Summary

I, Phillip [REDACTED] Coulson, presently of the District of Columbia, being of sound mind, declare this my last will and testament.

And is it ever a doozy....

Clint is bequeathed the world's oddest safe deposit box, goes off to find out who Phil really was, and maybe just finds Phil again.

Notes

So Laurakaye, Faeleverte and I were mutually squeeing over how much we love the #daily-phlint thing and how bad we are at really short stories. Because it was late at night, clearly the only solution to this dilemma was for us to start a three-person round-robin based on one of these unusual inheritance prompts.

So that’s what we’re doing, one 500 word post a night for each. Sometimes that’ll be a complete chapter, sometimes only part of a chapter. When we finish a chapter we’ll post it here. Chapters in progress can be found at the Passepartout tag or the Daily Phlint tag.
(Faeleverte will come in about Ch 4)

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Will

Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

I, Phillip [REDACTED] Coulson, presently of the District of Columbia, being of sound mind, declare this my last will and testament.

Preliminary Declarations

I revoke all prior Wills and Codicils.

- I am not married.
- I do not have any living children.
- The term “child” or “children” used in this my will includes the above listed children and any children of mine that are subsequently born or legally adopted.

Executor

I appoint Nicholas Fury as my Personal Representative to administer this Will, and ask that he be permitted to serve without Court supervision and without posting bond. If Nicholas Fury is unwilling or unable to serve, then I appoint Maria Hill to serve as my Personal Representative, and ask that she be permitted to serve without Court supervision and without posting bond.

Clint frankly stopped listening as the wizened little SHIELD lawyer, so old she probably came on with Director Carter, droned on, giving directions for Phil’s funeral and the disposition of his home. Of all the things Clint had thought he’d be doing in the aftermath of the Battle of New York, sitting with some twenty other people, most of whom had known Phil more or less intimately in his time, and listening to the reading of his will, had not been at the top of his list.

Not because he hadn’t known Phil had died-- Natasha had told him that in the Quinjet, when the sting of it would be buried under the adrenaline rush of fighting several bajillion invading aliens. Clint had just never thought of Phil as having a will. Oh, he was a will-and-testament kind of person, no doubt. He liked to do things properly. (This despite the fact that his legendary love of paperwork was heavy on the fable and extremely light on the fact.) But will implied dead, and despite their lines of work, Clint had never, ever been able to imagine Phil… gone.

He stirred a little when the lawyer started getting to the personal bequests, like everyone else in the room. And then sat up straight at the end of the first three bequests.

“... I devise, bequeath, and give the remainder of my collection of recorded music, as well as the enclosed letter, to Audrey Nathan of Portland, Oregon,” the lawyer said, then looked up at the young woman, who had her hands carefully folded in her lap. Clint had avoided looking at her for longer than it took to press her hand; it wasn’t jealousy, he told himself. He’d just never known how to behave around her.

“Ms Nathan,” the lawyer continued, then glanced at the two other civilians who’d been present, a kind of second cousin twice removed and a fellow Captain America collector who’d come in for a share of Phil’s collection, “Mr Renault, Ms Taliaferro, the rest of this will is classified. Thank you for your attendance, but you will have to leave for the rest of the reading.”

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A whisper ran around the room. The cousin looked puzzled, the Cap fan shocked. Audrey, Clint noticed, didn’t seem surprised, only resigned. Obviously she knew what Phil did--had done--for a living, seeing as how they met because of it, but Clint had never really considered how she’d felt about dating a spy.

Of course, when Clint considered Phil in a romantic context, he tended more toward fond memories and wistful musings about what might happen, if they ever again found themselves in a place where having a relationship wouldn’t interfere with saving the world.

Director Fury escorted the civilians out of the room. When the soundproof door had closed behind them, the lawyer cleared her throat again.

“In accordance with section 4573 part A of the Convention on World Security, the following portions of this will are classified WSC Level Three.”

To Clint’s right, a small group of people sat up straighter. They were all Level Threes, he was pretty sure, a group of promising up-and-comers that Phil had been mentoring in the handler training program.

The lawyer turned the page. “I devise, bequeath, and give my unopened bottle of The Macallan 25 Year Old Sherry Oak Whisky and the black four-inch three ring binder located in my bottom-left desk drawer to Trinh Nguyen, Joseph Rollette, Erisa Magambo, and Sarah Reade. You are a credit to the agency and I was proud to work with you. The binder contains my compiled notes on best practices for handling active field agents. The bottle contains a damn fine whisky. I have found very few situations arising in my career that could not be addressed by one or the other.”

“Oh,” Agent Reade let out a muffled sob. “Oh, sir.” She had one arm in a sling and her face was bruised. Clint hadn’t asked how it had happened; he was afraid to find out. Rollette and Nguyen, on either side of her, made comforting noises.

“Agent Coulson regarded you very highly, Agents,” the Director said. “I look forward to seeing you carry on his legacy at SHIELD in the future.”

“Thank you, sir,” Agent Magambo said quietly.

The lawyer picked up her papers again. “In accordance with section 4573 part A of the Convention on World Security, the following portions of this will are classified WSC Level Five,” she said.

“Agents, if you would,” Fury said. The Level Threes made their way out of the office in a tight little knot. Clint watched them go, clinging to Natasha’s hand.

“I devise, bequeath, and give my KitchenAid stand mixer and all its attachments and accessories to James Woo. He knows why.”

“Phil, you bastard,” Jimmy muttered, from somewhere behind Clint, and blew his nose.

It went on like that for a while, the room clearing out little by little with each round of bequests, the clearance level getting higher. Phil left Sitwell an annotated map of the diners of the greater Sacramento metropolitan area; he left Blake his mother’s recipe for tropical scones; he left May the key to and contents of a locker in the Kalamazoo Transportation Authority. Finally, Clint, Nat, and Fury were the only people left in the room.
The lawyer looked up at the three of them, Clint sitting so close to Natasha they would have required surgery to separate and Fury sitting by himself a little to their right, drawing in on himself and slumping now that only family was left in the room. Well, what Clint considered Phil’s family to be, anyway. Clint wanted to catch his eye, make some kind of sign that he appreciated it, but everything seemed either wrong or not enough-- so he just sat and shuffled.

“Ahem,” the lawyer said—actually said, rather than clearing her throat—and continued onwards. “I devise, bequeath, and give my flat in Paris and all its contents, to Natalia Alienovna Romanova. The enclosed letter holds the key and deed; she alone knows the location. Natasha, when you came to SHIELD I promised myself I would do everything in my power to make sure you were never roofless and rootless again. You have never needed my help, but please accept my gratitude that you have allowed me to be your friend.”

It was Natasha’s turn to cling to Clint, her fingernails digging hard into his bicep— the first pain that had really penetrated since Loki had taken him. He put a hand over her shoulders and squeezed.

The lawyer caught his eye.

“I devise, bequeath, and give to Clint Barton the contents of my safe deposit box at the Treasury Department Federal Credit Union in Washington, D.C. The enclosed letter holds the key and necessary identification. Clint, you will understand when you get there. In accordance,” the lawyer went on without pause, “with section 4573 part A of the Convention on World Security, the following portions of this will are classified WSC Level Ten.”

And she looked expectantly at Clint and Natasha. Clint knew he should get up and move—Fury was the only Ten in the room, after all, hell even Phil hadn’t been Level Ten— but he was still stunned, waiting for the lawyer to realize she’d skipped a line and go back, that Phil had said something to him, even half, even a quarter of what he’d given to Natasha.

She was tugging his hand, trying to get him to move, and Fury was looking at him now, contemplative.

“Ms. Yuniesky,” he said at last, turning back to the lawyer, “keep reading.”

“Director Fury, I really can’t—”

“Ms. Yuniesky,” Fury said, “I can declassify whatever the hell I want. In addition, I am, if I got this right, the executor of this goddamn will. So why don’t you just keep reading?”

“This is highly irregular—” the lawyer stopped with a sigh and looked back at her papers. “Well, it always is with you, Nicholas. Very well. ‘I devise, bequeath, and give to Nicholas Fury the residue of my estate, including my 1962 Corvette. Treat her well, Marcus, for the sake of the fatherless punk you gave a chance to save the world. I hope I made you proud.’

Lola? Clint swung round to look at Fury, stunned. Sure, Phil and Fury went way the hell back, but…Lola? Phil’s most precious earthly possession (yes, even over and above the Captain America trading cards that had gone to Tony Stark— who was thankfully not around to hear it). It wasn’t that Clint didn’t think that Fury didn’t deserve it, but how did he rate that and Clint rated… Clint rated… what? A “you’ll understand” and that was it?

“What?” said Clint, finally finding his voice.

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“Clint,” Natasha murmured.

“No, this--this is bullshit, Nat, he wouldn’t just--he wouldn’t’--” Clint’s voice broke, and he shoved his fist against his lips, trying to swallow down the ugly noises rising in his throat.

“Barton.” Fury’s voice was gruff, but kind. “Go read your letter.” He was holding out a big manilla envelope, one of the heavy-duty reinforced kind. Nat took it from him when Clint didn’t reach out.

“I’ll see to it, sir,” she said gravely, and he nodded.

“Take some leave time, Agents,” he added, just before they left the room. “I know where to find you if I need to.”

She took him to one of her safehouses--one of the nicer ones, a two-bedroom--and installed him in one of the bedrooms with some sweats, a bottle of water, a bag of pretzels, a bag of banana chips, and the letter.

“Don’t come out until you read that,” she told him. “It will only hurt more, not knowing.” She kissed his temple and went back out into the living room; a few minutes later he heard the theme for Midsomer Murders start to play.

Clint kicked his shoes off and huddled against the headboard of the bed, staring down at the envelope in his hands. It was sealed, no shit, with actual red sealing wax; the embossed design was Captain America’s shield.

Clint’s eyes blurred with tears again, and he cursed himself for a fool. He’d thought that they’d had something special, once upon a time. When they’d decided that a relationship between them would interfere with saving the world, he’d thought they’d both agreed that once things calmed down--once one of them retired from the field, maybe--that they’d give it another shot.

He’d always known that Phil was probably the love of his life. He’d just thought Phil had felt the same way about him.

“Dammit,” he whispered, and broke the seal.

He upended the envelope onto the bedspread, and three objects fell out; a leather ID wallet, a keychain with three keys on it, and a smaller envelope with Clint’s name written on it in Phil’s neat, spiky writing.

He picked up the wallet first, and found a complete set of ID--passport, driver’s license, birth certificate, even a social security card--in the name of Charles Burton, with Clint’s height and weight and age and photo. The picture was even pretty recent, and Clint wondered how often Phil had updated them.

The keychain--Cap’s shield again, but there was a little chip on the back that Clint recognized; it was the same keychain he’d won for Phil at a carnival midway, on their second date--didn’t provide much else by way of explanation. Clint assumed that one of the keys was for the safe deposit box, but the others were unlabeled. One was an old-fashioned looking skeleton key, but had the bright threads of circuitry gleaming in the grooves; the other looked like any house key.

He took a deep, unsteady breath, and opened the letter. When he unfolded the pages, a scent wafted out, and he curled over like he’d taken a punch to the gut; it smelled like Phil, like bergamot and sandalwood and leather. He held the pages up to his nose with trembling hands and just breathed until nose-blindness kicked in, too soon, and he couldn’t make it out any more, and then
he finally read Phil’s last words to him.
Washington DC

December 10, 2011

My dearest Clint,

I’m dead now, so I can write that again knowing I’m not opening any doors we’re not ready to walk through. I update this letter at the end of every year; I suppose because it’s the only chance I get to use those words. Eight years? Nine? How long has it been since I last said that to your face and watched it light up?

Oh, damn it, I’m sorry. This isn’t supposed to be a love letter; that’s not fair to you. I want to tell you all the things I couldn’t over the years, all the things I saved up, but how can I force you to read them when you have no way to respond? These post-mortem letters are inherently selfish. Each year I consider not writing one. Or pause, like I am now, and try to convince myself to keep it short. To the point. Not hurt you more-- I don’t think I’m flattering myself when I think you will be hurting if you ever read this. Well, let’s see how I do this year, shall we?

Firstly: I love you. Budapest and our subsequent decision to part did not change that. Part of me says “he knows that, you don’t have to make it worse,” but I also know you. You’re wondering, especially after the will. In my defense, I thought you’d prefer to be mad rather than sad in public.

Secondly: the will. You being you, I assume you haven’t been to the safe deposit box yet because you of all people will want the lay of the land first. You have nothing to fear in that box. All I am trying to do is give you what I could not in life.

Thirdly: the chest. You’ll find it in the safe deposit box; the skeleton key opens it. You are the only person I trust to use the contents the way I would have used them-- or at least in a way that meets the spirit with which they were made.

Fourthly: SHIELD. I know you came to it wary, and hope that it, not just Nick and Nat and myself, earned your trust. But if you ever decide to walk away, I have tried to give you all the means
necessary to do so. Perhaps the Avengers Initiative will become operative— you deserve your place in it, a thousand times over. No matter what you do, I know you will always, somehow, be off saving the world.

It’s what I love so much about you that I was willing to give you up, after all.

With all my heart, and hoping you never read this,

Phil

A fat drop of water fell onto the paper, blurring the ink, and Clint set the letter aside hastily before giving in to the urge to bury his face in his updrawn knees and shake with the sobs he could no longer hold in. It hurt, sticking in his chest and burning his throat, and once he started he couldn’t seem to stop. It wasn’t just Phil he was grieving, either, but everything; the things Clint had done, the friends whose blood was on his hands, the future with Phil, all the somedays that he only now realized he’d been counting on when they had become impossible.

When he had wept himself hollow, he realized that he could feel a slight, warm weight on his back; Natasha’s hand, resting gently, reminding him that she was there.

“I should never have supported your ridiculous self-sacrificing notions,” she said. “We could have found a way around the situation; the world would have muddled through.”

“We couldn’t,” he said, his voice still muffled in the sodden fabric covering his knees. “You know why we couldn’t.”

“You made good arguments at the time,” she conceded. “But—”

“What’s done is done, Nat,” he interrupted. He didn’t think he could bear it if she came up with some way they hadn’t seen, some way that would have given him those years with Phil before he… before. “There’s nothing we can do about it now.”

She sighed. “Then I suppose we should go to Washington.”

He sat up, scrubbing at his aching eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “I think we should.”

Neither of them felt like sleeping, so they drove through the night, finally taking a room in a Marriott full of government contractors and managing a few hours of sleep before the bank opened. At 9:05, they were at the door, Clint with his new fake IDs at the ready.

Unsure of what to do, he approached one of the tellers.

“Excuse me,” he said. “My name is Charles Burton, I need to access my safe deposit box, please.”

The teller glanced at his proffered driver’s license and typed something into the computer, then his eyes widened. “Oh! Of course, sir, I’m sorry. Ms. Engelwood will be right with you. If you’d care to step into her office? It’s just there, first on the left.”

Clint exchanged curious glances with Nat, then the two of them went to the office. There was an engraved nameplate on the polished desk that said “M. Engelwood, General Manager.”

“Does the general manager usually do the safe deposit boxes?” he asked her out of the corner of his mouth.

