steal this building you mean!” she screeched indignantly.
Mara took the twine back from her and roughly pulled the older woman’s arms back, binding her wrists tightly. “Yes. You left us no choice.”

There is always a choice.

Hardison emerged onto the stairwell, waving his tablet. “It’s signed, they’ll be coming out soon!”

Natasha could hear the phantom of a cheer that they were forbidden to utter just yet. Parker must have instilled a healthy dose of fear to keep the residents quite at that news. The hacker grinned in satisfaction at the silence.

“Okay, people, time to be a mob! Let me hear you say AHH!!!”

The stairwell immediately erupted in cacophony. Aimee banged on a cast iron skillet, while the others roared and screamed. It was probably therapeutic. Natasha lent her voice to the mix, indicating to the others that they should begin dragging their captives upward.

Hardison followed them, grinning and yelling something about an age of the geek. He only had eyes for his tablet, fingers flying as he controlled the Barton Bot. “They’re headed out, ah-ha! They heard that, not gonna brave coming on down, up, up they go, and out the door…” He froze, eyes widening. “Uh oh. No. NO. SHIT!”

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“Do wigs make your head itchy?”

Maria did not jump in surprise at the voice coming from behind her in the dead end of the alley. She was a trained operative, Director of SHIELD, and she dealt with the weird on a daily basis, for chrissakes. She turned slowly, deliberately, and took in the slight figure who’d somehow appeared out of thin air. Natasha never mentioned Parker having powers.

“They make mine all itchy,” the woman continued, pulling off a mussed black wig, along with the cap, and any pins holding it in place. It had to have yanked out quite a bit of hair by the roots, but Parker didn’t blink. “Like ants crawling all over your scalp.” She thought for a moment. “Or centipedes wriggling through your follicles.”

Maria did not shudder, or reach up to scratch her suddenly itching scalp. “They always give me a pressure headache. Make me feel like the bloodflow to my brain is cut off.”

“Eliot says that. He hates wigs.” She was holding a school binder, clutching it close to her chest like a nervous student, but her voice remained level, conversational. “Sometimes, he puts beads in his hair. Blue ones, so they match his eyes, though he won’t admit that. It’s not practical, they might get caught in a fight, but sometimes I think he gets tired of being practical.” She set the binder on the lid of a trashcan and stepped back, folding her arms across her chest.

This is her version of small talk? Centipedes in hair and establishing a connection between me and her hitter based on hairstyles? The image of Eliot Spencer, assassin for hire, weaving beads into his hair for shits and giggles hurt Maria’s head more than any remembered wig.

“Is there photographic evidence of that style choice in there?” She pointed to the binder, but didn’t move toward it yet. “Cause, I’m going to need some proof.”
“No. There isn’t.”

The hair on the back of her neck rose, tingling. “Are you threatening my agents?” Natasha was supposed to meet her here. If Parker did have powers, she might have managed to surprise Natasha, somehow. Intercept her. Though the deliberate placement of the binder suggested differently.

“No. Are you threatening my crew?” Beneath her question lurked hard, tightly wound fury.

“Why would you think that?”

“You wanted a decade’s worth of data on Eliot. And us.”

“I run an intelligence agency. I collect intelligence. Particularly on those threatening my agents.”

“We didn’t threaten anyone. Natasha chose to give Hardison her files and agreed to play middleman. Instead of stealing a corporation, we stole your cooperation. That’s all.”

Natasha double-crossed me. Natasha double-crossed me for a reformed hitman. Should have seen that one coming.

She glanced back at the binder. “I take it there’s something else of value in there?”

“Deeds and related documents to the buildings surrounding Clint’s, in a three-block radius. Assets of the companies you’re investigating—if you’re looking where we told you to look.”

“We are. It’s proving…fruitful.”

“See that those get to the correct authorities. Call it interdepartmental cooperation, or whatever dumb term you use.”

“And this particular building?”

“It has an owner. Or it will. Once the job’s done. Job’s not done.” She turned to go.

“Wait.”

Parker turned back. “You have 1 minute and 37 seconds left.”

“Why come and tell me?” Why face me alone in a blind alley to boast about swindling me and talk about Spencer like he’s some magic pixie dream boy?

“Instead of simply providing you with an impressive array of forgeries?” Parker shrugged, but it seemed calculated.

She’s frightened. She’s frightened and hiding it well. Parker was a thief. One so privacy-obsessed that no record of her real name existed anywhere. Showing her face to the Director of SHIELD indicated a sacrifice being made.

“I wanted you aware of me. This was barely a job. It didn’t need to be. All that was needed was a bit of,” she paused, smirking, “leverage.”

“You like that word, but a lever works based on the pressure applied to it, and I’m very good at applying pressure.”

“You can’t have him.” A crack there, but only a slight one. If cornered, she’d be the type to lash out. Maria took a step back.
“I don’t want him. Not now. In another dimension, where he switched loyalties, or where Clint went after him earlier and brought him in. Remember, I assessed him. I chose him. I trained him.”

She shook her head, slight smile on her lips. “But he isn’t mine. I know I compete with other factors for my agents’ loyalties. I stay aware of their outside activities to anticipate problems. I could anticipate Clint fighting for this building. And Bobbi and Natasha getting pulled in, like they tend to when Clint gets in too deep.” She picked up the binder. “I should have anticipated this from Natasha, but I didn’t. That’s on me. But I’m not so stupid as to think I have any true leverage over Eliot, alone. Not with the family he’s found. You’d come after him,” she glanced up to catch Parker’s defiant nod, “and probably crash a helicarrier in the process, and I have no interest in dealing with the aftermath of yet another one of those messes.” Fifteen seconds left. “Your little family, with its impressive skill set. You owe me a job. And I promise, when I collect on the debt, you will not be able to refuse.”
He expected a quip from Clint, something smart-assed and taunting. He did not expect the third man to walk through the door, instantly raise a pistol and fire at the archer.

*If you’d stuck with SHIELD, maybe they’d have given you one of these.* Eliot resisted the temptation to lean forward and gun the sky-cycle, revel as Parker did in the flight, the brief triumph against gravity. The flying machine didn’t require hands, responding to his shifting weight as a responsive horse might. He resettled his grip on the spare bow Kate had given him, checked again that the quiver was within easy reach by his knee, tried not to think how long it’d been since he’d last shot one.

He stayed near Clint and Kate as they navigated rooftops, moving at full speed. Back at the studio, there’d been a hasty exchange between Kate and Hardison; one reassuring that Eliot was bleeding but breathing, the other informing them the plan was still on, get back to the building. No one brought up the necessary adjustments caused by his stupidity. They didn’t have to. He certainly couldn’t ignore them. He’d been careless; put the job at risk, put Clint and Kate at risk. If he stayed by their side much longer, if SHIELD turned up, he put his already tenuous anonymity at risk, and with it, Leverage, Inc. But he couldn’t leave. Job wasn’t done. He owed Clint that much and more.

Kaziu lay lashed to the back of the machine, probably awake, but smart enough not to struggle and throw them off balance. If that was possible. How easily did this thing roll? How the hell did it fly, for that matter? But he’d never have kept up on foot, head still reeling and blood dripping from hundreds of tiny cuts and a number of larger ones. After this was done, if he was still a free man, Parker’s small, clever fingers would need to pick glass out of the lacerations. For now, he ignored the sting, the blood drying into a tacky mess that glued the tatters of his shirt to his back.