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “Interesting.”
“Mr. Burton! I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting.” M. Engelwood, General Manager, was a tall woman in a cranberry-colored suit. Clint rose to shake her hand, and she closed the door behind her with a much heavier than expected thud. The sounds of the lobby were instantly muffled by impressive soundproofing, and he caught Nat’s eye, raising an eyebrow.

“May I see two forms of ID, please?” she asked.

Clint pushed the Burton passport and license across the desk, and she studied them intensely, scanning them both and waiting for verification. They passed, of course--no legend Phil Coulson came up with would be shoddy--but it still struck him as unusual.

Ms. Engelwood handed back the IDs and fixed him with a stern glare.

“Do you know the way to San Jose?” she asked, and Clint sucked in a breath. He hadn’t heard that passcode since--

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Ms. Engelwood shifted in her seat, her hands moving out of sight. “Do you know the way to San Jose?”

“You have to take a left turn at Albuquerque!” he blurted, and she relaxed, her bland little smile returning.

“Excellent, Mr. Burton,” she said, then cleared her throat. “Will your companion be waiting here, or do you vouch for her?”

“I vouch for her,” Clint said at once. He would always vouch for Nat, no matter what.

“In that case, please follow me,” Ms. Engelwood said.

They followed her through the big vault door, Clint started looking around, wondering for the right number, but Ms. Engelwood walked right past most of the boxes and to another, smaller door set in the back wall. She punched in a code, then punched in a second code, then scanned her thumbprint, then scanned her ID badge.

Nat raised her eyebrows, and Clint shrugged. He was beginning to think that the Treasury Department Federal Credit Union had more going on than met the eye.

They followed Ms. Engelwood through the second door, which led to another, smaller vault, lined with the doors to more safety deposit boxes. These were larger, though; the smallest was about a foot square, while the largest was the size of a regular house door. Ms. Engelwood led them to the back of the room, where one of the large doors sat in the center of the wall.

“If there’s a cart to Gringott’s back there, I’m leaving,” Clint muttered. Nat rolled her eyes.

“Here you are, sir,” Ms. Engelwood said, indicating the door with a wave of her hand. “Take all the time you need. I’m afraid our policy dictates that the door to the inner vault be closed while any of these boxes are open, but when you are ready, all you have to do is turn the handle to come back out.”

“Um,” Clint said. “Thanks.”

“We appreciate your business,” she said, and then left the vault, the door swinging heavily to behind her.
“Well,” Clint said. “That was different.”


He pulled the keychain out of his pocket, smoothing over the chipped spot with his thumb, and inserted the safe deposit key into the lock. The door swung open smoothly, a light clicking on, and Clint’s jaw dropped at what he saw.

“Holy shit,” he said. “There’s a whole room back there!” There was, too; it was about the size of a good-sized walk-in closet, and jammed nearly full, though from what Clint could see it seemed pretty well organized onto a series of floor-to-ceiling shelves and racks.

Natasha snorted. “‘Safe deposit box’, he said. No wonder.”

“What even is all this stuff?”

“Only one way to find out,” Nat said, practical as ever. “Do you see any sort of ledger? If I know Phil, there’s an inventory in there somewhere.”

As it turned out, there was not only a ledger, but a tiny desk with a tiny stool and a tiny reading lamp. Clint sat, Natasha crowding over his shoulder, and his fingers trembled as he opened the cover.

A half hour later Clint sat back, closing the cover of the ledger with a force that shook the little desk. Drifts of sodden kleenex fell to the floor.

“Well?” Natasha asked, looking impatiently at Clint. She’d been poking into boxes and envelopes while he read, either through a sense of consideration or just because she was done with his tears for the day. He suspected the former, since Natasha had an inhuman level of patience with his pain as long as he hadn’t been the one to do the stabbing.

“It’s…” Clint shook his head, trying to find the words to describe what Phil had done, had saved in here.

An entire hidden life-- no. No, an entire unbegun life, just waiting for Phil to be finished with SHIELD. Clint hadn’t thought, not really, that he’d survive SHIELD. Certainly he’d never thought about how he’d survive it-- except that he wanted another chance with Phil. On the other hand, Phil seemed to have been thinking about it obsessively enough for the both of them.

“I’ll be honest,” Natasha said, eyeing Clint closely, “it looks awfully like his Captain America collection. I mean, how it’s organized, how detailed…”

“It is a collection, Nat,” Clint said, finding his voice at last, “it’s all the memorabilia from the future that he wanted us to have.”

“There’s a deed to more than one house in one of those file boxes, Clint,” Natasha pointed out. “A more than generous number of bearer bonds. IDs. Those at least make sense. But-- a full set of enamelled cast iron casserole dishes? Did… would…” she paused, shaking her head and looking around once more. “Would you have even wanted a life that included that much cooking?”

“Dunno, but if I had, I guess he’d have had them,” Clint sighed. “There’s also the papers for a Winnebago and a sailboat. I don’t think we were meant to use them all, they were just… options. You know Phil; he didn’t make one plan, he made a full suite of ‘em. It’s why he was always one step ahead…” Except that last step, of course.
“Well, there’s one question answered anyway,” Natasha said, somewhat shakily, as she came over to wrap her arms around Clint’s waist.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“You were wondering if you were the love of his life, too.” Natasha gestured around the room. “Even setting aside the letter, I think it’s fairly obvious what the answer is.”

Yes, Clint decided, just before laughter hit him with all the force of a punch to the gut, it was fairly obvious after all. He buried his head on Natasha’s shoulder and let himself be rocked between sobs and snickers for a long time.

“Do you want to take anything now?” Natasha asked, when Clint finally decided it was time to go.

Did he? Clint wasn’t sure— he’d never needed much, that was the absurdest thing about it. Could survive equally well with a toothbrush and a change of underwear to his name as with… with… all of this. Okay, maybe not equally well— besides the underwear it helped to have his bow. But. It seemed like a damn shame not to take anything.

Clint looked down at the keys in his hand. The little high-tech skeleton key winked back at him.

“That,” he said, pointing to the mid-sized chest, drably painted and bound round in steel, that the ledger had matched to the key. Its contents weren’t listed on any of the dozens of sheets of closely-crammed handwriting. “Let’s take that.”

They did.

Chapter End Notes

Need more? Chapter 3 now posting on tumblr. If you're following, we'll reblog each chapter until complete, and then post on AO3.
They put the chest in their rental car and took it back to the Marriott. Clint felt a little weird hauling it into the elevator; it wasn’t unmanageably heavy, but it was big enough that the easiest way to transport it was for them each to grab one of the handles and carry it between them. Fortunately, all the consultant assholes in the hotel seemed to already be gone for the day; the lobby was basically deserted except for a few idle staff gossiping in the corner and a bellhop playing with his phone.

They hauled it into the middle of the room and stood there looking at it for a minute. It looked more like a movie prop than something a real person would own, aged and battered but sturdy and well-made. If Clint had ever imagined Phil owning some sort of mysterious treasure chest, he would probably have imagined it looking like this.

"If you don't hurry up and open that thing, Clint, I will make you regret it," Nat said.

"What do you think's in there?" Clint pulled out the skeleton key and fiddled with it, running his thumb over the fine lines of circuitry. "Pirate gold?"

“It’s not heavy enough,” she said, practical as always.

“Well, here goes nothing.” He slid the key into the lock and turned it. The chest hummed, and he could hear a series of clicks and whirs as whatever mechanisms secured the lid came undone. Finally, the lid came open, springing up about an inch as some final latch released. Clint took a deep breath and opened the lid.

The first thing he saw, oddly enough, was a cocktail napkin. There was a blood-red lip print in one corner, and scribbled across the body of the napkin in what appeared to be eyeliner pencil were the words “IOU one distraction, anywhere within 50 miles of Strasbourg. 3 hours notice. Marie.”

"Huh,” Clint said.

“There’s another ledger,” Natasha pointed out. Clint handed her the book and started sifting through the chest. It was packed full of papers and small items, and nearly every one had some sort of IOU attached. He pulled another out at random; it was a receipt from a Denny’s in Knoxville, and scribbled on the back were the words “IOU 2 weeks at the beach house. -Fred”.

“Clint,” Natasha said. She sounded funny, and Clint looked over, alarmed. “This is his black book.”

“Like, the names of all the spies he knows?”

Clint swallowed hard. “What kind of favors?”

She ran a finger down the page. “Every kind.” She handed him the ledger.

Clint started to scan the list, but the first entry at the top of the page stopped him cold. “That cannot be real.”

“I think it’s real, Clint. What possible reason would he have to fake something like that?”

“What the fuck could Phil have done that would earn him a private concert by Beyoncé? When the fuck did Phil even meet Beyoncé?”

As they flipped through the ledger Clint found himself increasingly depressed. There were dozens of entries, each weirder than the last-- and none of them familiar to Clint.

Phil had said he’d understand-- had said he alone would understand. But all Clint understood at the moment was that he hadn’t known Phil half as well as he’d thought. For instance, Phil apparently owed Neema in Bangalore two tickets to a Cubs World Series, should such a thing ever actually exist. There was no part of that sentence that failed to confuse Clint.

That couldn’t possibly be the message Phil had wanted him to get-- Clint might on occasion have a sense of self-worth about on par with his sense of preservation, but imagining Phil’s final legacy to him was a metaphorical neener-neener was beyond even him. Of course, it was entirely possible Phil had over-estimated Clint’s ability to read him. He told Natasha as much, and she snorted, dropping down next to him on the bed and pulling the ledger to herself.

“For argument’s sake, say he did,” she said, flipping through. She was holding a scorched piece of blue stationary in her hand, on which was scrawled IOU two cookies and disposal of one body within 25 km of Tegucigalpa--Edna. “He’s dead, Clint. He gave this to you. It’s yours now. You get to do what you want with these, not what you think he would have-- wow this one was seven years ago. I wonder if Edna is still alive? Want to find out?”

“I don’t need a body disposed of, Nat.”

“What about a cookie, though?”

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Edna, as it turned out, lived in New Jersey now. She was a little surprised both to find Clint instead of Pablo (seriously Phil?) at her door, and to find that he was only cashing in on the cookies. Honestly, she seemed a little disappointed by that part.

The cookies were little balls of cornflake with butterscotch coating that went down like crack. The coffee was laced with cheap whiskey-- as a tribute to “that poor damn bastard” as Edna called Phil-- and as it turned out a cookie had been just what Clint needed.

“For argument’s sake, say he did,” she said, pointing at Natasha, who looked smug. “Who the hell cares what Pablo would’ve done? What do you want most to do now?”

Rest, Clint nearly said. Disappear. Not face the hole in his life Phil had left, not face the people he’d killed and city he’d nearly helped destroy. How the hell was two weeks at a beach house or a
private concert by Beyoncé going to help with that?

“I don’t know,” Edna mused, “how many people is ‘private’?”

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“What I can’t figure out,” Tony Stark grumbled a few weeks later as they stood backstage at the Arms Around New York rebuilding benefit concert being held on the ground floor of Stark Tower, “is how the hell you managed to get Beyoncé to agree to this.”

“It’s all in who you know,” Clint said. Natasha merely winked, and ate the cookie Edna handed her.

Chapter End Notes

That's it for Chapter 3! Chapter 4 will post tonight on the tag. It's also short, so it'll post tomorrow night here.
Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

Having redeemed his first IOU, Clint struggles with next steps-- and inspiration knocks him on the head.

Chapter Notes

This chapter, Faeleverte joins Laura in posting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clint knew he had a reputation for being sloppy about organization. He also knew it was undeserved. He also also knew that he’d carefully cultivated that reputation himself, largely to keep people from expecting too much of him when he got distracted. Still and all, he’d learned to keep his gear tidy and his space at least navigable. He’d learned about filing and cross-referencing from the master of finding random connections, though. So, when he put his mind to it, he could plan, clean, and list with the best of them.

Phil’s book and box, the combination of the meticulously neat entries in one and the scattered and crumpled bits of paper, cardboard, matchbooks, and other oddments niggled at him. He’d tried to match each entry in the ledger to one of the scraps from the chest itself, but he kept getting sidetracked before he got more than a few entries in. He also kept getting irritated with his own chickenscratch handwriting when he tried to make notes.

Pen and paper weren’t working out, but he needed to get it done. And soon.

He pondered the problem for several days, going about his usual business on missions for S H I E L D, making charity appearances with the other Avengers (Yes, ma’am, we all lost people we cared about in the battle, but we’re coping and we’re determined to keep moving forward), answering uncomfortable questions about his own involvement in Loki’s attack on the Helicarrier (No, ma’am, I wasn’t at all in control of my actions. Yes, ma’am, I’m certain he’s out of my head now), and eating cookies. It didn’t leave him much time to brood, thank goodness, but he did find a few quiet moments to consider various solutions to the Phil’s Big Box of Weirdness problem.

After one particularly tedious mission– sitting on a rooftop for hours was only fun when you got to shoot something at the end of it– he slunk out of SHIELD HQ in DC with nowhere to go. He wished he still had a Phil around to bounce ideas off, but, lacking that, he wondered if he could get any ideas from Phil’s excessive planning. So, feeling guilty and furtive and hoping those feelings were just leftovers from the mission, he flipped up his collar and aimed his motorcycle toward the credit union where the vault-of-things-that-made-his-chest-hurt resided.
Given the number of government spooks who kept money and secrets with the establishment, Clint didn’t look particularly out of place in his tac pants and t-shirt with the little SHIELD eagle on his left pectoral; at least, no one batted an eye at his dress or his generally dishevelled state. Even the very proper Ms. Engelwood looked slightly more bored and less watchful than she had the first time around. He handed over his credentials and answered the passcode, and he quickly found himself among the stacks of dishes and linens and documents of a life he didn’t know he maybe could have had.

He wandered through the aisles between the shelves for a bit, not really looking for anything in particular. A few items stood out to him as remarkably weird (Seven different food processors though, Phil?), a few hit him as remarkably painful (His and his pillowcases...four sets in varying shades of purple and navy), but nothing seemed even remotely useful. At least not for what he needed. After a good half-hour of nosing about, Clint threw himself down onto the floor, arms looped around his knees, and just stared into the middle distance. Maybe he’d gone there in hopes that Phil, in all his infinite planning, had planned for Clint to need to digitize his IOUs on an absolutely unhackable system. Maybe he’d just gone because the few IOUs he had used managed to make him miss Phil more. Sitting there, not really thinking about much of anything, inspiration struck.

Literally.

A collection of vinyl records he’d stumbled across had gotten Dean Martin stuck in his head (he could only assume that Phil somehow thought that they’d be doing a lot of dancing in their maybe-someday-dream house), and he found himself humming under his breath. He rocked a little to the music, side to side, then forward. Then backward. As he did, his shoulders bumped firmly against the shelf behind him, and a box tipped over the front edge. A hailstorm of two-way radios, walkie-talkies, enormous first-generation cell phones, and a seemingly unending cascade of newer and newer models of mobiles poured down onto Clint’s head and shoulders. When he’d stopped being bombarded (and squawking out manly shrieks of pain. Very manly), he found an old Palm lying on his lap, and that was when he finally realized exactly what he needed to do.

Trust Phil to have squirreled away exactly what Clint needed. He wondered, briefly, if Phil had known that Clint would flop down in that just that spot, get a little too into his own rendition of Sway, and dislodge that particular box. For one wild moment, it felt like a(nother) message from beyond the grave, and then reason reasserted itself: Phil couldn’t have known that Clint would need just that thing. No matter how prescient his planning and backup planning had often seemed, this one had to be on chance.

Clint picked up the mess of aging and ancient communications technology, hurling them back into the box with only slightly excessive force, tucked the Palm into his pocket, whispered a silent thank you to Phil, and let himself back out of the vault.

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The thing about old tech was that it was inconspicuous. Nobody expected anything important to be housed on some old shitty piece of tech, especially not nowadays when everyone and their dog had the latest and greatest at all times. And half the time, would-be hackers either plain didn't know how to work on it or no longer had the right cables to connect.

When he get back to his place, he dug out his old (personal, anonymized) laptop and rummaged in his box of mystery cables until he found one that would work. He connected the PDA to his computer and, after an only moderately infuriating amount of time, got it to sync up.

His suspicions had been correct: the device might be obsolete now, but it had been given a spy
makeover before being put into storage. The battery, memory, processor, and storage space were all well over the manufacturer’s standard. It would be more than sufficient for his needs.

Some digging around in the recesses of the internet - there was a hobby group for everything, these days, even hipsters who wanted to use their parents’ old PDA s ironically - yielded what he needed: a simple database program. Fortunately, Phil had used a consistent format for his ledger, so it was easy enough to set up the form.

Of course, the data entry was another matter. Clint appreciated the ability to lose himself in repetitive work as much as the next formerly-brainwashed archer, but the idea of typing in all of Phil’s records gave him pause. He couldn't just hire the work out, either; the thing with Edna and the body disposal Voucher told him that.

The solution hit him the next time he visited the Tower, watching JARVIS scanning documents into Tony's hologram table thing. By the time he left, he was the proud owner of one of Stark Industries’ new OCR scanner packages. He spent about half an hour training the system to recognize Phil's handwriting and setting the system up to generate the right format, but after that, it was just a matter of running each page of the ledger through the scanner and taking a second look at any sections the system was unable to parse.

By the end of the night, he had Phil’s ledger neatly contained in the Palm Pilot. It was probably for the best, anyway. The chest was a little too distinctive looking to keep out in his apartment, after all, no matter how much Clint might enjoy digging through it.

There was one IOU, though, that the system had been unable to digitize, and it was that one that was, in a way, responsible for everything that happened next.

Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned tomorrow for Chapter 5, currently posting on tumblr.
Chapter Summary

Clint’s bequest from Phil is a chest full of IOUs. He’s digitized them… now he’s going to use them.

“It’s not going to spit on me, is it?” Clint asked, eyeing the alpaca warily.

The man next to him, a tall guy with the sad kind of face you expect on a codfish, shrugged.

“Because they spit sometimes. I read that in National Geographic.”

The alpaca was side-eying him now. It gave him one last glance, sniffed his pockets for any forgotten hay, and wandered off.

Clint and the guy watched it amble.

“Llamas,” said the guy after a while.

“What?” Clint asked, blinking.

“You’re thinking llamas.”

“Oh, well, darn,” Clint said.

“Mmmm,” the guy said, and stuffed both hands in his pockets.

“What I can’t figure,” Clint went on after a while, when it became clear the guy wasn’t about to speak, “is how you and Phil met.”

“Ah,” said the guy, nodding and shoving away a large brown alpaca that was trying to eat his hair, “that’s classified.”

“I bet. Bravo Niner Victor Yankee spank my ass and call me Charlie; that kind of classified?”

“Huh.” The guy laughed a little. “Trust fuckin’ Phil, huh? Not enough he hands off the IOU-- he gets slipshod with the security too. Bastard. The Company had me in a bad spot in Berlin; Phil pulled me out.”

“And you owed him… this?” Clint asked, waving a hand to indicate the herd of alpacas scattered all over the lawn, lipping with great delicacy at the grass.

“Kind of. Sort of. Wasn’t expecting this to result from ‘afternoon with an alpaca herder,’ gotta tell ya.” The guy looked Clint up and down, as if seeing him anew. “Shoulda, from any friend of Phil’s.”

“Ah.” After a silence the guy chuckled, pointing down across the lawn. “Geez, lookit that one go. He must not get much exercise. They used to make ‘em much tougher, back in my day.”

“He’s getting up to speed now,” Clint allowed, meaning that to be all. Instead something in the air, or maybe in the background noise of alpacas munching, of soft creatures milling around him, seemed to open his mouth for him. “By ‘apparently,’ I mean that Phil left all these IOUs. Like this one, right? One was to me, filed in with the rest. No note, no explanation, just two rings with our initials.”

“Presumptuous,” the guy said.

“Yeah, it was that all right,” Clint agreed, thinking back to the moment he’d found them, in a small pocket in the chest’s felt lining. How he’d sat staring at them, unsure if he was physically capable of crying more. “And I think that was-- that was the moment, right? I saw them and I realized… Phil spent all this fucking time saving up promises, making promises… and he died before he could keep ‘em. And I….”

“Ah,” the guy nodded. “I get it.”

“You do?” Clint asked, still not sure he entirely got why seeing the rings Phil apparently thought he owed Clint had taken him this way-- made him so determined to redeem as many of Phil’s godforsaken IOUs as he could before it was too late. Again.

“Yeah. Quit Langley for the alpacas, didn’t I?”

“Yeah,” Clint allowed, “that’s so. How’s the CIA like you now, do you think?”

“Heh,” the guy said, eyeing his alpacas with pride as they ranged all over the grounds in front of the George Bush Center for Intelligence, chased by an increasing number of besuited company men, “they never did get it. The alpaca thing. Phil did. He’d be sorry he missed this.”

“Yeah he would,” Clint sighed. “Yeah he would.”
Chapter Summary

Life is slowly getting back to normal--for certain definitions of normal--when Clint finds out the hard way that if he’s going to redeem Phil’s favors, he needs to pay some back as well.

Chapter Notes

And we're back! This chapter is long, and the next one likely will be too-- which means more days between posting. You can always find the latest at the tumblr tag.

Clint was stretched out on his couch in his boxers eating Cheetos and watching Deadliest Catch when the phone rang. Not his house phone, either, and not his Avengers phone or his SHIELD phone or his personal cell; this was the burner phone he kept for emergencies, the one that only Natasha and Phil had the number to. This was the Oh Shit Phone.

He fumbled the Cheetos, scrambling to get to it; Nat was supposed to be on a training rotation right now, what even was happening? He finally reached the phone, leaving greasy orange fingerprints on the buttons as he answered.

“Yeah,” he said, jamming the phone between his shoulder and his ear, already hustling to the bedroom to get some pants. “Nat, where are you?”

“M--Mr. Coulson?” It was definitely not Nat. It was definitely not anyone Clint knew. The voice was high, and soft, and scared; it sounded like a … like a little girl.

“What the hell?” Clint blurted. “Who is this?”

“Oh,” the caller said. “Um. Sorry. I forgot to say the, the thing. Um. Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope.”

“Is this a prank--wait.” He cut himself off, trying to calm his hammering pulse. He was remembering something he’d seen when he was digitizing the ledger. Not one of the IOUs that people owed to Phil--this was from the other side, the list of things that Phil owed other people. “Um. Hang on.” he pulled out the PDA and looked up the passcode and its countersign. “It’s not the years, it’s the mileage. But kid, forgive me for saying this, but you don’t sound much like a--” he peered at the entry in the PDA-- “Frederico Calabrazzo.”

“H-he’s my dad,” she said. “He told me if I got in trouble, like real trouble, I could call Mr. Coulson and he’d help me, but you’re not him and I don’t know what to do!” She was talking faster, breathing faster, sounding like she was about to cry.
“Hey,” Clint said, trying to make himself sound soothing. Phil had always been really good at soothing; it had used to piss Clint off, sometimes, how Phil could talk him down despite himself, like Phil was some kind of agent whisperer or something. “Hey, kid, it’ll be okay. I’ll help you. What’s your name?”

“Maddie,” she said, sniffling a little. “Maddie Calabrazzo.”

“Hi, Maddie,” he said gently. “My name is Clint, and I’m gonna help you out. But I need you to tell me what’s wrong first, okay? What happened?”

“Someone took my dad!” she wailed, and then burst into tears. “I w-was supposed to be in school,” she said, through her sobs. “But there’s these girls that--they--I didn’t want to go, but my dad said I had to go, so I pretended to get on the bus and then I snuck back ho-home and I was just going to hide at the house, because dad was supposed to be at work!”

“Deep breaths, Maddie, you’re doing fine,” Clint said. “What happened when you went back home?”

“My dad came home,” she said, her voice a little more steady. “I was watching TV and I heard his car pulling in, so I ran upstairs and hid in my room. I thought he forgot something for work, you know? But then he--there were other people with him, and they, they wanted something, but he said he didn’t have it, and they were gonna--they said they’d kill him!”

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“Hi,” Clint said, when a young girl cracked open the door in front of him two hours and a ride in an expropriated quinjet later, “I’m Bess, this is George,” he jerked his head back over his shoulder where Natasha was hovering, “and you must be Nancy.”

“Y… yeah,” she said, looking at them both dubiously. Clint shifted, trying to make the bow on his back look less conspicuous. He was sure Natasha was doing a far better job of appearing to be something other than an Avenger, landed on Maddie’s Chicago doorstep.

“That was the passcode, right?” Clint prompted, shrinking down even further. Maddie nodded, and then clearly pulled herself-- and the blanket she had wrapped around her shoulders-- together. “Good taste in classic literature you’ve got.”

“Please come in,” she said in a very grown up voice.

Once they were inside, she carefully latched the door, turned to them, and asked if they wanted water or something to drink, her hands twisting.

“Why doesn’t Natasha get it,” Clint said, going over to sit on what remained of the couch, which had been slashed up, “and you and I will talk more. I need to know as much detail as I can, so we can find your daddy.”

Maddie’d already given Natasha a lot over the phone, but she repeated it now “just to be sure” for Clint, going over what she knew about her daddy’s work in import/export, his known friends down at the Third Rail bar, and the way he’d been working late nights, lately, leaving her to her own devices and her math homework (which she glanced at guiltily, clearly having forgotten it).

Natasha came in midway through and listened, carefully not wincing as Maddie went on. It sounded to Clint like it had sounded over the phone-- Daddy’d likely been mixed up in smuggling something, gotten greedy, gotten caught. Then again, back in the old days Natasha and Clint had
made something of a habit of breaking these things up. The smuggling usually involved enhanced humans or bioweapons rather than, at best, designer drugs but at heart it was the same.

It almost made Clint feel nostalgic-- except for the bit where there was a high likelihood Freddie’s hours were numbered.

After a while, Maddie ran down, and sat looking at them both, worrying something over.

“Um,” she said, picking at her nail, “no offense but… you… you are the Avengers, right? You’re Hawkeye and the Black Widow. You fight aliens.”

“We are Hawkeye and the Black Widow,” Clint agreed, “and we do a lot of other things as well. Why?”

“Okay but-- I mean I love my dad and I’m glad you’re here to help and all but… we’re not exactly aliens? I mean-- we’re just normal people, and you’re… you’re… you. Aren’t you… busy?” She bit her lip at the end of it, like she was afraid reminding Clint he had better things to do would send him running off.

“Yeah, we’re busy helping you,” Clint said. “Look-- you had my number because Phil owed your Dad a favor. So Phil must’ve thought your Dad was worth worrying about.”

“I liked Mr. Coulson,” she sniffed. “He treated Dad nice, not like Dad’s other friends.”

“Yeah,” Clint said, knowing Natasha was nodding behind him. He’d been right, this was absolutely a trip down memory lane, despite the fact that he’d never met Freddie Calabrazzo or Windy City Exports and its owners the Kuzmich brothers, in his life. “Phil never steered us wrong.”

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They took Maddie--and her math homework, more to give her something else to think about than because Clint was feeling particularly like a responsible adult--and set her up in their hotel room, just in case the people who had Freddie decided to come back for more leverage. They picked up a pizza and a six-pack of pop on the way and left her well secured, with strict instructions that if anyone tried to come in without giving the proper passcodes, she should hit her panic button (connected to 911 in addition to the Avengers emergency number Tony had set up; Clint figured JARVIS was better than any human emergency dispatcher.)

He put a tracker under her collar too, just in case.

“So how do you want to play this?” He asked Nat, as they emerged into the cool night air.

“I have a contact with CPD,” she offered. “I could see if they know anything about the Kuzmiches or Windy City Exports. Odds are they’ve got him at one of their other properties.”

“‘You trust your contact?’ he said. “If the Kuzmiches have someone inside the PD…”

“I trust her,” Natasha said.

“Do it.”

She pulled out one of her phones and dialled.”Francesca? It’s Tasha Romero. I know! It really has!” Clint marvelled, as always, at how good she was at undercover; it had been years since she’d
used that identity--at least, as far as Clint knew--but he recognized the voice at once.

“Listen, Frannie,” Nat continued. “I’ve got kind of a situation going on and I wondered if we could help each other out. Uh-huh. Of course. Of course. Straight to you, I swear. Okay, the business is called Windy City Exp--oh. Oh, I see. No, this tip came from inside the company. One of their auditors. Right. Right. And--yes, that’s it exactly. So if they were okay. On State? Sure, and any others? Fifth. Great. Thanks, Fran. I owe you one. I’ll give you a call as soon as I know. Thanks! Bye.”

“Well?”

“CPD’s in the middle of an investigation,” Natasha said. “The Kuzmiches are crooked- quelle surprise. Mob ties, gang ties, the whole bit. It’s drugs, mostly. Some guns. Good news is, they aren’t too bright; exactly the kind of criminal who would abduct one of their own employees and then interrogate him in a building they own. I have a few likely addresses.”

“Awesome,” Clint said. “Let’s get to it.”

They caught a cab, because they were carrying a few too many weapons to take the El. Clint tried not to clank too loudly when the driver took a sharp turn, and mostly filled the time with pulling up the warehouse blueprints on his (Avengers) phone, which for reasons he preferred not to go too far into, was seemingly always able to find whatever information Clint needed. It was just like the good old days, getting ready to do an old fashioned kidnap extraction. He felt downright nostalgic, honestly.

He missed Phil, though. The familiarity of the situation just served to underline Phil’s absence further, like trying to eat corn on the cob with two missing front teeth.

Two warehouses turned up empty-- well, empty of anyone being interrogated, or signs someone had been interrogated, besides a handful of Kuzmiches and associates that Clint and Natasha left behind them in various states of bondage.

At the third, a big old concrete hangar down by the docks, they hit pay dirt. The warehouse itself was empty and echoing, but a half-eaten bologna sandwich and open pop pointed to someone having been in it very recently. They widened their search to the shipping crates that littered the site like giant legos, scanning for heat signatures until they found a distinctly person-sized lump in one near the back of the site.

Freddie Calabrazzo wasn’t in great shape when they pulled him out; his skin was practically mint green between hunger and nausea and fear.

“Who the hell’re you two?” he asked as Natasha freed him.

“Friends. Maddie sent us,” Clint said, rubbing Freddie’s hands to get feeling back into them. “She saw them take you and called for Coulson. And he--” Clint swallowed hard, “he was unavailable, so we came.”