Kate waved to him as she ran, dodging through the maze of pipes, water towers, patio furniture, and gardens overgrown and gone to seed with a lack of care. No one called out objections to their barging through, no one called out greetings either. The few people left in these buildings stayed in hiding.

Clint gestured, indicating Kate right and Eliot left. They both obeyed, Eliot dipping lower, so he would not be immediately visible from the rooftop of Clint’s building as he headed towards the back. Kate stopped in the shadow of a water tower as Clint continued straight forward, making a running leap, catching the lip of his roof and scrambling up to stand on the edge. *They think you’re dead, and you’re still holding back your teenage trump card. Goddamn, Circus.*

The roof access door banged open. O₂ and Bishop came through and froze, staring at Clint in confusion.

*Sure, just pose there a bit longer, Circus. Always the showman.*

He expected a quip from Clint, something smart-assed and taunting. He did not expect the third man to walk through the door, instantly raise a pistol and fire at the archer.

Eliot leaned forward and to the right, sending the sky-cycle rocketing into a swerve that placed him
between Clint and the gun. Several things happened then, in quick succession:

Clint, right arm bleeding, but apparently still functional, loosed his arrow just as Eliot failed to brake in time and clipped him in the side.

Clint tumbled off the edge of the roof, yelling in surprise.

Another bullet zinged past Eliot’s head.

Clint’s arrow went wide, striking the old man’s canister of oxygen. Sparks flew everywhere. Shock arrow, apparently.

The oxygen canister ignited and $O_2$ shouted in surprise, tangling himself in the flaming line.

Eliot loosed his arrow, as the gunman—Ivan, he suddenly realized—fired again. The bullet struck flesh, there was that distinctive thump, but nothing flared up in pain or ceased to function, so Eliot ignored it. His arrow punched through Ivan’s forearm and he dropped the gun at his feet, shouting in agony.

Eliot nocked another arrow and drew.

Clint dashed out of the access door, yanked the burning line clear of the old man and dragged the flaming thing across the roof. His clothing ignited as he—no, IT—did so.

Eliot’s brain finally caught up with him and he risked a glance down off the side of building, looking for the actual Clint in the desperate hope he wasn’t sprawled in the alley below. Wouldn’t that be a great way to repay him.

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At long last, Spencer finally managed to shove me off a goddamn roof. And possibly saved my ass. Figures. He’d caught a suction arrow—when did I shoot this up here?—on pure reflex and for an instant he dangled there, conscious only of the burning pain in his arm and the fact that he’d at least managed not to drop his bow. Never drop the bow. In the next instant an arrow, also suction tipped, thudded above his head. And another, slightly higher. And another. Risking a glance over his shoulder showed him Kate, who stuck her tongue out at him before sending a final arrow in his new path of handholds to clamber back up. She took off running as soon as she was finished, loosing another arrow that sent a line and a grappling hook flying out to latch onto the fire escape. She swung off, silently, still intent on her role as the flank.

Never gonna know what I did to deserve you, am I, Katie-Kate? He looked back up for the arrows and saw Eliot staring at him, relief blatant beneath the blood caked on his face. Dismissing the yelling of his arm as irritating but not immediately relevant, Clint hauled himself back onto the roof and to his feet, arrow on the string and ready before he even conceived the action.

A view far different than the one he’d lost while tumbling off the building greeted him. For one thing it contained substantially more fire. For another, he was the something on fire. That was weird. Not like, top ten weird, but even for him, flaming robot versions of himself definitely counted as weird. How did?—ohhh the canister. Well shit.

“Well shit,” he said aloud. Elocqently, even.
Not to be outdone in witty responses, Eliot grunted.

The old man still stood, gasping from his reduced oxygen and the shock, literally, of what had just happened. Ivan gripped his impaled forearm (nice shot, Eliot) with his other hand, torniquetting it temporarily. Bishop had folded to his knees, hugging himself and rocking back and forth. Clint was willing to bet good money that Bobbi had had a hand—and a chemical or five—in his condition.

For a moment there was relative peace, only infringed upon by the crackle and acrid reek of the Barton Bot’s wiring becoming engulfed in flames.

The door banged open again. This time a crowd of people poured through, led by old Olena from the first floor—if being frog-marched out by the Black Widow counted as “leading.” They were followed by residents hauling hogtied tracksuits. Madame Masque stumbled through, shoved by Bobbi, who wore a blooming black eye and an even brighter grin, Lucky by her side.

And there was Hardison, who took off running toward them the moment he saw Eliot. Parker was nowhere to be seen. Based on trajectory alone, Clint expected Hardison to hit Eliot, still perched on the sky-cycle, full force. Instead he slowed, his eyes going huge and alarmed, and Eliot grimaced.

“Don’t freak out, I’m fine.”

“Shit! Eliot, that’s—that’s a lot of blood, man.”

“I got attacked by a mirror, Hardison, I’m gonna be a bit bloody.” He staggered off the sky-cycle, almost fell, and Hardison caught him on one side, Clint on the other. “’S’okay, I got it,” he muttered and batted away Hardison’s questing fingers.

Clint’s eyes followed the runnels of blood dripping from the platform behind the seat. “It’s not you, it’s the Clown.” Three shots from Ivan. He’d counted. He was down an aid, the remaining one upped to piercing extremes to compensate for the Clown’s gunshot next to his head earlier. He’d also been busy falling off a building. But some things were just instinct at this point. Three shots. One for his arm—ow—two more unaccounted for while he’d been dangling off the roof. One must have struck Kaziu. Or both missed, and Eliot took matters into his own hands while I was having an argument with gravity. He dismissed the thought. Not as impossible; he just didn’t seem to care.

Eliot limped over, and laid his hands on the man’s throat, searching for a pulse he had to know wouldn’t be there. Not with that much blood. Not with Eliot’s expertise.

“Don’t let the residents see that.” Hardison shuddered and turned away.

“No. Let ‘em.” He heard something harsh and hard and heartless in his own tone and didn’t care about that either. If more blood was going to stain this roof, at least it would be the blood of Grill’s killer.

Together, he and Eliot hauled the body off the machine and dragged it forward, dropping it in the center of the roof.

Everyone fell silent.

“I dunno if that’s justice,” Clint said, waving a hand in the direction of the body. “But he ain’t gonna shoot anyone else on this roof or anywhere else. Ever again.” Grill’s dad met his eyes and nodded, clutching the puppy in his arms. I screwed up. I didn’t protect your son. This doesn’t make it right. Nothing can.

“Where’s your moral high ground NOW?” He hadn’t expected the sound or sudden movement
from Bishop, who staggered to his feet, yelling and waving Ivan’s dropped revolver.

_Standard six-shooter. Three shots left at least, maybe less. Guy looks out of his mind, who knows who or what he’d hit._ Eliot started to move forward in a charge—because of course Eliot would be the type to tackle crazed gunmen—when Kate appeared on top of the fire escape, bow drawn.

“Daddy. Drop. It.” Her voice stayed calm, level, and full of power.

Bishop whirled, and people ducked in panic. Eliot started to move again, but Clint stuck out his arm and held him back. “Wait.”

“Dad. Look at me. I’m right here. For once in your life, you are going to pay attention while I am speaking.”

He focused on her, eyes blinking owlishly. “Katie?”

“Yes, Daddy. I need you to put down the gun.”

“Yes, Daddy. I need you to put down the gun.”