“Maddie saw?” Freddie cried, his voice cracking, “she was supposed to be in school! What the-- did she skip? Damnit we had this talk-- that girl is grounded for a month when I get home.”

“Uh,” Clint said, “really? You’re the one who got mixed up with the Russian mob. Maybe ground yourself too, while you’re at it.”
“Freddie,” Natasha cut in, “we need to know what they told you. Will they be coming after you again? What did they want?”

“Aw shit,” Freddie sighed, as they got him on his feet, “I don’t even know. They were going on about some papers-- I don’t think it was invoices, but I don’t know-- I bring work home sometimes. Thought I brought it all back. It’s just easier to do spreadsheets when you’re not being interrupted all the time to come help move heavy shit, right? I do it at the kitchen table with Maddie, while she does her homework.”

“Uh, Freddie?” Clint asked, shoving him in the back seat of their cab-- which completely failed to surprise the driver-- “Are you telling me you’re an accountant to the--”

“Um, not really an accountant, just in accounts payable,” Freddie shrugged. “Turns out I had a knack for it. Anyway, they wanted something back real bad. Tried to tell them I didn’t have it, but they wouldn’t listen. Did you guys get Maddie out? Is she safe?”

“Yeah, she’s safe,” Clint said, buckling both of them in since Freddie’s hands weren’t going to work any time soon. “We’ll get you to her.”

About ten minutes later, as they were stuck in traffic, Natasha sat bolt upright.

“Freddie,” she hissed, “your accounts. Your invoices. Did you… scribble on them a lot? Formulas?”

“What? Yeah-- shit didn’t add up half the time, I’d take notes, why?”

“So… in bad lighting or late at night… would you have been able to tell the difference between your work and, oh, say, a seventh-grade pre-algebra worksheet?”

“Shit,” Clint said, and leaned forward to grab the driver. “Step on it.”

--

The driver shot him a disgusted look in the rear-view mirror. “I dunno what kind of movie you think you’re in, bro, but look at this shit! Where’m I gonna go?” He waved an expansive hand out the windshield, where the evening theater traffic was jamming up every possible route.

“Just do the best you can,” Natasha said. She leaned in close and whispered into Clint’s ear. “Text Maddie. Tell her not to let anyone in without the code word. I’m going to make a call.”

He pulled up the phone and sent off the text, cursing when he had to retype it three times (stupid fat thumbs. Stupid autocorrect). By the time he was done, Natasha was hanging up her phone.

“Well?”

“Lt. Vecchio is sending someone to the hotel.”

“Are you nuts?” Freddie demanded. “The Kuzmiches have people inside CPD, you’re gonna lead them right to her!”

“The lieutenant is trustworthy,” Natasha assured him. “And she’s not putting it out over channels. She’s sending people she trusts absolutely. Your daughter is in good hands.”

“She better be,” Freddie muttered miserably. “On your heads be it if she’s not.”

It was, Clint thought, the fourth worst cab ride he’d ever taken. Maybe even the third, depending
on how much you weighted motion-sickness. Every red light seemed to be taunting him personally. Every time he looked over at Freddie’s bruised face, he pictured the same thing happening to Maddie and felt sick. After about fifteen minutes, Nat’s phone chimed with a text. She looked at the message and relaxed.

“Vecchio’s people are at the hotel,” she said. “They’re with Maddie; she’s fine.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it with my own eyes,” Freddie said, but the atmosphere in the cab got decidedly less tense.

When they finally got to the hotel, Clint flung a fifty to the driver as the three of them scrambled out of the car. They rode up to the fifth floor in silence; Freddie was shifting nervously and wincing when he pulled on one of his injuries. Clint and Natasha were poised for action, just in case.

Clint knocked on the door.

“Who’s there?” The voice was male, with a distinct Chicago accent. One of Vecchio’s people, Clint hoped.

“The Hardy Boys,” he replied. “Frank and Joe. We brought you a delivery.”

“Step back,” the voice commanded, and they did. The door opened on the chain, and Clint could see a bright blue eye sizing them up through the crack. He held his hands out to his sides, palms out.

“Okay, come on in, don’t linger,” the man said. He shut the door for a moment to take off the chain, then opened it wide enough for the three of them to enter. “So I guess this must be--”

“Daddy!” There was a clatter from the bathroom, and Maddie threw herself at Freddie like a tiny, pigtailed whirlwind. Freddie let out a groan that was probably, Clint thought, about equal parts relief and bruised kidneys, but he didn’t let that stop him from crumpling to his knees, clutching his daughter tight.

“Well,” Natasha said, amused. “You have been busy.”

Clint looked away from the touching family reunion in front of him (definitely not sniffling), and his jaw dropped when he took in the sight before him. Six burly men were lined up against the wall, gagged, blindfolded, and hogtied with what looked like strips of sheet. A big white-and-silver dog—a husky, Clint thought—was sitting in front of them, ears pricked forward alertly. The dog was wearing a ‘service animal’ vest.

“Isn’t that good? Mr. Ray said I had a natural talent. But he checked the knots anyway when my back was turned.”

“Hey, now--” said the man who’d let them in, “just didn’t want them to get any ideas.”

One of the bound men tried to talk through the gag, and the dog barked a warning.

“Quiet, Trudeau,” said the other occupant of the room, who was—Clint blinked his eyes, and then rubbed them, but the sight did not change—wearing the full dress uniform of the RCMP.

“What?” Clint said.

“Ah,” the… Mountie, apparently? Said. “Good evening, you must be Agent Barton. I’m Chief
Inspector Benton Fraser of the--"

“Mounties,” Ray said, “Ben, don’t do the whole spiel, it don’t need exploring at this juncture.” He
turned to face them fully, watching them with keen eyes. “I’m Ray Kowalski, ex-Chicago PD. This
is my husband Benton Fraser, and we’re not really here, if you get my drift. Doing a favor for old
friends. You too, I take it? Or does SHIELD get involved in CPD business now?”

“Um, not usually. My…” Clint paused. For some reason ‘fiance’ seemed out of place in front of
two guys who apparently had the real deal-- he didn’t want to think about that too closely. “My
friend, Agent Coulson, he owed Freddie here a favor. Maddie called to collect. Since Phil wasn’t…
wasn’t available, we came.”

“Phil Coulson?” Fraser said, “Yes, we had cause to work with him several years ago; a matter of
black-market maple syrup smugglers. I owe him a great debt, as does the Creston Valley Wildlife
Area. How is he? Still in the field, I presume? I’m envious. My work is mostly administrative these
days.”

Luckily, Clint was spared answering by Ray bumping his husband’s shoulder and grinning.

“Yeah, this one’s never happy unless he’s driving someone’s car into the lake or jumping off a
roof. Thought I was gonna lose him more than once-- but it’s worth it.”

Clint was struck with an almost blinding wave of grief. Seeing the two of them, silver-haired and
happy and working together, he couldn’t help but wonder whether he and Phil could have made it
work somehow. If they could have been partners in life as well as in SHIELD. If they had been
together, would things have been different, when Loki stepped through the portal into the Pegasus
facility?

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“You made a Mountie cry,” Natasha said as she and Clint got back in the taxi after extricating
themselves from the rather confusing scene at the hotel. “Granted, they were fine, upstanding,
manly tears, but they were tears.”

“Heh,” Clint sniffled, well aware she was trying to distract him from his own far less upstanding
tears. “Poor guy. I wonder, Nat… if we’d… if we’d been together when Phil… when Loki....”

“Clint,” Natasha said, “you can’t. You said so yourself, you can’t go down this road.”

“Oh, I think we both knew I was full of shit,” Clint told her, and grabbed her hand when she held it
out, trying not to wring it too hard. “I just-- I’m not… I dunno how we’d have done it, but okay, if
we had? And Phil’d still died? D’you think at least I would know the Mountie I was making cry?
Like, would Phil’ve introduced me to his friends and… I just....”

Benton Fraser of the RCMP had clearly remembered Phil far too fondly, and both Freddie and
Maddie had been understandably hurt to hear he’d died, too. It’d been awkward, these strangers
mourning Phil. Clint’d gone looking for antacids, his whole chest burning between the conflicting
satisfaction that Phil was missed and the jealousy that they’d had pieces of him Clint hadn’t
known.

“It’s part and parcel with the safe deposit vault, isn’t it?” Natasha asked, and Clint nodded.

Whole lives Phil had been saving up, just waiting for Clint-- and whole other lives he was off
having while Clint’s back was turned.
“I missed so much of it,” he told Natasha softly, twisting her fingers together with his until they must have ached. “I know a lot of it was classified-- shit, near the end he was gone so much I was starting to think Fury had him running an entire shadow SHIELD or something-- but I wish I’d known. Made my choice, didn’t I?”

“He could have asked again.” Natasha extracted her hand from his and wrung it out, before curving it around the back of his neck and stroking his hair softly. “He could always have asked again.”

“Naw,” Clint sniffled, “he wouldn’t’ve. Bastard told me he’d wait for me to be ready; guess he meant it. Even asking would’ve made him think he was pressuring me. You know that. Fucking Phil. Was bad enough finding out he’d had all these future plans I’d missed out on, but Nat?”

“Yeah?” she asked, giving him the time he needed to draw his voice back down from the high forlorn whine it’d achieved by the end of his sentence.

“I think it’s hurting worse realizing there was a whole past I missed too, back when it, um, when it was, ya’know, the present.”

“Well, you could put the IOUs away,” Natasha said, practically.

“I could,” Clint agreed, mulling it over. It didn’t feel right somehow. But this in and out he was living, wandering off between missions to redeem another IOU then trying to put his head back in the game, was starting to wear him real thin.

The taxi driver let them out at the corner Natasha indicated, near an abandoned plant where the quinjet would pick them up. He collected his extremely large fare-- and tip-- with gratitude. Clint hugged Natasha, gave her her bag, and then opened the cab door again.

“Clint?” Natasha asked, and Clint tried to give her a smile.

“Tell Fury I need some time off, okay? Sick leave or bereavement or whatthefuckever. I’m gonna go redeem some fucking favors. See who else has Phil stories.”

“I can come with--”

“Naw, shit, I’ve pulled you out too many times already. You’re supposed to be watching Rogers soon. I’ll write, okay? Let you know how it’s going?”

“You better,” Natasha said, and hugged him. Clint watched her walk off, then leaned over the seat and told the cabbie

“O’Hare, please. I gotta see a guy in Kansas City about a panda.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's surprise crossover is Due South. There may be others.
Chapter Summary

Clint finds out one of the secrets Phil didn’t intend to bequeath him.

Chapter Notes

Here’s the complete Chapter 7. As always, the ongoing work is on the tumblr tag. Chapter 8 looks to be a multi-part chapter as well, and will post here when finished.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next time Clint’s backup, backup phone rang happened in the middle of the night. Clint’d just rolled in from Kansas City, head still spinning with all his new knowledge of Phil’s past packed between his ears and into his heart. If he’d known how important Phil had considered DNA preservation, Clint could have taken him...taken him somewhere. To see something. An endangered something. Maybe even one with the same kind of mites (and Clint shivered again, thinking of those probable-alien things). Maybe that would have been their let’s-get-back-together date. Or...or something. He’d dropped into his bed, body trembling with exhaustion and his entire chest aching with a strange combination of fullness and emptiness. For once, it hadn’t taken him so long to get to sleep. He tried not to resent the merry little ring that startled him out of a great dream. A really great dream. There’d been pizza. And...company. Naked company. Naked company with really spectacular chest hair.

“What?” The phone rang again, much too close to his ear, so he pulled it away, pushed green to answer and tried again. “WHAT?”

“The celery stalks at midnight.”

“And the va—” Clint cleared his throat and tried again, but it still came out too hoarse. “And vampire bunnies only eat vegetables.” Clint flopped back on his pillows and heaved a sigh. Figured. Someone else needed to cash in one of Phil’s favors, and just when Clint had made it through half a night only dreaming about Phil twice. “Whatcha need?”

“We need nothing.” The answering voice was soft and husky, high for a man or low for a woman. “We do, however, have more news for you, Agent Coulson. It’s taken some time to track down, even for us. But we know it’s information which you seek. We will be arriving in Copenhagen next week. Flight 3639. On Tuesday. We look forward to meeting you. You have been so... helpful in the past, Agent. It will be nice to finally put a face to your name. We will...wear an orchid, we think. Yes. Black and white orchids. You wear a tie with goldfish. See you then, Agent Coulson.”

Clint started to protest the name, but the line went dead in his hand. He fished around for his pants on the floor and pulled out the modified Palm, typing in the few keywords that he’d managed to get from the bizarre statement.
Waarzegster. Assassin and information dealer. Dutch, probably. Debt owed for an offering of personal information on MJ. And for setting up a blind date that was ostensibly a meeting between spymasters. Probably didn’t stay a simple meeting of minds. Further information not wanted.

Clint wondered who the MJ was, discarding Michael Jackson after a few minutes of bewildered contemplation. He ran over the various MJs that he’d known in the spy business, a few that wandered around the fringes of spy agencies, and finally discarded the contemplation. He dropped the Palm back onto the floor, the phone somewhere under the covers on his bed, and turned the lamp back out. Obviously he’d need to hurry up and book a flight. And find someplace that sold fishy ties fast. He didn’t particularly want to take this IOU, since this Waarzegster character was obviously not a person who’d actually known Phil.

Still, Phil thought it was important, so Clint would hold up his end of the deal. And if he didn’t get back to sleep soon, he’d also curse Phil’s ridiculous favor system, Phil for being dead and making it Clint’s problem, and himself for still being so hung up on the guy that he couldn’t just drop it already.

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“Agent Coulson!”

Clint eyed the gangly figure in front of him in frank astonishment. He still couldn’t quite tell if it was a man or a woman. They wore a simple black pantsuit that probably cost more than most SHIELD agents spent on an entire decade of black suits (Phil excepting, of course), a few expensively simple pieces of gold jewelry, and wore a cluster of orchids on their lapel that probably decimated a few dozen endangered species from a nearly inaccessible rainforest. Their scarlet-painted lips curled into a welcoming smile, and only one bright blue eye was visible through a part in their inky blue-black curtain of cheekbone skimming hair.

“Oh we are pleased to see you!” They carefully removed their hand from Clint’s stunned shake and patted his cheek. “So much handsomer than even we had been led to believe! Let us find somewhere for a cup of coffee and we will give you our information. After business is finished, we simply must have a moment to become acquainted.”

They looped their arm through Clint’s and half-pushed, half-pulled him through the airport. Clint opened his mouth a few times to try to explain that he wasn’t Coulson, even if he was wearing a suit and a koi-tiled tie. That Phil had died, and all he’d done was inherited a box full of favors and a vault full of unfulfilled dreams, but Waarzegster kept up a steady stream of mindless smalltalk, rattling on about the weather, the quality of their flight, and how good it was to be back in their adopted homeland. They kept it up all through ordering coffee (Clint wondered how they knew exactly what he’d have ordered on his own, since it was in no way related to what Phil would have ordered).

“Thank you for your patience; as you know we are usually more timely in our information-gathering, but Agent Barton was unusually difficult to find information on after this event.”

Clint froze, cup held against his lips, not a drop going into his mouth.