“Katie, I don’t know what’s going on here, but it’s not safe, and—”

“Dad. The only person making it not safe for me is you.” She lowered the bow, slowly, and stepped off the ledge onto the roof, walking carefully toward her father. The man twisted, waving the revolver and it went off once, the report ricocheting against the surrounding buildings. People screamed and Kate dropped the bow to lunge forward, grabbing the gun and wrenching it neatly from his grasp, while kicking his legs out from under him. He went down and she stood above him, studying the revolver.

“Don’t really like guns,” she said softly and emptied the bullets into her hand, checking the chamber before dropping the gun in front of their captives.

“Join the club,” Clint called and found himself saying it in unison with Eliot. He grinned and decided the tight, brief twitch of Eliot’s lips meant the same thing. Kate, checking on them over her shoulder, tossed him something that wasn’t really a smile; her mouth contorted into the shape, but with none of the intent. _Join the club. Barton, you’re a futzing idiot. She’s joining you in the piece-of-shit-parents club. You know how much that sucks._

He wanted to go to her; didn’t want to stay something else stupid and wrong. Lucky, who didn’t have to worry about crap like that, nudged her leg and she knelt, burying her face in his fur for a moment before standing again, face grim and set.

She stood guard over their prisoners, Lucky alert at her side. He didn’t know much, but he knew to let her do this, let her have a job. Sometimes the only thing you could do was do something.

Nat, binding the wrists and ankles of their final prisoners, gave Kate a nod of reassurance and support. She was better at that than she thought she was. He had a suspicion she’d given Lawrence the puppy to hang on to as well.

Bobbi approached them; him, Eliot, Hardison, and the corpse of Kaziu. The other residents hung back, unsure if the action was done, or what would come next.

“Hardison, did you _have_ to set Bartison on fire?” Bobbi’s voice brought him back to the people surrounding him. She looked mournfully at the flaming remains of the robot. “We were getting along so well.”

“Hey, now, I figured roasted old dude wasn’t quite the barbeque Clint had in mind for this roof.
Not to mention, if he went up in smoke, so would that damn deed and we just went through all this trouble.”

So they had done it. He’d almost been afraid to know. “So it worked?”

Bobbi snorted. “Took you long enough to ask.” She ducked back out of the circle. O2 cursed at her angrily as she reached inside his blazer, pulled out the deeds, and returned to the group, presenting them to Clint with a flourish.

“Bartison and I made a fantastic team.”

“Hang on, we used to make a fantastic team. Are you saying robot me is better?”

“Well, he was only partially you, really. Different hands at the wheel.” Bobbi winked at Hardison.

“Not sure how I feel about that,” Clint muttered.

“Me either,” Eliot grumbled.

“Anyway, I was trying to taze Ivan,” Clint said, nudging Eliot. “Someone got in the way of my shot.”

If anyone ever asked him what made a partnership work—though seriously, who’d bother?—he wouldn’t have had an answer. Least not for him. Hell, he sucked at communication, sucked at most of life, really. But he knew when it clicked and when it didn’t. Just like he knew when an arrow was gonna fly true. At some point in the last day, he and Eliot had clicked again. This, the post-action bickering, this felt good.

“Next time I’ll jus’ let you get shot twice, how about that?”

“We almost blew up the building I’m trying to own!”

Hardison laughed. “Nah, bro, it ain’t actually that easy to explode an oxygen tank. Safety valves doin’ their thang.”

“Yeah, but quick thinkin’, using the bot,” Eliot told Hardison, and held out his fist.

He saw the split second of hesitation before Hardison responded, bumping his fist against Eliot’s. They slapped palms twice, and something about the sequence felt both habitual and ritualistic. It united them, Hardison moving closer to Eliot, saying something about “age of the greek(?)” that Clint didn’t quite manage to catch.

Just like that he was on the outside again.

Eliot tensed, probably hearing something Clint couldn’t pick up. He seemed to be weighing options before growling, “SHIELD chopper, incoming.”

“Yes. I arranged it.” Natasha appeared behind Bobbi. “I assumed we’d have an LMD to deliver. And captives.”

“Well, we have the charred remains of an LMD. And captives.” Bobbi groaned and cracked her neck. “I wonder how much of the debriefs I can sleep through without them catching on?”

“As long as you keep your eyes open, they never seem to.”

Clint tuned out, casting his gaze over the rooftop, from the smoldering LMD, to the residents
hugging each other, still wary of approaching Clint and the others—and the dead hitman at their feet. He’d need to talk to them. It was all over now and he’d need to explain what happened, that it was probably going to be okay, but he could see Aimee and Deke and Archie and Mara and all the others staring at that corpse and at the looming SHIELD helicopter. He wasn’t their friend right now. He wasn’t even their landlord. He wasn’t Clint and he definitely wasn’t Hawkguy.

“Barton! Bro! You’ll pay for this!—” Ivan kept yelling, but Clint decided he was done listening to the asshole. And Bobbi had a good point about the upcoming debriefs. He yanked his remaining aid out, crushed it beneath his foot, and flipped Ivan off. *How’s that for some AS-fucking-L?*

Bobbi rolled her eyes, but didn’t even bother to tell him he was an idiot. He needed to tell her thanks at some point. Maybe he already had, but he should tell her again. *Thanks for having my back. For saving my ass. For knowing the people to call and calling them. For giving me back a friend I thought I’d lost.* Beside him, Eliot seemed to be getting more and more focused on just staying upright, his mouth set in a grim line as he watched the incoming chopper.
There was a period, after a con, where he could truly breathe again.

Eliot feels. I have a lot of them.

“Hey, Eliot, c’mon man, we gotta skedaddle.” He bumped Eliot’s shoulder lightly, adding, “I like y’all, but we ain’t exactly fans of shady government organizations, and the feeling’s mutual.” Hardison had already turned around, certain Eliot would follow him off the roof and away.

It was an option, just not a practical one. Hardison might have an instinctive dislike for agencies like SHIELD, but Eliot had learned experience of institutions with long memories and an eagerness to capitalize on any opportunity. They wanted him. An asset gone rogue, but still valuable, as long as he could be controlled.

And he could be. Most people can, if you find their pivot; the thing they’ll sacrifice everything to protect. He knew that, used it against those he fought, while obsessively avoiding any such ties himself. Until I broke. I tried to protect myself from the world and I broke. Another learned experience. He’d rebuilt himself, refocused, reformed. The irony of joining a team called Leverage was not lost on him. Nor was the significance of what he’d found there. Helluva pivot you gave me, Nate.

He wouldn’t have traded it for the world. But he’d trade the world for it. For them.

Hardison was wrong. Shady government organizations were fans of genius hackers, exceptional thieves, and violent men. They collected them, relied upon their skillsets to stop others like them. Hardison and Parker were not safe.

Running was an option. He wouldn’t get far concussed and bleeding, with people he wouldn’t hurt interested in stopping him, asking questions. It would be an act of desperation and stupidity.

Flying was an option. Better option than running. Grab Hardison, hop on the sky-cycle, and get out. But the thing was SHIELD tech, and would be traceable. He was injured, exhausted, and could be implicated in a murder, and all of that would have been manageable, but if Parker and Hardison tried to run with him, he’d slow them down. He didn’t even know where Parker currently was.

Staying was an option. The only option, really, when it came down to it. He had allies in SHIELD now, three formidable ones. That wasn’t something he could have claimed two days ago. Could be worse.

“I’m staying.” He said it quiet and firm, in a tone that brooked no argument.
“The hell are you talking about?!” Trust Hardison to argue anyway.

“You’re staying?” Clint too, for that matter, though his outburst was tinged with hope as opposed to Hardison’s outright shock. Fair enough. He hadn’t done a whole lot of staying as far as Clint was concerned. Or the guy could just be checking his lip reading.

Hardison looked back and forth between him and Clint in dawning horror and a complete misunderstanding of Eliot’s reasons.

_I could use that. A few well-chosen words and Hardison will leave this roof without me, exactly as I need him to. I can trade my cooperation for their freedom. They’d be safe._

But Hardison hadn’t asked Eliot to keep him safe. He’d asked Eliot for the truth.

“Alec, I’m gonna slow you down. Can’t get away clean. Don’t worry ‘bout it. There’s worse people to be taken by.” All of this was true. He didn’t have time to explain further, he just needed Hardison to get it.

In the five years Eliot had known Hardison, he could count on one hand the number of times he’d seen him truly furious. The odd corner of his brain devoted to counting stairs and bullets and the rhythmic pulses of chopper blades added another tally to the total as his partner in all things erupted.

_“GODDAMMIT ELIOT! THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?!”_

“You said tell you everything! I AM!”

“Damn straight, I did, but I never said I’d agree with your stupid ass!”

“Hang on, that’s why you’re staying?” Clint’s tone wasn’t modulated quite right, which could have been due to his ears, Eliot’s head, or just the complete bewilderment of his expression.

“Circus, you got a dead man on your roof that I had a hand in putting there. Hill wants me brought in. If I go quietly, Parker and Hardison can slip away.” The chopper blades were rattling his skull now. They needed to stop fighting about this.

“Fuck that. No one’s taking anyone anywhere they don’t want to go. That’s kinda the whole fucking point of this.” Clint snapped, his voice as tight as the bowstring he thrummed unconsciously between his fingers. “Get behind me, get downstairs, or get going. But you’re _not_ getting on that carrier.”

He meant it. Clint Barton would fight for him. For a moment it didn’t matter that he would lose. That Eliot wasn’t worth it. Nothing mattered except the fierce intent behind the words. And the fact that this time, Eliot believed him.

“God, you boys are a set of self-sacrificing idiots,” Bobbi muttered.

“It’s settled?” Natasha was asking someone.

A slim, cool hand slipped into his, gripping it firmly. “Yes.” There she was.

“Parker, take Hardison an’ go. I’m stayin’.”

“No. You’re not. It’s taken care of.”

“Taken care of, how?” _What did you do Parker? What deal did you make?_
“I’m the mastermind, remember?” She looked back at the rapidly approaching chopper. “This time, I drive.”

Hardison’s large, warm hand found his and he was pulled forward. He looked back at Clint, at the SHIELD force looming behind him.

The other man nodded a reassurance. “You won’t be followed. Take that thing,” he jerked his head at the sky cycle, “and go.”

“Sky-cycle! Sky-cycle!” Parker sing-songed, the sound incongruous, careless and scot-free. He’d been ducking SHIELD’s radar for a goddamn decade and now she was going to swoop him away in full view of them, protected only by Clint’s righteous indignation and whatever Parker had done.

Hardison released his grip, only to interlace his fingers again in Eliot’s, for once not complaining about the blood. “SHIELD cell sounds safer. Way safer,” he whispered in his ear.

The thought of Hardison in that cell made him move. They didn’t get to have these two. No one did. No one except him.

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There was a period, after a con, where he could truly breathe again. Sometimes it lasted minutes, sometimes hours, if he was lucky, and lately he’d been lucky, it would last days. Locking up Moreau had given him a solid week.

It was an illusion, he knew. For one thing, it had nothing to do with breathing. He could have two busted ribs and still have that sensation, that release. He’d felt it after the first job; had severely checked his enthusiasm, knowing it was a one and done deal and he was a loner, and hadn’t those idiots been annoying anyway? So. Much. Talking.

And there was Nate, who’d looked straight through him and Eliot still didn’t know what he’d seen. He knew what he’d seen in Nate. Wasn’t a day he didn’t know exactly what Nate was, what he had been, what he could be. And Eliot swore he would stop it from happening.

He made a lot of promises like that. Mostly to himself. He had rules. Hard, fast ones to keep himself sane and those around him safe. The successful end of a job meant his crew was alive, the client was alive, the mark was down. And he could breathe.

Figuratively speaking.

In literal terms, his head was a pounding surf as he rode waves of nausea, trying to force whatever was left in his stomach—when had he eaten last?—to remain there as Parker maneuvered the sky-cycle off of Clint’s roof and threw her body forward, punching the machine into overdrive. Hardison screamed and Eliot considered joining him. The thing could technically carry three—at least it could when one of them weighed ninety pounds soaking wet—but it slewed through the air, counterbalanced and sluggish.

“Parker, girl, if you don’t make nice with the flying machine, Eliot’s gonna puke, and physics is telling me I’m not gonna enjoy it.”

“Eliot doesn’t puke.” Parker yelled, but she did, mercifully, slightly slow her headlong plunge
toward the horizon.

“Would he be this quiet about your driving if he wasn’t?”

He could feel Parker, positioned almost in his lap, freeze. “Eliot, hotel or hospital?”

That was Parker, for you. Hardison was already arguing for hospital, but Parker expected him to tell her straight.

“Hotel,” he managed, and then focused just on breathing, until his bile ducts stopped trying to free-climb his esophagus.

“Okay.” She guided the sky-cycle more carefully now, making a turn in a longer arc, rather than the tight swerve he’d learned to expect in Parker’s operation of any vehicle.

“’m okay, Parker.” He didn’t say it for her, because Parker didn’t trust words. She’d reassure herself that he was fine by picking glass out of wounds and stitching them back together. He’d feel her love in each careful bite of the needle. What ER could say the same? No, the reassurance he’d addressed to Parker was for Hardison, who sat stiffly, trying not to touch Eliot’s lacerated back—not an easy thing to do with Eliot currently playing the filling of a Parker-Hardison cookie.

He didn’t really care that his back was on fire. The adrenaline powering him had faded. The marks were down, the clients, including Clint, were safe, and his crew was alive. Job was done. He even had his freedom. He could breathe.

He leaned back and Hardison tried to avoid him, till Eliot, too tired to bother with speech, just growled at him. Hardison stopped moving. Finally. He let his head fall back, steadied by Hardison’s jaw.

“Pretty sure you’ve got a concussion and it should be checked out.” Hardison pointed out, his voice mostly vibrations from Eliot’s position.

“Don’t care,” he murmured. Perfectly reasonable rebuttal, that was.

“At least stay awake, okay Eliot?”

“Make me.”

“Really?”


“You currently huggable?”

“Mmm.”

Steady arms wrapped around him to grasp Parker’s waist and he drifted, removed from the choppy waves of discomfort to somewhere secure and safe.

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By late afternoon of the next day, Hardison and Parker were surreptitiously fidgeting enough that
Eliot demanded they leave the hotel room for a few hours and leave him in peace. He overrode all their protests, arguing that it was much easier to sit still and do nothing if they weren’t bouncing around. After they practically booked it out of the hotel room, Eliot heaved a careful sigh and, in deference to the number of stitches holding him together, moved slowly out to the balcony, a beer in hand.