“He is, in fact, alive.” They took a delicate sip from a coffee cup. “He was temporarily lost in the chaos leading to up to the space invasion and the Battle of New York. Apparently he was recovered through some sort of difficult treatment at the hands of a specialist.”

Well. That wasn’t an in accurate description of Natasha and her ability to kick Clint’s ass.
“And also, according to sources, this Agent Barton is now single.” Waarzegster went on. And on. Giving details about Clint’s recent travels he wasn’t entirely certain how anyone outside of Nat knew. They told him things—minor things— that Clint knew would matter to no one in the world but...but someone who loved him. Really loved him.

Jesus, Phil. You could have just asked me. But Phil never would have asked. He would have felt that it was too much pressure, pushed too far into a presumed intimacy. Besides, Phil had been a spy, and spies spied.

The longer Waarzegster talked, the more Clint could feel something bubbling up inside, and he still couldn’t tell if it would come out as laughter or tears.

“We have been informed that he recently took a trip to Washington, DC, where he visited a credit union, but we have as yet been unable to ascertain precisely what he was doing there, as we are certain he has not ever been there bef–”

“I’m not Phil.” Clint interrupted, needing to derail that train of thought before it pulled away from the station. “I’m Clint. Barton. Because Phil’s dead.”

There was a long, stunned silence from across the tiny cafe table, and Clint looked up to see that Waarzegster had pushed all of their hair off of their narrow, beautifully made-up face to stare at him with a pair of sharp eyes and their mouth hanging open in a tiny O of shock. They closed their mouth and cleared their throat with effort.

“Oh. Well this is awkward, Agent Barton.”

***

“Please don’t worry about it,” Clint found himself saying, nonsensically.

Waarzegster huffed a hidden little laugh, more with Clint than at him, and then took a long moment to look him up and down.

“Ah yes, now that we look closely,” they said, staring straight at Clint’s arms, still suit-clad, “we do see the finer points we might have… missed. How embarrassing for someone in our profession.”

“You don’t seem to have missed much else,” Clint told them, placing his cup carefully down on the table then folding his hands. He wasn’t trying to intimidate, exactly-- he hadn’t lasted this long in the spy business without knowing when that would get him a knife in the kidney-- but it did help him feel less like his ends were all hanging out.

“Well,” Waarzegster demurred, “that would be why Agent Coulson requested these little morsels from us.”

“What’d he request?” Clint asked, “I mean-- how often? Just after something big, or just when he was away or what?”

“Agent Barton, you do understand we sell information, correct? We do not give it without exchange.”

“And I just told you Phil Coulson, one of your standing customers, one you-- if I’ve got his notes right-- owed a debt to, is dead. More than that, I just gave you Agent Barton’s face to put with your dossier. That’s not enough exchange for you?”
“It is, at that,” Waarzegster said at last, and folded their hands over their own coffee, playing with it as they spoke. “Very well-- part of our, ah, debt to Agent Coulson was to provide information on yourself, either at specified intervals or after any large-scale catastrophic event in which SHIELD participated. It began… how long ago, now? Ah-- in the spring of 2010. Firstly, we were always to ascertain your continued well-being. Second any other tidbits we were able to discover.”

“Oh,” Clint said, trying to sort through all of it. It made sense in its own weird way. Phil had been gone so much the last few years between Avengers business and whatever project it had been that had made him look so gray when he was around. And Audrey of course. He’d been gone to her, too-- and gathering information on Clint, all the while. Saving it up, probably, so he could figure out what color towels to get for their condo-to-be.

In its own twisted way, Phil must’ve been trying to reknit his fraying connections to Strike Team Delta, or at least to Clint. It was so stupidly Coulson that half of Clint’s retroactive anger fizzled out. He buried his face in his hands and just breathed through his fingers for a moment, trying to force back the sudden wave of lonesomeness.

“For what it’s worth,” Waarzegster continued in a gentle tone, “he also asked us to keep any personal items to ourself, and as far as possible tell him our sources so that he could, ah, stifle them. As he put it.”

“Oh course he did,” Clint said, on a muffled sob. “Of course he did. ‘S Phil all over.”

“Agent Barton, in the… in the interests of a fair exchange,” Waarzegster said, carefully eliding which exchange and with whom, “would you… oblige us with a few, just a very few answers about Agent Coulson? We truly are devastated to be too late to meet him in person.”

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Clint shrugged. “Sure, I guess,” he said, trying to clear his throat. “I mean, it’s not like it can hurt him. And it sounds like you’ve been holding up your end of the bargain.”

“We appreciate that.” Waarzegster pulled a tiny phone, sleek and wafer-thin, from a hidden pocket and flicked the screen. “Are you aware of the circumstances under which Agent Coulson acquired the nickname ‘Cheese’?”

Clint blinked. “Um, I think it’s because he was from Wisconsin? But, um, the only person who ever called him that was Director Fury. I saw Agent Blake try it one time and Phil… I didn’t hear what he said to him, but he turned green and hightailed it out of there. Never tried it again.”

“Fascinating.” A long, slim finger flicked over the phone screen. “Does--pardon us, did--Agent Coulson have any pets?”

Clint flinched at the past tense, but managed to hold it together. “No. He said he was gone too much.”

“Hmm.” Flick, flick, flick. “We know that Agent Coulson obtained a master’s degree in US History, but the topic of his thesis is classified. Do you know what it was?”

“I don’t think I should tell you the exact topic,” Clint said. He’d never understood why it was classified, but he wasn’t the one making those calls. “I think it’s okay to let you know that it was about Peggy Carter.”

“Ah. Yes, of course.” Waarzegster took a delicate sip of their coffee. “Thank you, Agent Barton, this has been very helpful. Just one more question, if you would.”
“Shoot.”

“Why us?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“You obviously knew Agent Coulson well. He thought highly enough of you to leave you his favors—the dearest possession of anyone in our line of work. And you obviously thought highly enough of him to be using them now. So why did Agent Coulson come to us to learn, at great difficulty and considerable expense, things about you that would surely have been easier to learn from you directly?”

Clint realized he’d clenched his hands into fists only when a splash of scalding coffee on the back of his hand penetrated the haze of anger he’d fallen into at the question. He shook it off, groping for a napkin and scrubbing at the reddened skin, avoiding Waarzegster’s piercing eyes.

“That’s none of your business,” he snarled.

Waarzegster hummed, a low, considering sort of noise. “Our apologies, Agent Barton. We had… misconstrued the nature of your relationship with Agent Coulson.”

Clint laughed, bitter and burning. “There’s a lot of that going around these days.” He buried his face in his hands, uncaring what the information broker across the table might make of it; if someone out there was willing to pay to learn that Clint Barton was a mess, they could have the knowledge and good riddance. It wasn’t as though it was any big secret.

He kept remembering the last year, the way he’d seen Phil so infrequently, the way he’d seem to be stretched thinner and thinner each time. As bizarre and terrifying as the incident with Thor in New Mexico had been, it had actually seemed almost restful to Phil; he and Clint had left the connecting doors open in their hotel rooms, had eaten late-night vending machine snacks and talked, speculated about the hammer and what it might mean. It had been almost like old times. And yet, all that time, Phil had wanted to know more about Clint—wanted so much that he was willing to trade favors with an informant—but hadn’t felt like he could just ask.

If only Clint had looked past the easy camaraderie and seen the loneliness that must have lain behind it. If only he’d been confident enough in himself—in Phil—to believe that they could find a way to love each other and still do their jobs.

No. Face it, Barton. They’d never stopped loving each other, and the world had still gotten saved, over and over again. Phil had known it. Phil must have known it; what else was he hoarding up the trappings of their life together for? It was Clint who hadn’t let himself see what was staring him in the face.

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't noticed yet, this is a work of sheer indulgence on our part, which includes more than one crossover... including crossovers with ourselves. Waarzegster would like you to know they can be found in several phine Phlint phics.
The Check-In

Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

Clint and Director Fury discuss recent events.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 9, a Faeleverte solo, will be up soon on tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Date: December 5, 2012
Classification: Level 7
Classified by: Maria Hill, Deputy Director
To: Nicholas Fury, Director
Re: Activities of Barton, Clinton F. October-November 2012


October 12-14: Kansas City, MO Seeing a man about a panda. Traced to Kansas City Zoo. Only red pandas on premises. No further details. Follow-up not recommended.

October 14-16: Amsterdam. Schipol. Met informant. Further information eyes-only.


October 25-30: Gaborone, Botswana. Tlokweng Speedy Motors. Brought proprietor Opel Kadett for repairs. Appears to have been social visit; spent considerable time with family.


“All right, I get it,” Clint sighed, putting down the memo. He leaned back in his chair carefully, relieved to find it wasn’t one of the ones with the tricky bearings. “You’ve been watching me.”

“Not as much as you’d think,” Director Fury sighed, leaning forward. “Didn’t need to really-- or
“How much did you know about the chest? About what Phil left me?” Clint asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Not as much as you’d think, again,” Fury said. “I mean I knew the man had favors owed-- we’ve all been around long enough-- but didn’t think the extent was--” he swept his hand over the report on his desk. “Even so, I didn’t panic until I got a call from a certain information broker, demanding to know why I hadn’t told them about Agent Coulson’s death.”

“Should you have?”

Fury grimaced and turned to look out his window.

“Yeah, probably.”

Clint felt his eyebrows raise; Waarzegster hadn’t been that close to Phil-- they’d admitted it themselves. How had they gotten that close to Fury?

“Why didn’t you?” he asked, though he doubted he’d get an answer.

“Would’ve made it too real, I think,” Fury said. Clint nearly choked on his own tongue. From the look on Fury’s face, he’d shocked himself as much as Clint. But then he sighed, and rubbed his good eye. “You think you’re the only one who’s made some questionable choices about coping with this? News for you, Barton: there’s a lot of us in this boat.”

“Or in your case, convertible,” Clint said, desperate to lighten things up a little. “I think the boat’s mine.”

“Of course there was a boat,” Fury sighed. “Yeah, exactly. I didn’t want the damn convertible any more than you wanted the damn boat. I’ve been letting you have your space hoping it’d help. Figured it was what Phil’d want. Would’ve wanted. Has it?”

“Helped?” Clint closed his eyes. “Not… especially. At the moment, in fact, I think it made it worse. But. Got only myself to blame, right?”

“No,” Fury said, sounding shocked. “Not at all. You aren’t responsible for anything Loki did.”


“What’s weird?”

“This thing, this Phil IOU thing, maybe it’s making me miss him worse-- but it’s sure taking my mind off Loki.”

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“Well. That’s something, I suppose.” Fury cleared his throat. “All that aside, I would appreciate it if you could fill in a little more detail about your encounter with Waarzegster. I was unaware that Phil was actively using their services.”

“It wasn’t anything relevant to SHIELD,” Clint said. “It was… personal stuff.”

“Lots of personal stuff is relevant to operational security, Barton, I shouldn’t have to remind you of this,” Fury said. “That’s how intelligence gathering works.”
Clint felt all his muscles tighten, suddenly angry—at Fury for pushing, at Waarzegster for bringing it all up, at Phil for taking Clint at his stupid word, at himself. At himself. At himself, for killing the best thing that ever happened to him before it even got started.

“Sorry, sir,” he bit out, “but I fail to see how even an intelligence master could get much of use from knowing that I fucked up my relationship so badly my ex felt like he had to hire an information broker to find out after every op if I was still alive.”

Fury stared at him.

“Also I told Waarzegster that Phil’s thesis was about Peggy Carter. Sir. I’m sorry if that’s somehow a threat to global security.” He knew he didn’t really sound sorry, but he didn’t really care.

“I… see,” Fury said at last. He sighed, shoulders sagging; he looked exhausted. “I’m sorry, Barton,” he said. “I hadn’t realized you still—” he broke off. “I hadn’t realized.”

“If it makes any difference,” Clint said, all the fight draining out of him and leaving heavy sadness behind, “neither had I.”

“Shit,” Fury said.

“Yeah,” Clint said.

They were both silent for a while.

“I was planning to ask you to go back on reserve duty,” Fury said, “but I think perhaps it might be better if you stayed on leave for a while.”

“Probably,” Clint agreed. “I’m not—I’d bench me, if I were you.”

“Do what you have to,” Fury told him. “Go through Phil’s shit or don’t, use it or don’t. Nobody’s place to judge but yours. All I ask is that you don’t go completely off grid. If I call you in, or Hill, or Romanoff? You answer. Otherwise?” He made an expansive gesture. “Up to you.”

Clint nodded. “I will,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Hell, maybe I should drive the car,” Fury said.

“Maybe you should, sir,” Clint told him. “Maybe you should.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is "spot the blink-and-you-miss-em" crossovers.
My dearest, treasured, deeply loved Clint,

I’m dead now, so I can write that again. There are so many words I could write, and it pains me that writing to you in case of my death is my only opportunity to say any of them to you.

Phil’s hand shook, and the writing on the page bobbled and became lines connecting angles connecting...showing the...or maybe it meant…

“Agent Coulson?”

Phil looked up to see the orderly who usually brought his dinner looking at him with something like fear.

“I’m sorry.” He straightened up and tried to fix his bland, Perfect Agent smile in place, but it slipped and trembled around the edges. “I’m fine. It’s not time to eat again, is it?”

“No, sir.” The young woman shifted on her feet and crossed her arms over her chest. “You just...you have a visitor. Uh, Direct--”

Fury pushed his way into the room and stalked over to the chair opposite Phil at the tiny table.

“They say it’s coming back again.”

Just like Fury, to not beat around the bush.

“Yes, Sir.” Phil looked down at the letter he’d been trying to write, flipping it over to hide the shame of all the bizarre alien symbols he’d finished the scrawl with. “I think we’re...they’re...you’re...I think more has to go. I need to remember less. I do wish you’d just let me go, though. Although...maybe after I finish this letter.”

He glanced down to find that his hand had continued scribbling away, and he dropped the pen and twisted his fingers together in his lap.

“I’m not entirely certain I can,” he admitted, feeling very small and very tired. “I just wish I could
“You’re dead, Phil.” Fury said it as gently as he could, but gentle sat oddly on him at the best of times. In that setting, in the sterile white room with the thickly padded walls and the hidden-but-not-forgotten observation window, gentle only made the harshness of the statement stand out worse. “He’s already read your letter. You knew that before—”

He cut off, before the last time unsaid but echoing in Phil’s mind.

“How is...how is he doing?” Phil tried to control the quaver in his voice, but the padding on the walls muffled all echoes, making his voice thinner than ever. “With me...Since I’m...Since he doesn’t know.”

“How do you think he’s doing, Phil?” Fury took a deep breath, visibly pulling himself back under control. “I had no idea your damned IOU system had gotten so...so...” His face scrunched around his eyepatch as he tried to come up with a word that fit. “Batshit insane.”

Phil just shrugged and reached for the pen. If he gave in to the urge to scratch down the weird symbols that burned behind his eyes, he should have a few more minutes of concentration left.

“I did what I needed to do,” he offered mildly, carefully making a straight line between a circle and a square. “You never complained when it was working for you.”

“Well right now, it’s become a fool’s errand for one of our best and brightest.” Fury sighed and rubbed one hand over his scalp. “But maybe it’ll help him get his head back in the game.” He paused again. “And why did you never tell me you had a certain Dutch assassin with a temper problem and too much leg working for you?”