The stitches were Parker’s work. They’d gotten him back here after the showdown at Clint’s the night before, and he’d let Parker use her nimble fingers to find any lingering pieces of glass and stitch up the worst of the cuts.

Hardison almost lost it when he saw the size of the gash on Eliot’s head, but since he was sitting on the bed, with the head in question resting on his lap (and not at all inclined to move while Parker cleaned the wound), he was forced to stay put. In return, Eliot tolerated Hardison’s barrage of questions intended to verify he didn’t have brain damage. At some point he fell asleep, was shaken awake, and after snarling a detailed description of what would be done to the pair of them if they woke him up again, was finally allowed to pass out.

He’d woken once, still sprawled across the bed, using a sound asleep Hardison as a pillow. Parker sat at the end of the mattress, staring at him.

“‘vrything okay, Parker?’”

“You’re breathing.”

“Yeah.”

“Then, yes.”

“C’mere.”

She hesitated a moment, before sliding across the bed and burrowing under his arm. “Keep doing that, okay?” she whispered.

“Promise.”

He’d drifted off again, woken after sunrise, obeyed their orders to stay immobile, watched the careful dance of unspoken tension that spooled between the three of them until he finally demanded peace and got it. At some point, unsaid things would have to be, but not yet. Not till they were distanced from the latest reminder of his mortality, stopped sneaking worried glances they thought he couldn’t see.

For now, he was going to sit in the sun, close his eyes, and finally have a good think about this mess of a job.

The thunk of something hitting the wall above the balcony door was incongruous enough that Eliot’s eyes flew open and he almost jumped. A figure zipped through the air straight towards him, bow hooked over the line now attached to Eliot’s wall. It didn’t look very secure to Eliot. Clint landed fairly gracefully and leapt up to grab the grappling hook arrow somehow lodged in stonework. He gave the thin line a tug and it detached from the building across the street, raveling back into the arrowhead of its own accord.

Curiosity got the better of him. “How’d it support your weight?”

Clint held up the arrow. “Smart wire. I push this little button and it sends a signal across to blow the minicharge on the other end.” He shrugged. “Pretty simple.”
“Huh.” Eliot offered eloquently. “What’re you doing here, Circus?” Then, taking a closer look at him, “You slept yet?” It was going on sixteen hours since he’d last seen Clint, and the guy was still wearing the same clothes from the day before, along with the look of someone who hadn’t seen a bed in a while. A bright purple aid hooked over one ear. The other one was probably still bugging him then.

“Uhh, yesterday? In Aimee’s bass case. And earlier on Simone’s couch.” He ran a hand through his tousled hair.

Eliot grunted. “So, short answer, not really.”

Clint gave another shrug. “I dunno, they were both pretty comfy.” He pointed to the beer Eliot was holding. “You got another one?”

Eliot, still not sure what Clint was doing here, jerked his head towards the door, and immediately regretted the movement. “Get it yourself, I ain’t movin’.”

“Good,” he replied in an odd tone, and vanished inside. He returned shortly with one for him and a second for Eliot, who was reconsidering how much of his communication style involved nods and jerks of his head.

“Thanks.” Eliot said and meant it for more than just the beer.

Clint offered one of those not-quite-smiles where his mouth twisted at a corner. “No problem,” he answered and Eliot figured he meant it for more than that as well. Which begged a question…

“Where you been? I’da thought you wouldn’t leave that building now that it’s yours.”

Clint lifted an eyebrow. “When a full SHIELD squad is called in to reclaim a hijacked LMD impersonating an Avenger and who has just signed legal documents on the same day that a suspiciously large number of pillars of the community—upstanding and otherwise—suddenly get audited, there can only be one outcome.” He rolled his eyes dramatically. “Hours and hours of debriefs. Bobbi is less than thrilled, considering she was doing the same thing the night before. Think she’s had less sleep than I have.”

“Kept us out of it?” He tried to ask it casually.

“Officially yes. Unofficially, I’m sure Hill’s been adding to your file in her secret database. Nat said she gave all her data to Hardison, though. You’re off her watchlist.”

“They’re not…pursuing me? Us?”

“Hill’s exact words were: ‘Fuck no, I like my sanity and I already have you to deal with.’”

“The database’ll give Hardison a project for rainy days.” Eliot muttered. “Plenty of those in Portland.” He took a pull from the bottle and posed Clint his original question again. “Circus, why’re you here?”

Clint shifted. “Birdie told me you were alone. Figured you might like company.”

“This birdie have long black hair and a penchant for sticking her nose in other people’s business?”

He had no doubt Kate would somehow discover this, and convince Clint—

“Uhh, blonde hair is really more her style, she looks weirder the darker the wig.” At what must have been a truly non-plussed expression on Eliot’s face, Clint elaborated, “Bobbi. Bobbi is
‘Birdie.’

Eliot sighed. “You got any non-confusing nicknames for her?”

“I have another one?” Now it was Clint’s turn to be lost.

“First time you mentioned a Bobbi, I definitely wasn’t picturing some lady with long blonde hair,” Eliot admitted.

Realization dawned and Clint burst out laughing. “Man, you’re too easy!”

“Yes, well.” Eliot said, because he didn’t want to shrug. They were silent for a few moments, aside from Clint still trying to stop laughing. Something about him being here still felt off to Eliot, but he couldn’t pinpoint what exactly.

The silence was beginning to stretch. Clint started fidgeting a bit. Guy never could sit still. Finally, Eliot broke it. “Look, I don’t mind if you head home, Circus. Finally crash into your actual bed, in your actual building.”

Clint tensed, and Eliot caught that distinctive, split-second expression that he still remembered from the first day he’d met the guy. He’d never fully decided what was behind it, but it always reminded him of a wild animal, stuck in the instant between flight or fight.

The next moment it was gone, and he’d settled back in his chair. “Just got done answering hours of questions, not really in the mood to answer more,” he said.

Eliot finished off his beer and twisted the cap off the one Clint had brought him before casually asking, “Natasha teach you to lie like that?”

Clint whipped his head around and glared at Eliot. “Like what?” he demanded.

“Choosin’ a truth and swearin’ it’s the whole truth and nothin’ but the truth.” Eliot drawled blandly.

“It is the truth!”

Eliot sighed. He’d clearly hit a nerve, and he wasn’t actually trying to piss Circus off, just figure out what was bugging him. “Whatever you say, man.”

Clint didn’t say anything, just stared out at the city.

“Where’d the money come from?” Eliot finally asked. If Clint was gonna stay put, at least he could answer the thing that had been bothering Eliot this whole time.

“What money?” Clint muttered, sulking.

“The money you paid for the building. Hardison went through your accounts. He does that. Anyway, up till not that long ago, you were basically broke. Then suddenly you had money. A lot of it. From some transfer that Hardison didn’t have time to track, but he said looked sketchy as hell.” It was a kind of litmus test, he decided. Ask Clint a simple question and a complex question, the second one possibly involving illegal actions, and see which, if any, he’d answer. He’d ducked the simple one.

“Oh that money.” Clint looked down for a moment, then back out at the city. “I uhh…” he hesitated, then spoke in a rush. “…got it from my brother. Not really with his permission, but since
he was trying to kill me at the time…” he trailed off for a moment before finally finishing, “…look, it’s complicated, and I probably shouldn’t have it, but he made it doing bad things, so at least I could spend it giving people their homes back, okay?” He turned to Eliot, unable to keep a lopsided grin off his face. “And I bought the coolest car ever.”

“What kind of car?”

“Challenger. Orange one.”

“No shit? That’s what I drive.” Back on firm ground, and he was sure Clint hadn’t lied about the money. But he couldn’t help himself. He used to do the same thing with Nate, shoving past all those walls and defenses until Nate would shut him down, time after time.

But Clint wasn’t Nate, at all really, and maybe, just maybe, that meant he could get to the bottom of whatever was going on. So he kept pushing. “You guys used to be close? You and your brother?”

“When we were kids, yeah. He taught me how to punch, how to take a punch. Protected me when he could.”

Eliot nodded. “Things went bad?”

“Multiple times.” Clint sighed. “Don’t know where he is, but we’re kinda okay now? I don’t think he’ll try to kill me again.”

“You got a low threshold for okay, Circus.” That was true for both of them, if he was being honest. “Didn’t think I fit with my family. Lit out from home minute I was old enough to join up. Turned myself into somethin’ that didn’t fit right with me. Not that I fit anywhere else either, till a few years back.”

Clint said nothing, so Eliot slid the point home. “Weird, ain’t it. Realizing you belong somewhere and that place belongs to you?” He watched as the other man’s jaw clenched suddenly. “Kinda sneaks up on you. Happens with people too. Least it did for me. But I think places catch you more off your guard. Especially if it didn’t mean much at first, just where you crashed and kept your stuff. And one day you realize you think of it as home, and something to fight for.”

Clint said nothing for a long, long moment. When he finally spoke, it was quiet and low. “I didn’t plan it.” He laughed bitterly. “I don’t plan much of anything. But I sure as hell didn’t intend to be people’s landlord. I just couldn’t not do something.”

“And now that building is home, those people are yours to protect, the fight is over, and you wanna run.” Eliot finished for him.

“I’ve painted a giant target on their backs,” Clint muttered.

“Man, don’t you ever get tired of archery references? Don’t answer that. In fact, quit sitting here and sulking about winning without dying. Go home. Guys like us don’t generally have them, and both of us got lucky. Hell, you even got a dog named Lucky. Dammit, Circus, go home. They deserve answers and you deserve a bed.”

Clint sat there for a moment longer, as if steeling himself. Finally, he exhaled sharply and nodded. “Okay. You’re right. That sounds good.” He drained the last of the beer, stood up and swept his eyes across the nearby buildings, before grabbing his bow, selecting an arrow, and smoothly firing it at a squat, brick-walled structure across the street. He turned back to look at Eliot before taking off. “I think I’ll fire up the grill again tomorrow. The tradition kinda fell apart after Grills died. But
you took down the guy that murdered him.”

“*We did,*” Eliot said pointedly.

“Yeah. *We did.* Anyway. You guys should come.”

“Who’s cooking? *You?’*

“Hey, I’m great at—”

“Hell, no. I’m cooking. Wouldn’t trust you near my food, or anyone else’s.”

“But—”

“Shut up. I’m cooking.”
This was hardly the result she’d anticipated, but for once, the unintended consequences seemed to have resolved themselves favorably?

For now, Birdie, let’s not tempt fate.

She’d gone to bed—in her own damn bed, for more than six hours of sleep even—last night and woken to find reality unchanged. Based on previous experience, that wasn’t always a given. But as far as she could verify, things were normal. Somehow, two of her lives had collided, with minimal...
explosions and no bridges burned. It was a refreshing change.

Hardison bumped her shoulder. “Lemme guess, you’re considering the miracle that this worked out without a bulldozer to dig us out of the rubble.”

“Hey, I’m the one that gets to be a pretend psychic, remember?”

“Yeah, I do, Tara.”

“Aaand we’re back to that. “Look, I—”

“I’ll give ya a week. Course, Parker may not be able to contain herself…”

“Please. I give it two days before I get a phone call. Your fingerprints are all over this job, for those who know what to look for. And don’t tell me Nate doesn’t know exactly what to look for. I’m surprised you haven’t gotten a call already.”

“Oh, I have.” He held up his phone to show her the call data. Foreign number, duration just over 18 minutes, logged at 6:17 PM yesterday. Long call for Nate, but not for Sophie, if she got on the line. Bobbi hoped she had. She’d noticed the quick flicks Hardison’s eyes took toward Eliot, unable to stop reassuring himself. If he hadn’t had a talk with Sophie yet, he needed one.

“You tell them?”

“Nah, I said nothing, but I hardly needed to. Nate likes his drama, so expect to find him sitting at your kitchen table, in the dark, nursing a scotch, any day now.”

“Honestly, I’m more worried about Sophie.” The other woman would forgive her the fake name, obviously, but possibly not the job.

“She prefers dark alleys and trenchcoats.” He did another quick check, trying to mask the action by scratching his eyebrow.

“If you keep eyeing him like fine china that’s about to shatter, he will. Explosively. In your face.”

“Don’t think anyone’s ever called Eliot ‘fine china’ before.”

“Originally I was gonna go for an analogy to nitroglycerin, but the context didn’t quite work. Anyway, it’s your problem, not his.”

“It used to not bug me, not like this. How do you do it?”

“You realize I’m so not the person to ask, right? I’m giving you the warning as an Eliot-type myself. Clint would do the worry thing. The try-to-fix-everything thing. Drove me nuts.” More nuts. “Do me a favor? Find a project for the summer. Something for the three of you. Not a job. And don’t go and over-plan the shit out of it, because I know you, and your style.”

He laughed and nodded, considering. “Yeah, I’ll think of something. Thanks. Bobbi.” He stressed her name, her actual name, and gave her a quick, very Hardison grin, before wandering off.

Now I just have to look for Nate and Sophie in the shadows.
Natasha lounged in the shaded corner created by the access door. Clint would call this ‘lurking’, had in fact called it that in sign, spatula still in hand, flinging grease everywhere, but predominantly at Eliot. If he survived tonight, it was only because Spencer wanted to avoid ripping stitches. *Which he does. If he rips a stitch, he’ll have Hardison to contend with.*

The thought came unbidden and confident in its assertion. Ten years following Spencer’s trajectory made the analysis habitual, almost entirely second nature. She’d had less time observing his partners, but still plenty to make a number of educated guesses based on body language alone.

Hardison: posturing a bit as he talked to Bobbi. He held the upper hand in the conversation, or thought he did at any rate. Given her blown cover, he was probably right. She caught the name “Sophie”, confirming her suspicions.

Parker: perched on the edge of the roof, radiating her desire for solitude. To her, a rooftop would be a retreat, a place to avoid the press and pressure of humans in the building and street below. But here, as in other densely populated areas around the world, the roof was a gathering space, communal and friendly.

Both of them on edge, Parker literally, even as Natasha watched some of the tension ease out of Hardison’s shoulders as he spoke to Bobbi. Over beside Clint, Eliot’s eyes must be catching the same cues, but he stayed where he was. *Why? Is the choice deliberate or borne out of insecurity?* She shook her head, cutting off the line of thought sharply. She was done.

*I will miss this. It’s become a hobby, watching these people. Watching them discover their power and each other.* She’d given Parker her files. Hardcopies, originals, even classified records, swaths of text redacted. It flew in the face of her training, of her allegiances. Ten years of intelligence gathering abandoned. Not sacrificed. She’d gained nothing in return for giving up this pursuit.