“Double circle, line; triangle line line; corner...”

“You never asked.” Phil ran out of paper and started on the top of the table, so he dropped the pen again. Paper doodling might be okay, but table writing ran high on the list of Problematic Symptoms To Watch For. “And it had nothing to do with you, okay? He...he cut me out so far. Or maybe I cut me out that far. I don’t know, but I do know that I needed it. Needed to know he was okay. Took too long for the official reports to come in.”

“Explains why they asked me about Delta every time we talked. I just figured it was rumor mill stuff.” Fury shook his head again. “Maybe I should have told them you died, too. I never did, though because I always assumed you’d just...be alive again.”

“Not so much, no,” Phil answered, suddenly incredibly tired of trying not to write. “This isn’t much of a life, Nick.”

“It’ll get better.” Fury said the words quietly, but the gravel in his voice told how desperately he was willing them to be true. “We’ll get it worked out.”

“I’m already writing again.” Phil gestured at the papers and the tabletop between them. “And I can feel it...the rest of it...I can feel it creeping up on me.”

“They’re going to repeat the procedure.”

The flat statement sent Phil’s heart rate into overdrive. He couldn’t ...he wouldn't ...it was too... He had to talk Fury out of it and fast.

“If it’s ever going to work, you’re going to have to take more. Maybe too much. Enough that I
don’t remember...anything about it.” Phil looked down to find he was clawing at the pants of his scrubs, fingernails gouging as hard as he could, trying to draw the lines and shapes that curled tantalizingly through his brain like a melody just on the edge of hearing. “But I wish...I’d rather...You see, if I’m dead already, if he’s mourning already, why do we have to keep going? I wish you would just end it, once and for all.”

“I can’t do that, Phil.” Fury’s face had gone wan and drawn around his eyepatch, and Phil wondered when he’d started looking so old. “Something big is on the horizon. Something dark. I need every agent, every person I can count on by my side. If I could make it less…”

He shook his head and stood up, coat sweeping around his booted feet as he did.

“You’re my best agent, Coulson. If I could spare you all of this, I....” He heaved a sigh as he turned to go, shoulders slumping. “If I could take it all back, go back and make this easier on you– on Barton – I would do it. But even we haven’t figured out that time machine yet.”

“I’m sorry, Phil.” He walked to the door, but stopped short, not turning around. “I’ll stay until it’s done this time.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will begin on tumblr on Tuesday. We’ll post here when it's complete.
Chapter Summary

Clint gets his taxes done and eats the perfect hand fruit.

Chapter Notes

We did warn you about the increasingly obscure crossovers.

“Okay, this looks bad,” Clint sighed, and put his chin in his hands.

“Yeah it… it looks real bad,” the man sitting across from him said. “The aliases alone will take me an extra week. Is this everything?”

“Um, no, there’s another box in the trunk,” Clint said, eyeing the guy dubiously and starting to wonder if this was the right time to call in this IOU after all.

“What’s in that?” the guy asked, looking resigned to his fate.

“Receipts.”

“He itemized deduct-- of course. Of course he itemized deductions. Probably for every alias. Okay. How about you?”

Without waiting for the probably-obvious answer, the guy slipped off his stool and headed for the door. Clint followed, skirting the couch and pretending he wasn’t creeped out by the mostly-bare walls of the mansion. At least the man was starting to sound more like the kind of person Clint needed.

The last few months hadn't brought Clint a lot of perspective, but they had kept him busy. He'd done everything from negotiating a hostage situation in Beijing to standing in line for two days to pick up tickets to Soundcheck, and every story about Phil had gotten filed away like the receipts Phil had saved religiously-- and Clint usually didn't.

It wasn't until he checked in with Fury in February that it occurred to Clint that there were other entities he owed because of Phil's death. Entities like the Internal Revenue Service. Clint had always had SHIELD - affiliated accountants help with his taxes, but it felt way too personal to trust all of Phil's carefully kept aliases to them.

And so Clint had gone to California to call in a favor from an ex-con named Ted.

“Give me the receipts; I’d better get started,” Ted was saying as he put his hand on the doorknob. “Jeez, the estate tax alone-- oh, hey, Charlie.”
The door had opened to reveal a tall redhead in a suit, whose hand was still outstretched, key at the ready.

“Ted,” Charlie said, peering around his friend at Clint, who waved awkwardly, “there’s an Avenger in our house. Did we know we were going to have an Avenger in our house, Ted?”

This Avenger thing kept happening since New York; Clint hated it. He'd briefly grown a beard, but the only person it had fooled was himself.

“It’s okay Charlie,” Ted said, “he just needs his taxes done.”

“Why are you doing his taxes?”

“I uh… I owed a guy a favor.”

Clint half tuned out. This part of the conversation had turned rote after the first few times.

“Not this guy?”

“No, not this guy. Another guy. You knew the guy.”

“I knew the guy?” Charlie asked and Ted nodded, sober.

“Phil Coulson, Charlie.”

“Oh! Phil! Is he here too?” Charlie’s voice perked up so much that Clint tuned back in against his own will. Repetition hadn't made the next part hurt any less.

“He’s… he’s dead, Charlie.”

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Somehow, getting his taxes done had turned into staying over in one of Charlie’s rather large, rather empty, guest rooms. Phil was owed far more than the tax help of an ex-white collar criminal, at least in Ted and Charlie’s estimation. By extension, so was Clint.

Charlie, as it turned out, was currently a cop, but he and Ted had become close when they were both in jail. Charlie had been framed for murder, a charge he'd only been cleared from twelve years later. Ted had gotten out before that, friendless, homeless, and lost-- and Phil had found him.

The way Charlie figured it, he’d said, if it hadn’t been for Phil, there might not have been a Ted when he got out of jail-- and no Ted, no life. Existence, sure. But that wasn't the same.

The sentiment hit closer to home that Clint would have liked, and he said so.

For some reason, Charlie responded to that by inviting Clint to tour one of his settlement-money orange groves while Ted organized all of Phil’s paperwork.

“California navel orange is supposed to be the perfect hand fruit,” Charlie mused as they wandered between the rows, the mild winter sun making him squint. “Thick skin to peel easily. No seeds.”

“I dunno, I’d go with banana, or maybe apple,” Clint replied, his mouth full of orange. Over the course of the previous evening he’d had time to get used to Charlie’s fruit fixation. “Apple has less clean-up.”

“Best fruit is the one in my hand,” Charlie said, nodding. “I try not to get attached to any one fruit.
Harder than it used to be, not getting attached. Things creep up on you. I liked Phil. He seemed like he was in the now. Then, I mean. Obviously he's not in the now, now. Is it still hard? That he’s not in the moment with you now?’

“What?” Clint asked, stopping short literally as well as mentally. “I-- Yes. Yeah, it’s still hard.”

Ted had warned Clint that Charlie had gone kind of zen in prison. It still took some getting used to-- SHIELD didn’t do zen well. Except maybe the Phil kind of zen and Phil was not half so zen as he pretended. Phil liked you to think he was above it all, that was the point of the inscrutable smiles, but underneath…

“I’m sorry,” Charlie said.

Clint took a breath, expecting it to shudder, and was surprised to find it soft and smelling of citrus and loam.

“He was actually really bad at it. Being in the now, now.” Clint could feel his lips turning up at the corners.

Bad at it. Bad was a safe deposit vault full of a dozen-dozen unlived lives and chests stuffed full of things he could not let go of. Like Clint.

“I could tell from the state of his taxes.” Charlie finished tearing his peel into confetti and sprinkled it beneath the trees. “Or Ted’s reaction to the state of his taxes. He hid it well. Phil.”

“Yeah he did.”

Charlie shrugged and smiled, just a tiny crooked tilt of his lips. “You wouldn’t know it to look at him, but Ted’s pretty good at being in the now. Makes it complicated sometimes, when he doesn’t know that his moment is the wrong moment. Or that the moment he’s in isn’t with the right person. Maybe it’s the right person and the wrong moment. Mm, either way, moments keep happening, and you can’t go back to one you left.”

No. Clint couldn’t go back to the moment he left in Budapest. To the moments he left each time he pulled further away from Phil. To any of the moments before the moment where Phil was no longer in the world. No going back, but standing here in the quiet space between the rows of orange trees, Clint felt for the first time like maybe he could keep going. Like he could move forward from the moment where he’d finally realized, too late, how much he had loved Phil.

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“So all you have to do is sign this form, and that one, and then fill in the relevant information on the last page.” Ted pointed to the highlighted lines for Clint to scribble his name on, and the few lines of information needed at the back. He shifted and shuffled in the background while Clint wrote as neatly as his hurried scrawl would let him, clearly trying to work up the nerve to say something and unsure how to start.

“What.” Clint didn’t mean it as a question, and clearly Ted didn’t take it as one.

“Charlie told me. That you and Phil...that before he…” He rubbed the palm of one hand against his thigh, scratching it on the denim. “I just...I know something about making the wrong choice. In, well, you know. In emotional things. Love.”

Thinking of the way Ted and Charlie sounded alike, moved alike, and even smiled alike, Clint failed to see how that could be true. The level of comfort and trust between them as they moved...
around one another, played off of one another, it was…. To be honest, it was like Clint and Phil had been during the short time they were together and even later, during the glory days of Strike Team Delta.

“I left Charlie. Before we were together, I mean.” Ted gathered up the stacks of paper slowly, tapping the edges on the table to get them all even. “Well, we lived together-- I mean I lived over the garage but-- never mind.” He huffed a rueful snort of not-quite-laughter and licked his lips. “There was a woman. A really beautiful-- honestly, the details don’t matter. She was wonderful. I thought she was my future. I told Charlie I loved her-- and I left him.”

That was followed by a long silence where Clint watched Ted watch him, trying to figure out what Ted’s eyes were saying. Phil’d always been better at Clint both at reading people and at waiting patiently for them to speak.

“So what happened?”

“I got lucky.” Ted smiled at Clint again, more than a little sad. “But I didn’t know that when I first figured out how wrong I’d been. Didn’t know that I would be lucky, I mean. So.” He shrugs. “I’m sorry. I hope you get lucky again in the future.”

They looked at each other for a longer silence, and then Clint started laughing, Really laughing. For the first time in...almost longer than he could remember.

“Yeah, I’d like it if I got lucky at some point in the future, too,” he told Ted.

After a stunned second where the pun sank in, Ted started to laugh, and Charlie– coming in some five minutes later– laughed too, without even knowing why.

Maybe Phil’s monetary taxes hadn’t been the only account that he’d expected Ted and Charlie to balance. Who could tell though; Phil’d always lived a moment ahead of everyone else, anyway. The least Clint could do was pull himself from past into present. There was enough of Phil, still lingering in the places where he'd made friends, to make it worthwhile.
The Socialite

Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

One of Phil's contacts calls in a favor: she needs a guy who can wear a tux, dance a waltz, and hold his own in a fight. That's Clint to a T.

Chapter Notes

We're back! This chapter really got away from us, length-wise! Really, the only surprise here is that it took 11 chapters before it happened. Thank you for the wait, have an extra-long, extra-Hawkeye-riffic chapter.

We don't think future chapters will get this big.

Probably.

Why are you laughing?

It was a little surprising, how soon Phil’s legacy became Clint’s new normal. He went back on duty, eventually, though Fury had taken him and Nat off the standard roster. They mostly got pulled in for high priority stuff and spent the rest of the time training, helping other people train, and working on “team cohesion,” aka showing up to Stark Tower every so often to eat either stupid fancy rich-guy food or proper greasy New York pizzas with Tony and whoever else he’s managed to get to come over. It was usually just him and Pepper, who kind of terrified Clint and kind of turned him on and kind of made him sad, because the way she looked at Tony reminded him of the way Phil used to look at him, like the things about him that annoyed most people were the things that made her love him.

In between, he ran the IOUs.

Sometimes he’d just flip through at random until he found something that looked interesting, which was how he got to free-climb the Eiffel Tower and meet a super awesome octopus who did math by pointing to cards held up against the side of his aquarium. Other times, he’d just read through the PDA, familiarizing himself with codes and favors, enjoying Phil’s snarky little private notes. Every one of them was a gem, succinct and crisp, sometimes sarcastic and sometimes nerdy, and always so Phil that it made his chest ache with mingled love and grief. In a weird way, he felt closer to Phil than he had when he’d been alive; he knew Phil’s secrets, now, kept meeting contacts and acquaintances and old friends and enemies and lovers.

He had Phil’s vault, supplies for a dozen possible futures together, all crammed into one space like
some kind of demented hope chest.

He hoped that somewhere, in an alternate universe like Tony liked to talk about sometimes, some version of himself—bolder or more confident or merely more reckless—had done what Clint hadn’t, and even now was sleeping on those sheets, cooking with those dishes, riding around in that RV, with Phil.

Anyway, he was just embarking on a week of mandatory post-mission downtime, during which he was hoping to clean a couple shows off his DVR, when what he’d started thinking of as the Phil Phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet, eating her curds and whey.” The voice was impatient, young, female, and from the sound of it, local.

Clint pulled the right code phrase out of the Palm. “Which is disgusting. She should’ve tried poutine.”

There was a pause. “You don’t sound like the person I was expecting to talk to.”

Clint sighed. He hated this part. “I’m not. I’m his… delegate.”

“Hm. Well, okay, I’ll go for it. I need a man who looks good in a tux, will dance with me without stepping on my feet, and can handle himself in a fight. That you?”

“Could be.”

“Are you available to be in New York Saturday night, plus a couple hours tomorrow for planning?”

“I can do that,” Clint said.

“Great. I’ll text you an address, meet me there tomorrow at three. Oh! How old are you?”

Clint blinked at the phone. “Uh… forty-two?”

“Excellent,” she said, and the relish in her voice made Clint a little worried. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Wear purple. I’ll call you Twinkletoes.” She hung up, and Clint listened to the dial tone for a minute, stunned.

He looked up her entry in Phil’s ledger.

*Cathy Knight (prob. pseud.)* Rescued from mugging. Turned out, was sting operation intended to entrap mugger. Don’t approve vigilantism, esp. In the young, but she’s got fire. Could go far. reminds me of C Gave card for recruitment if interested, favor owed for non-consensual rescue.

Well. This should be interesting.

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“Twinkletoes!” said a girl with dark hair and a plum beret, as Clint stepped through the door to the Starbucks on 87th. A half dozen people turned to look at him. “Yeah, let’s not use that one again,” Clint told her, holding out his hand, “I’m Clint. You’re listed as Cathy Knight, but I’m guessing you’re not. Right?”
“Mmm,” Cathy sipped her coffee thoughtfully, looking him up and down, before she finally took the proffered hand and shook it. And then didn’t stop shaking it for a long moment, frowning. Clint could feel her hands shifting over his fingers. “Um,” she said finally, and looked back up, “you’re Hawkeye, aren’t you? I mean, the face is familiarish, but your hands--”

Her voice had gone abruptly young.

“I am,” Clint said.

“Wow-- that’s… okay?” She clutched her coffee hard, suddenly, like she wasn’t sure if she should bolt or not. “I thought you’d be more of a spy. Well, no, I thought whoever Agent Coulson had meet me instead of him would be more like a spy. Like him, you know? But you’re-- I mean, you’re not even really trying to keep it low key, are you? I mean, really, with the arms, and the hands--”

“Most people don’t recognize me by the hands,” Clint interrupted, and got a snort for his trouble.