“So how legal is this whole deal?” Hardison took a sip from his bottle and waited for her to acknowledge his existence.

Natasha lifted her eyebrows. “According to a lawyer I know, just posing the question was enough to give him a headache, though that could have been due to him banging his head against the wall as I added in details.” Poor Murdock. “He rambled on about the gray areas of having a person use a robot to impersonate another person, with that person’s permission, which technically makes it a proxy, of sorts, though the intent of both parties complicates matters… Anyway I had Clint sign and backdate a statement giving you license to operate—what did Bobbi call it?—Bartison.”

She finished her own beer, and handed it off to one of Simone’s boys. They were practicing Clint’s coin trick in one corner. “Don’t cut yourself, we’ve had enough of that lately,” she told him as he grinned and ran off.

“Exactly where did you find a lawyer to ask a question like that?” Hardison asked, having finally finished wading through her sentence.

Her smile showed a hint of teeth and no secrets. “Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies.” Matt probably wished she’d not asked *him*, but if he didn’t want to get put on the spot then he shouldn’t answer his phone. And she’d name-dropped the Kingpin, just to sweeten the pot. Likely, nothing would stick to Fisk and some of the others, but they’d lost a substantial sum of money, a huge investment, their private assassin, and their army of thugs, not to mention whatever trust they’d had in each other. And none of them would think about threatening Clint any time soon.
“‘S’pose I just gotta be happy with the other information you dumped on me.”

She said nothing, scanning the roof out of habit, rather than caution. In one corner, Aimee and Archie were having a jam session that kept devolving into esoteric music debates. Simone laughed at something Bobbi said as they watched her two boys. Other tenants were laughing, too, enjoying lack of threat, as well as the May warm spell that hinted at summer. The tension, palpable in the building for months now, had faded, replaced by ordinary concerns. It was a small victory, but it mattered.

“Thanks.” Hardison said finally. “For the files. Can’t have been easy for a spy to hand over.”

She sighed. “Somewhere, someone has a similar file on me. Likely more than one someone. It’s possible, too, that I was not the only person with a longtime interest in Spencer. One day they may use it.”

He shifted, catching her drift and uncomfortable with the direction they were heading. “I ain’t reading them. It ain’t my business. It’s in the past.”

As if that changes anything. “The past can hurt, but you can either run from it or learn from it.”

He stared at her, befuddled. “Are-are you quoting the LION KING at me?”

“It’s a good movie, and it makes my point.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I am not saying you keep your possession of those files a secret, if you haven’t told him already. Or that you read them without his permission.” She swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. “But. If he says you don’t need to know what’s in them, or that whatever comes, it’s his job to protect you and Parker and he’ll handle it—know that he can’t. Be prepared.” She ended the conversation, stalking past him before he could form a response.

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Kate blinked as Natasha swept by her, and turned to see Hardison looking about as adrift as she’d felt ever since they’d all left her on this roof two nights before, facing a crowd of confused civilians unsure what they’d won and what would come next.

Not that she’d had the slightest idea. She’d herded them back downstairs, fed Lucky, cleaned Clint’s apartment to give herself something to do, shot arrows at the dummies until they were more hole than target, and crashed on his couch. When he’d finally turned up the next evening, looking exhausted, but somehow less like the pile of warmed-over crap than she’d grown accustomed to, he hadn’t asked why she’d never gone home.

Hardison was still staring after Natasha. “A Russian assassin just gave me life advice by quoting The Lion King.”

Kate winced, and then felt stupid for it, but Hardison was looking at her, eyebrows raised. “I didn’t like that movie as a kid,” she admitted. “I hated the dad lion dying, ‘cause I thought of him as my dad and… well now that seems pretty stupid, all things considered.” She twisted a strand of hair. “I take it you weren’t similarly traumatized?”
“Nah, but I didn’t have a daddy to project on. Just my Nana, and believe me, if Scar came for her, she’d whack him good with her cane and keep on to wherever she was headed.” He grinned.

“Course, I was also basically a teenager when it came out. The little ones would cry at that part, but they liked Timon and Pumba—the meer cat and the warthog? I’d tell them they were foster parents to Simba, and they liked that.”

“You were in the system?”

“Yeah, she isn’t my Nana-Nana, she’s—”

“Batman?”

Hardison stared at her. “Oh you did not just—.”

She stuck out her tongue, feeling lighter than she had all day. “Couldn’t help it! Easy target!”

“Oh AND an archery reference on top of that?”

She fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Guilty.”

He giggled and it sounded ridiculous and wonderful. “I’m gonna miss you, girl. You should come visit.”

“Thanks, but I’ve been officially disowned for a day now, so this summer I get to find myself a probably shitty job to pay the bills.” Kate shrugged, began twisting the strand of hair again. She should have anticipated being cut off; was, in the furious and righteous side of her brain, utterly relieved. Finally, something she and Daddy agreed on.

“Shit, Kate. You got a place to live?”

“Clint offered me the vacant apartment, now that Olena’s been arrested and will be deported.” She tried to make that sound like an option she preferred. “It’s nice of him.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but.’”

She sighed. “But. I’m a formerly wealthy heiress. I’ve just been disowned by my father, who is going to jail. The story’s going to break any minute now and it’s not going to let up until the next big scandal hits the gossip rags. Clint is my partner and my friend, but that’s all he is. To me. Other people make other assumptions. And living in his building, the center of this scandal, with free rent? Where do I even start with the shit that’ll be written? Or shouted at us in the street? And I don’t care, really, but the paparazzi can get fucking awful, it’ll be a nightmare for the other people who live here, and I guarantee Clint will react and do something stupid that just makes it worse.”

“That’s quite the ‘but.’”

She glanced back her less-than-generous ass. “Well, it had to go somewhere.” *Shit, a few more deflections like that and I just might transform into Clint.* “So, what’s up with Parker?” Not the smoothest transition, but Hardison was easy to distract, especially when it came to his girl. And Parker’d spent most of the night sitting on the edge of the roof, staring out into the distance.

“Been giving her some space, but I’m about to go find out. Hang in there, okay?”

“I’ll be fine, Hardison, thanks.” She gave him a real smile, one that stuck the landing, and it was only after he’d moved off that she remembered what F.I.N.E. stood for.
Parker felt his presence before he ever spoke, like the sun at her back.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, fine.” She stared out at the city and didn’t look at him, even though she wanted to. Emotions were so stupid. All of this was stupid and she needed Sophie here to gaze through her and know what she was feeling because Parker didn’t and what was the point of having a feeling if she couldn’t name it, define it, dissect and understand and control it?

“You’ve been quiet, like weird quiet, since this job ended.” Hardison sat down next to her, keeping his feet on the inside of the ledge, because for him the open air beneath them was not the same as an open invitation. Sometimes that frustrated her to no end, how he didn’t see the same possibilities in emptiness. He loved to fill things—a black screen needed content, a page needed code, and a building needed people and laughter and music…

But she’d discovered that her voice wanted—needed—ears to hear it, and a mind to listen, and he filled that hole too.

She sighed and shifted her shoulders. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. In the apartment. When I saw him, after—” Eliot filled holes too, a rock with solid sides and sharp edges. *If I were a lock, Eliot’s the tension wrench, holding the plug, while Hardison’s the pick, working through the pins.* Somehow the idea made her feel better.