“No, I know, I bet it’s the ass. It is the ass, isn’t it? You know, a longer coat would--”

“Kate.” He hadn’t been planning to pull that out so soon, but needs must.

The girl stopped short mid-babble and blinked at him. Clint gave her an apologetic smile.

“I really am a spy, though,” he explained. “Or at least I work with them. D’you want to sit down while I get coffee?”

“Yeah…” Kate Bishop said, “and then I want to get out of here. I hate Starbucks.”

Clint spent the time in line running over the high-level dossier SHIELD had sent over after he’d taken her picture through the store window. Father, Derek Bishop, big in real estate, apparently. Stepmother, Heather, who had attended high school only a few years ahead of Kate. One older sister, married to a tech millionaire and living in California. No job, no college, no priors, no real hobbies-- except archery. And shopping. And probably, if her reflection in the pastry case glass was an indication, checking out his ass.

And she was the one who’d gone all vigilante in Central Park? Who Phil’d wanted to recruit? Who’d reminded him of grew-up-in-an-actual-circus Clint? Well-- Phil had a keen eye for talent. Time to find out what he’d seen.

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Two hours later, Clint checked his watch and cursed.

“Gotta get home-- movie night with a friend,” he said, “one I don’t need questioning a change in my routine.”

“Do your friends often question changes in your routine?” Kate asked, leaning further forward over the rail of the promenade to brush the remains of her scone off her purple gloves and into the East River.

“Sure,” Clint said, “it’s how we’ve stayed alive all this time. Hell, Phil used to have someone give him intelligence briefings on me. And if he hadn’t asked Nat why she’d stopped painting her toenails-- eh,” he cut himself off, aware he’d babbled on too long already. And that Phil’s routine had changed permanently sometime back.
Thing was, Kate Bishop was surprisingly easy to babble at, despite being young enough to be his daughter, spoiled rotten and determined to use him to piss off her father at a “deadly” party. She had this way of--

“See, that’s why the Starbucks,” Kate said, interrupting his musing, “there are 212 in Manhattan alone, you know? And they all look kinda the same. So, if Dad ever gets on my wall and sees a picture. You see?”

Clint saw.

Clint grinned.

And then Clint realized that a young woman who had a habit of concealing her movements so ingrained it meant she was drinking coffee she hated on a daily basis was probably not a young woman who was calling in a favor from a spy just to piss her daddy off. No matter how plausible her thirty-minute explanation was.

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When he got ready for the party, he treated it like an op, choosing his Stark-provided bulletproof undershirt and the tuxedo that was specially tailored to conceal weaponry and permit the greatest possible range of motion. He was fairly sure there’d be metal detectors at some point—so he limited himself to an assortment of ceramic knives, a sheet of sticky bugs tuned to his phone, and a chunky signet ring that would inject knockout drugs when properly triggered. He figured this would be enough for whatever shenanigans Kate Bishop thought she needed a spy for at a society gala.

He met her at the pre-arranged time, at yet another Starbucks. She was looking very pretty in a long purple dress, and Clint wondered whether it was her fashion sense that had made Phil think of him. She was scowling down into the tiniest possible cup of coffee, though she looked obviously relieved when she looked up and caught Clint’s eye.

“ Took you long enough, Twinkletoes,” she said, which was completely unfair, because Clint was five minutes early.

“This kind of quality can’t be rushed,” Clint told her, waving a hand over his ensemble with a cocky smirk. She whapped him on the bicep with her (unusually heavy) little sparkly silver purse, but she laughed while she did it, so he called it a win.

They took a cab to the gala. The cabbie spent the ride giving Clint the stink-eye; Kate spent the ride watching Clint squirm and laughing. Well, she wasn’t making noise, but she was laughing on the inside. Clint could tell. She was terrible, but Clint was really starting to like her.

There was an honest-to-god red carpet out in front of the place where the gala was being held—some kind of art gallery, Clint had mostly focused on the floor plans that Kate had slipped him in a thumb drive, not the actual purpose of the space. He groaned to himself when he saw the paparazzi; Tony was never going to let him live this down.

“Showtime,” Kate whispered in his ear. “Remember, try to look like a gigolo.”

“Nobody even says that anymore, what movies do you even watch,” Clint muttered, but he tried to help her out of the cab with an appropriately sleazy leer, even though it made him feel dirty. He tried to look like he was ogling her cleavage while keeping his eyes firmly at collarbone level.

“You’re really squeamish for a spy,” Kate murmured as they swept up the red carpet under the
glare of flashbulbs.

“Just because you’re like twelve,” he shot back, trying to keep his face away from the murderous end of the spectrum.

“I’m twenty-two,” she said, jabbing him in the side with a pointy elbow. “Stop bitching and smile, I want Dad to think you want to con me, not put me in your murder basement.”

“I don’t even have a basement,” Clint said, smiling until his cheeks hurt. “You have any idea how much a house with a basement costs in this city, princess?”

“Don’t call me that,” she said, suddenly sharp.

“Hey, sorry!” Clint said. “Sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

She took a deep breath. “No, I--it’s okay.” They passed through the entry, and Kate handed her invitation to the security at the door. Once they were admitted to the main gallery, she shook a tendril of hair out of her eyes and stiffened her spine. “All right, Hawkeye,” she said. “Let’s get to work.”

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“Work?” Clint asked, raising an eyebrow at her. “And here I thought this was a social event.”

For that, he received a sharp glare from Kate.

“For me it is. For you, it’s a piss-my-father-off event,” she said, “and that’s work.”

“Ah. And here for a moment I thought you’d inveigled me here under false pretenses,” Clint told her, solemn he could make it. “I’m relieved.”

“Geez, did you put on your fancy words as well as your suit? Let’s… hmmm… “ Kate glanced around the room-- or rather, Kate cased the joint while pretending to be glancing around the room. It wasn’t subtle, but it was entertaining. “Let’s dance,” she decided.

Clint thought about dancing with her, about her deciding that their cover required she make a move on him-- or worse, that he make a move on her, groping a kid on the dance floor.

“You don’t want to dance with me; Phil was the dancer,” he said. “I’d just step on your toes and everyone would know I wasn’t any kind of respectable gigolo.”

“Ew, it sounds skeevy when you say it,” Kate replied.

“I thought that was the point? No… if you want to case the joint, let’s go snark at the art. Plenty easy to watch everyone’s moves while you’re debating whether that’s sculpture or a trash can.”

“Pretty sure that one’s a trash can; I saw someone drop an hors d’ouvre in it, and what do you mean ‘case the joint’?” Kate asked.

She did take his outstretched elbow, though, and he led her straight to the trash can.

“I don’t know, I think it’s meant to be performance art. Commentary on the wastefulness of high society or something. I’m not dumb, Katie-Kate, and I may not be Phil but I’ve been in this business long enough. What, were you going to just spring it on me all casual-like later? ‘Oh, dearie-me, there appears to be a cat burglar here! What a coincidence! I suppose we’ll just have to stop him.’”
“Don’t be stupid, there’s no cat burglar,” Kate sighed. “And have you been hanging out with an 80 year old or what?”

“She’s 79, and she’s still mad I won’t let her help dispose of a body. So, no cat burglar. What’s got you worried then?”

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She opened her mouth, then closed it again. He could practically see the wheels spinning in her brain as she tried to figure out a path to plausible deniability, and watched as she gave up on it, shoulders dropping a hair.

“It’s not a cat burglar,” she said, keeping her voice low, no suspicious and hissing whispers to draw attention; good girl. “I could handle that on my own.”

“So what is it then? And if you say ‘bomb’ I’m going to be really pissed.”

“Do I look like an idiot? It’s a theft ring.”

“Ah, so we’ll be heist-foiling tonight. Good times.”

“You are so weird,” she said approvingly. “No wonder Agent Coulson sent you.”

Clint had gotten good, over the months, at suppressing his instinctive flinch. “Yup. So, break it down for me. What are we looking at here?”

“Right now, we are looking at a trash can.” She stiffened her spine and took a tighter grip on his arm. “Come on.”

She led him on a circuitous route around the gallery. Halfway there, he saw something out of the corner of his eye that nearly made him trip over his feet. “Kate.”

“I know.”

“I think I just saw--”

“I know, Clint, why do you think I asked for help?”

He looked around with new eyes. Now that he wasn’t busy reminding himself to act casual/gigolo-like, he picked it out easily; the slight bulges under jackets, the purses that hung like they were too heavy for their size. That lady worked for Hammertech; she’d escaped prison, but Tony thought she had just as much a hand in the whole Whiplash debacle as Justin Hammer himself. The guy next to her, looking quizzically at an oil painting of what was either a bowl of spaghetti or the tangled desires of modern man, was definitely a high-level gun runner. The socialite in the red gown sipping champagne was Whitney Frost, who SHIELD was 85% convinced was Madame Masque. The whole damn gala was like one of those crossover comic books where all the villains gang up on Batman in a League of Evil or something.

“But why would these guys all team up to rob an art gallery?”

She snorted. “Don’t be dense, Clint. Think about it. A bunch of shady people, a bunch of shady money… they aren’t the robbers. They’re the marks.”

“Oh. Damn.” Clint let it sink in for a minute. “Damn, that’s… actually really smart. Not like they’re gonna be too anxious to get the cops involved.”
“Exactly.”

He thought some more. “Stupid question.”

“Well?”

“We want to stop this why exactly?”

“Besides just on principle, as crimefighters?”

“Yes, I’m betting there’s more to it than that, Katie-Kate.”

She blinked at the nickname, but there was something pleased in the curl of her mouth. “Yes, there is,” she said. “Think about it. A whole bunch of people get robbed at a fancy event. Who takes the blame?”

“Whoever set up the security,” Clint said at once.

“Exactly. The people who set up the security, maybe the people who own the venue, maybe the venue staff.”

“So you’re saying, what, that this bad guys’ debutante ball is being run by innocents?”

“No run,” she said. “I’m pretty sure the planning committee’s the thieves, or at least working for them. But, um, my best friend’s moms own this gallery.”

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Clint let his eyes slip closed for just long enough to send up an exasperated plea to any and all deities listening— including Thor, even though Clint was still pretty skeptical about his godly status. This would have been a hard job for a SHIELD team, and even a somewhat-difficult one for Strike Team Delta. Too many innocent bystanders, too many people who could be part of it-- this was a Natasha special, in a lot of ways, only Nat was out of town with Cap again, wreaking righteous havoc in some corner of the world.

He’d have given a lot for Phil in his ear— hell, Phil in his arms, what with all the dancing and cuddling, the gun in the back of Phil’s waistband within easy reach. Kate was looking up at him, waiting, and Clint tucked that back away.

This was what they had, and unless he wanted to call the cops-- which he very much didn’t, they’d just confuse the issue-- they were going to have to make it work. Which meant he was going to have to get handsy after all.

“All right,” Clint said, waving down a passing server and grabbing both of them champagne, “if this were an infiltration, I mean a SHIELD one, we’d have set agents up in inconspicuous roles. Security, janitorial, catering, that sort of thing.” He took a sip while looking over the rim of his glass at the crowd. “Especially if I’ve got people on the planning committee. So, how do you tell real servers from fake servers?”

“I don’t know,” Kate responded, leaning in, “how?”

“Fuck if I know,” Clint told her, “we usually waited until the shooting started, and checked who dove for concealed weaponry.”

“You did not really,” Kate grumped, then glowered further at Clint’s wink. “Stop flirting with me.
This is serious.”

“Which is why I’m flirting with you, Katie-Kate,” Clint told her, sliding an arm around her waist and whispering in her ear. “Send the champagne down the hatch then giggle at me.”

“I’m underage.”

“Now is when you bring that up?”

The champagne went down the hatch, Kate tilting her head back to drain the flute dry, and then she slammed the glass down on a nearby table and collapsed into Clint, giggling as directed.

“Very good,” he murmured in her ear. “Now, c’mon and giggle at that rhinestone-studded bra with me, and then I’m going to lead you out to, ah, find a janitor’s closet.”

“Why is that?” Kate whispered, and got an answering grin in return.

“Partly because I want to see if anyone watches us go. Partly because I wanna see how easy it is to slip in and out of this joint. And partly because that does seem to be your father staring at us while chatting with Whitney Frost, and I think I promised you we’d make him blow a gasket.”

“Dad?”

Kate froze in the act of turning to stare, and instead followed Clint’s gaze as he tilted up an empty silver serving tray, to show a distorted view of the room behind her.

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“Futzing--why did he come to this? I just thought he’d see the pictures, I didn’t know he was going to actually be here!”

“Easy,” Clint said, trying to make his eyebrows appropriately lecherous without actively dipping his eyes too low. “Hang in there, it’s fine, we’re cool. Grab my lapels or something and pull me out the door to your left.”

She giggled again--less convincing than the first time, but still at least a B+ for effort--and picked up his tie, bopping him in the nose with it.

It kind of hurt; he had a panic button sewn into the hem.

“Seriously?” he muttered, but he followed along as she kept hold of the tie, tugging him after her as she headed to the door. They kept it up until it swung shut behind him, then she dropped the tie like it was made of bees, making a hilarious face.

“I feel like an after-school special,” she said.

“Hey, the cover was your idea, girly.” He looked around; they were in a service hall of some kind. There wasn’t anything there except scuff marks and a few loose pieces of trash. “You said your friend’s family owns this place; you know the layout?”

“Yeah. Where should we go?”

“Hm. Who hired the security guards?”

“The planning committee.”
“Security room’s probably a bust, then. I didn’t bring equipment to splice the cameras, so we’re going to have to hope whatever their plan is also involves disabling them so there isn’t any evidence.” He sighed. “Okay. We need to scope out the rest of the building, make sure they don’t have any guys in reserve, see if we can figure out their evil plan, then foil said plan. Great.” He eyed Kate’s purple evening gown. “Please tell me you’ve got some equipment hidden in that thing.”

“Of course I do, what do you take me for? I have two tasers and a set of lockpicks,” she said.

“Not bad,” Clint allowed.

“Also I came by yesterday and stashed both my bows and all the arrows I have under the couch in the ladies’ room.”


She lifted her chin. “Well, I wasn’t about to foil a robbery with Hawkeye the Avenger and NOT bring him something to shoot with.”

She might be nine years old and spoiled rotten, but she was perfect.

He grinned at her. “Now we’re talking. Let’s case this joint.”

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Ten increasingly frustrated minutes later, Clint and Kate were standing on the loading dock pretending to smoke cigarettes Clint had bummed off one of the catering staff, and looking out over the low dark expanse of the Hudson as it drifted underneath the walkway at the back of the building.

“So what do we know, Hawkeye?” Kate asked.

“Not a damn thing,” Clint said, flicking ash, “which is pretty suspicious itself. Catering staff mostly checks out; actually, I’ve seen that company around some of the hoity-toity black tie diplomatic affairs that Strike Team-- that we used to get stuck infiltrating. Not saying they’re incorruptible, but I am saying that their currency is more along the lines of insider access to a barrel of beluga caviar, not whatever this is. They’re professionals.”

“Yeah, I checked them out in advance. Pretended I had an arugula allergy. They seemed to know what they were doing.”