“Hey, he’s okay, we’re all okay. And I know I’ve been freaking out too, but Bobbi says I need to stop that. But I’m the worrier, okay? You’re stealing my job, bein’ all mopey over here.” He took her hand, rubbing it gently.

“That’s the thing. I know my job. I was right. In the apartment. I made the right call and I know I did, but I—” she broke off. *Nate trusted me to make those calls. They all do. And I can. But I think it’s supposed to be harder.*

“No buts. You were right, and you made the right call. I just, I hate seeing either of you hurt. And Eliot—he thinks that’s his job and I… I don’t want him to ever think we wouldn’t come after him.” He was rambling, filling the quiet surrounding them with words. “I know he does sometimes. I don’t want him, or you, or Clint, or anyone to ever think they’re too broken to be worth putting back together.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. “I know. But I still made that call. We talked about it once. Eliot n’ me. When we were on that mountain.” She bit her lip. “He said sometimes people needed us to be us and do the things other people can’t and I know that. But I don’t always like that me.”

Hardison rotated, bringing his legs up and over the side to dangle next to hers. “You know what I like about you, Parker? Everything. I like that you’re hanging your feet over the edge of this building and you’re not worried about falling. I like that you remind Eliot we change together when he wants to go all Rambo by himself. I like that you remind me to breathe, even that you make me jump off buildings sometimes, cause even when I’m scared as hell, I know you will catch me. And we’ll catch Eliot. And the three of us can catch anyone else in need of a rescue.” He paused for a moment, before continuing.
“Bobbi was talking about how Eliot’s not fine china and it reminded me of those Japanese pots you didn’t steal from Kate. The ones that are broken and pieced together again with gold or some other precious metal?”

She nodded. “Kintsugi. I stole a sixteenth century one once.” She sniffed and breathed out, finally looking at him. “What about them?”

“They’re stronger and more beautiful than before they were broken. Like someone I know.” He watched her carefully as she ducked her head and smiled, warmth spreading across her cheeks and down her throat. “Thanks, Alec.” She kissed him, briefly, and swung her legs up and over the ledge to stand firmly on the rooftop, pulling him with her. Over by the grill, Eliot caught her eye and nodded in reassurance. Somehow, he knew.

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Clint didn’t catch everything that Kate was saying to Hardison, but thanks to perfect eyesight and plenty of practice lip-reading over the last few days, he managed to get the gist. The gist sucked. It also made perfect sense and explained Kate’s hesitation at his offer. He wanted her happy. She'd stood by him even when he’d acted like a piece of shit over the past few months, and he wouldn't have blamed her if she'd cut and run, hell, he'd sorta tried to force the issue. *Time to clean up the mess you made, Barton.* But he didn't know how to clean up the mess Kate was in.

“Well, shit,” he muttered.

Eliot glanced over at him, or rather, Eliot glanced over at the burger he was in charge of. Priorities. “Not burnt yet, you just anticipatin’ screwing it up?”

“This may sound crazy, but I wasn’t actually thinking about food. Kate’s dad put her in a shit position. I don’t know how to help. I mean, I thought I was helping, offering her a place to live. But…”* turns out I’m an idiot, there’s a shock.* “…things are complicated.” *How come I can factor in every single aspect that might affect the trajectory of an arrow, but I for the life of me see the bigger picture when it comes to people? I thought I was good at people.*

“You were eavesdropping?”

“Does it count as eavesdropping if I’m lip-reading?” He scraped at the grill absentmindedly.

“Unless you want to add ‘lip-dropping’ into this conversation. I’d advise against it.” He nodded over at Hardison, now taking to Parker. “You know what’s going on there?”

He could read the rigidity of her muscles, knew the sensation of that tightness all too well. “Too far and a bad angle.”

“Damn. She’s been odd—*odder*, anyway. I’ve got theories, but gettin out whatever’s buggin her can take days.”

“And here I was gonna ask how you figure out people.”

“Always thought you had a better handle on that than I did.”

“Same here, but I think I’m acquiring humility.”
“You?!”

“Yeah, well apparently there’s more ways than one to have your head stuck up your ass.”

“Boys.” He turned at the drawled derision. Bobbi’s mouth twisted in amusement and she bent down to rummage in the cooler for another beer. “Either of you consider going over and asking?”

“Hardison’s got us beat.” Eliot grumbled.

“Well, he’s a better talker than you and a better listener than Clint, so that’s not a surprise. But this isn’t a competition. Give me the spatulas.” Clint registered her no-nonsense tone and handed his over immediately. Eliot hesitated a moment before doing the same. Bobbi twirled them, one in each hand, the movement effortless and automatic. She winked and made shooing motions. “Go on.”

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Hardison, hand still clenched tight by Parker, who did not so much believe in holding hands as holding on to them, offered Eliot what he hoped was a casual nod, as he approached. He moved stiffly still, but—he’s fine and your nightmares get to take a back seat for a bit.

“Breathin?” Eliot asked Parker, his tone somehow both hesitant and sure.

“Yes.” She sounded similar and in that instant Hardison knew that the three of them would be okay.

“Good.” Eliot looked at his hands for a moment. “Thanks,” he said finally. “I know helping superheroes isn’t really what we do…”

In another corner of the roof, the Hawkeyes were talking. Clint listened as Kate spoke, head bent so her hair covered her face. His hand rested on her shoulder, but she still seemed alone and overwhelmed.

“We do whatever we decide we want to do,” Parker was saying.

_Find a project_, Bobbi’d said. This would count, right? “Hey speaking of, I got another one in mind.”

“’Nother one, what?” Eliot asked, already wary.

Like he didn’t end up loving Hardison’s plans, by hook or by crook. The _Brewpub was still a stroke of genius, if I do say so myself._ “Another superhero to help. Another Hawkeye, for that matter.”

Parker tilted her head all the way back till she could see his face. “Run it,” she commanded.

“Alright! Name’s Kate Bishop, aka Hawkeye, and her daddy’s a real piece of work. Now I _could_ just arrange for his money to find it’s way into Kate’s account, but—”

“She don’t really want money,” Eliot interjected.

“And she’s about to turn a few too many heads on the East Coast, and that kind of publicity sucks.”
“So she needs to get away...” Parker was bouncing now, dragging them forward towards their next client.

“All while building a resume, working a summer job at an established local business...”

“...in Portland, obviously.” Kate and Clint looked up at Parker’s voice, Kate’s eyes widening.

“...maybe pick up a few new skills...”

“...like hacking...”

“...picking pockets and locks...”

“...knife fightin’...”

“What do you say?” Parker demanded. Hardison winked at Kate and Eliot didn’t move a muscle, but then that was Eliot for you.

“A Hawkeye on the west coast? Seriously?” Clint groused, grinning. Bobbi somehow appeared behind him and smacked him with the spatula, while Natasha folded her arms, smirking. “Ah! I didn’t say it was bad idea!”

“Just don’t get her arrested,” Bobbi ordered.

“Or at least make sure it’s under an alias, no cameras, and the system can be wiped later.”

“Do I tell you how to do your job!?” Hardison griped at Natasha, but Kate was grinning ear to ear.

“What’d’ya say, girl?”

“Yeah. That sounds good.”

THE END.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everybody who’s made it this far, thanks so much for reading! I’ve never written fic before (well, apart from a two page story about sentient ice cream) and I had so much fun playing with these odd and complex people. I’ve got a few short things in the works, and a couple of baby plot bunnies starting to hop around, so we’ll see where this goes next!

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