“An arugula allergy?” Clint asked, momentarily diverted. Kate shrugged.

“That’s tame, compared to my stepmom. She never goes anywhere until she knows exactly how they’ve quarantined the gluten. I think half the catering companies in Manhattan know her by name.”

“Makes sense not to mess with catering then; it’d get noticed fast,” Clint said, “if that’s common. No wonder Barcelona went south so fast; I’ll have to tell Morse that sometime. Okay. No catering. Security is as rotten as expected, but nothing lurking out of sight. Just the gala and the tape room; we’re not getting in the room without minor explosives, which let’s keep that as a back-up plan.”
“Especially since I didn’t bring any,” Kate agreed.

“Eh,” Clint waved the objection away, “there’s an entire kitchen there plus the maintenance staff clearly mean business and someone stocked the back of the stage for pyrotechnics. Explosives we can impro-- Kate. Kate Kate Kate. I know how it’s going to happen.”

Clint dropped the cigarette and straightened up, staring into the river but not really seeing it. He was too busy watching it happen in his mind’s eye. The event space had a small stage at the end near the river, just on the other side of the wall from them. A little green room, where Clint and Kate had nearly surprised a couple of contortionists painting makeup on each other, a couple of bathrooms where they’d disappeared for a few deceptively loud moments that Clint had promptly erased from his memory, and backstage itself, a narrow dark space filled with props.

There was, Kate had explained, a program. Quick thanks from the chairperson, rambling speech from a major donor, the band giving way to some kind of avant-garde tumbling troupe, before coming back for more dance music.

“What’s going to happen?” Kate asked, watching him closely. Clint chuckled, and walked to the edge of the pier, looking to both sides.

“C’mon,” he said, “let’s circle the building. I wanna see something.”

“What?” Kate’s voice had turned into a growl, though that might have been the brisk night air as much as annoyance. “Is it the tux that makes you insufferable, or what? You do know it’s not attractive, right?”

“Yeah, someone once told me that,” Clint said, neglecting to tell her it had been Phil, and it had been right before he’d dragged Clint off into a side-room post-mission to divest him of his tattered tuxedo. Phil had, of course, been lying through his teeth. Even while said teeth had been occupied removing the studs from Clint’s shirt.

Clint hadn’t remembered that in years -- outside of half-awake three AMs, anyway-- why the hell would it pop up now?

“Well,” Kate pressed, bringing him back to the present, “are you going to tell me what we’re looking for?”

“The getaway vehicle,” Clint said.

---

“I’ll be honest, I was kind of expecting, like, a panel van,” Clint said, staring at the pair of speedboats. “I mean, criminals love a white panel van. We got special training about them in counterintelligence seminar and everything.”

Kate looked interested. “What, like special ways to disable them or something?”

“Nah,” Clint said. “Mostly never to park next to them or walk between them and another car so you don’t get kidnapped to death in one.”

“Oh. Wait, you had to take a seminar to learn that? Isn’t that, like, common sense? Like never trust a clown.”

He shrugged. “You’d be surprised.”
She arched a skeptical eyebrow, and it made him miss both Phil and Natasha so much it ached. “What, do you trust clowns?”

“Not unless I know them personally,” he assured her. “You can get away with all kinds of shit dressed as a clown, and people will just think it’s part of the act.”

“I mean, it’s pretty smart,” Kate mused. “Like, as long as you want to commit a crime somewhere you won’t stick out dressed like a clown.”

“Fortunately, there aren’t that many places like that,” Clint said.

“Oh, I don’t know. Parks. Family restaurants. Kids’ birthday parties…”

“Do you see a lot of birthday-party stickups in your part of town?”

“Well, I’d hardly know,” Kate said. “It’s not like people would be eager to tell everyone if they got robbed by a clown.”

“I would,” Clint said. “I would absolutely tell people that.”

She snorted. “This, I believe.”

“What?” Clint demanded. “I get threatened by all kinds of shit these days. A clown would be downright refreshing after the fuckin’ Chitauri.” He swallowed hard, realizing that he’d gotten a little too vehement by the way she was staring at him, eyes wide.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I got… I got some issues.”

She relaxed, visibly hesitating a moment before punching him lightly in the arm. “I get that,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“What, you think I just decided to do this shit on a whim?”

That made him feel bad, because, well, he kind of had? Like, some socialites got purse dogs and some dated ballplayers and some volunteered and some became vigilante archers of the upper west side.

On further reflection, that was kind of dumb.

“I guess maybe issues go along with the arrows,” he said.

“I guess maybe they do,” she replied, looking out over the water. “So. Boats.”

“Explains why they wanted to come all the way out here,” he said. “I mean, not that your friend’s moms’ gallery isn’t cool, but this isn’t the usual society beat.”

“Do you think we should disable them?”

“Yeah, probably,” he said. “I mean, there’s got to be a sparkplug we can take out or something.”

Kate sighed. “I knew I should have brought a change of clothes.” She started peeling off her long white gloves.

“Yeah, well, next time tell me what the mission is, and I’ll come better prepared,” Clint grumbled.
She shot him a sidelong look, a little smile teasing at the corners of her mouth. “Next time?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, I mean, I can’t leave a fellow archer in the lurch, now can I?”

“Agent Coulson seemed to think I wasn’t ready for the big leagues.”

“Agent Coulson was planning on recruiting you,” Clint told her. “He thought you were great, that’s why he left—” he cut himself off.

She turned to face him, eyes searching his face in the twilight. “When you say ‘was planning,’” she said slowly. “Is that because he changed his mind?”

Shit. He hated this part so much, and yet somehow he couldn’t ever seem to manage to avoid it. “No,” he said quietly.

“Oh.” She bit her lip. “The Battle?”

She didn’t have to say which battle. New Yorkers always knew which battle. “Yeah.”

“Oh,” she said again. She opened her mouth, drawing a breath to speak, then froze, tilting her head. “Wait,” she said. “Is that music?”

“Aw, circus, no.”

---

Even long after, Clint wasn’t sure exactly how he’d gotten stuck with retrieving the weapons from the women’s restroom, while Kate Bishop snuck through the kitchens and back into the crowd. All he knew was that he was scrounging around under the couch, desperately trying to peel back the duct tape Kate had used to secure the bows to the frame, when the door between the restroom proper and the little anteroom opened.

“Mon dieu,” said a light voice, in highly suspicious tones, “Qui-es tu? Que fais-tu ici?”

Slowly, Clint backed himself out from under the couch and looked up, past a pair of long, pantaloons-clad legs and a top with little but suspenders and into a rather startled, unnaturally white, face.

“Clint?”

For the record, Clint had heard his name said with even more stunned, disgusted incredulity in his life. But not often, and never when he was—okay, not more than once when he was struggling to pick himself up off the floor without knocking anything over. He sighed, and gave up any idea of trying to bluff his way through this.

“Bonjour, Veronique. Je m’excuse,” he said, and knocked her out with a convenient vase.

He was slightly relieved to note that she’d been reaching for a knife concealed in her comically-oversized pants before he’d hit her.

Clowns. Even the ones he knew personally he couldn’t trust. With a sigh, he reached down and stripped off her suspenders.

----
When Clint reached the edge of the stage, he was greeted with a sight he absolutely hadn’t expected to see. Kate Bishop was on the stage, center spotlight, her back to him, and she was wielding a large rod of red-painted cast iron that he suspected she’d wrenched from the sculpture titled *Rusty Fences, Rotten Neighbors* over there in the corner. With it, she was fending off the feints of a swordsman whose style-- though not his face-- was dishearteningly familiar to Clint. The Circus of Crime.

How he’d never wanted to see them again.

After a startled moment, it became clear to Clint that the swordsman was trying to convince the audience his entire duel with Kate was part of the act. He was too good not to have disarmed her several times over by now-- and she knew it. Still, she yelled at him that he wouldn’t get away with it, they hadn’t planned on her, she was on to their dastardly plot--

It was the “dastardly” bit that convinced Clint she was trying to distract everyone until he could get out there with the real weaponry. And she was doing a damned fine job of it; all the performers on stage were watching her. Even some of the pickpockets slipping through the crowd had stopped to stare. And Derek Bishop was white-faced and frozen, down in the front row, his mouth hanging wide open.

Clint felt his heart swell.

Well, time to give the people what they wanted, he decided, and ran onstage honking. He had one brief moment to appreciate the shock on both Kate’s face and the swordsman’s, before he unleashed the jets of water from his trick boutonnières, hitting Kate directly in the center of her forehead, and the swordsman right up his long nose.

In the confusion that followed, he tossed Kate her bow and quiver, and winked.

“Send in the clowns,” he said, and thrust at the swordsman with a comically-oversized plastic kipper he’d found backstage.

Veronique had always been rotten to the core, but she was a highly dedicated clown.

--

It was times like this that Clint really missed Agent Coulson.

Not *Phil* --Clint missed Phil the most when he was reading his notebooks or when he was sitting in the vault holding a set of purple sheets and trying not to cry or meeting yet another person whose life Phil had made better just by being himself. But when he was in a ridiculous situation and trying to pull a solution out of his ass? When he was trying to thwart villains and his list of assets included a ramekin of hot pepper aioli, a debutante with dead-eye aim and a chip on her shoulder, and a four-foot-long plastic fish? He *really* missed Agent Coulson.

Phil’s unique genius, he thought to himself, parrying swordstrikes with his kipper as Kate rained arrows into the crowd from atop the lighting rig, had always been taking a mixed bag of ridiculous bullshit and somehow turning it into exactly what was needed to save the day.

Huh, he thought, turning a backflip over the head of the ringmaster to knock a pistol out of the feet of a contortionist. Come to think of it, Phil had done that with people, too.

He knocked out the contortionist just as the ringmaster turned, managing to cut a slice right off the
end of Clint’s fish. It clattered at his feet, one beady plastic eye staring up at him threateningly. Clint brandished the rest of the fish wildly, digging the aioli out of his clown pants with his other hand and throwing it in the ringmaster’s face as he turned. While the man screamed, clawing at his eyes, Clint ran for the lighting rig, climbing up hand-over-hand to join Kate.

“I really wish I had my exploding arrows,” he yelled at her over the hubbub, pulling Kate’s backup bow and quiver out of the other leg of his pants.

“Yeah, well, some of us don’t have Tony Stark as a supplier, Hawkeye,” she yelled back, pinning a clown to the ground by shooting two arrows at once, right through the empty toes of his oversized shoes.

She was magnificent.

“I did see something potentially useful when I was poking around the stage earlier.”

“Yes?”

One of the aerialists was trying to climb up the rigging. He found a set of juggling balls in one of the clown pockets and nailed her in the head with one. “They’ve got the stage rigged to blow,” he said. “Looked like pyrotechnics, but the charges are way too strong. It’ll bring the stage down, but shouldn’t be enough for much more than that. I’m guessing the plan was to blow it during the finale and use the confusion to make their getaway. Not sure what we can do without the detonator, though.”

She looked at him sharply, her eyes gleaming with a terrifying light. “This detonator,” she said, faux-casual. “Would it happen to look anything like--” she got off another shot then rummaged in her quiver, pulling out a slim black box with flashing green lights on the side and a stubby antenna. “--this?”

“HAH!” Clint crowed, triumphant. “Nice one.”

“So we could blow up the stage,” Kate said. “Should we maybe get off of it first?”

“That part’s easy,” Clint told her.

“Easy how?”

He jerked his head wordlessly down. Out the open back door, toward the river, toward the twin speedboats bobbing peacefully behind them. “Think you can make it to the door in one jump… Hawkeye?”

She eyed the distance, then nodded, squaring her chin. “You bet I can, Hawkeye.”

“Toss me the detonator.” She did. The program was set up and ready to run, not even a passcode on it. The Circus had gotten cocky.

“Okay,” he said, raining arrows down onto the stage and around the perimeter of the audience, pressing the attendees back and the evil circus members forward. “We’ll need to shoot a final volley, get them to duck and cover, then make a break for it and trigger the explosion. I’ll blow it while we’re in the air. You ready?”

“Ready.”

“Okay then,” Clint said, grinning at her. This was gonna be great. Somewhere out there, he
thought, Phil was smiling. “On three.”

---

Later, much later, as they careened wildly down the Hudson with a half-dressed clown and a battered mime chasing their speedboat in the second boat, Kate paused, crate hoisted above her head, and turned to hiss at Clint.

“You said you were great at boats!”

“I am!” Clint yelled, hoping she could hear him over the roar of the motor, “just not ones with bullet holes in the hull! We cleared that damn closet!”

Kate flung the crate, watching with satisfaction as it bounced off the windshield of the speedboat and came crashing down neatly over the mime’s head.

“That’s one box he won’t be getting out of any time soon,” she said with satisfaction, brushing her hands off. “Okay, the clown is still standing. Do we have a harpoon?”

Clint closed his eyes briefly, and gave solemn thanks to Phil for her.

---

Three weeks after that, sitting in a SHIELD debrief and idly texting Kate about a new bow to replace the one she’d lost in the Hudson, Clint looked up just long enough to say:

“Actually, you’d be surprised how much you can hide in a decent pair of clown pants.”

After a dead silence, Maria Hill just closed her eyes and bit her lip, before responding:

“Thank you for your contribution, Agent Barton. We’ll keep that in mind.”

“You’re welcome,” Clint said, and added a few pictures of experimental arrowheads to his text. He always did enjoy being helpful.

Chapter End Notes

As always, the chapter in progress can be found on the [tumblr tag](#).
(U) A top-secret look at Director Fury's inbox.

Our source on US government email classification systems. We make no claims to strict accuracy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To: njf0002 @SHIELD.gov
From: mgh0018 @SHIELD.gov

Subject: (U) Update EID 00657430

CONFIDENTIAL L7

(H) Hawkeye’s doing well back in the rotation. Seems almost normal. Well, what passes for normal for him, anyway. You know how he is. He’s fitting in well with his new team, which is a real shock. I wouldn’t have thought he’d be able to get along with Stark as well as he does. It’s almost creepy. Also, if you make me manage a meeting with both of those chuckleheads in it and don’t let me give them assigned seating, I will resign. Effective immediately. I’m still uncertain if they were talking about arrows or making dirty jokes. Either way, Rogers started off looking alarmed and ended up leaving without saying a word to either of them.

(C) And we need to keep an eye on K. Bishop. I’ve heard she’s started doing her little acts of vigilantism under the same codename as our own archer. What IS it about a bow that makes otherwise normal people go all weird? Or maybe they go to the bow because they’re odd to begin with. An observation for both of their files.

Hill

Classified by: Maria Hill, Deputy Director

Reason: Avengers Initiative

Declassify on: July 15, 2063
To: njf0002 @SHIELD.gov

From: jes0112 @SHIELD.gov

Subject: (S) Update Guesthouse

SECRET L10

Director Fury,

(S)Agent Coulson seems to be leveling out. We have moved him to a nearby facility to finish his recovery. I am confident we took enough this last time that there is no TAHITI left in his memories. The implanted memories of recovery in actual Tahiti are, so far, holding. I am reluctant to turn him loose, knowing that he could crack at any time. I do so only with your assurance that he will be supervised by a team that will know how to deal with any possible breakthroughs or breakdowns.

(S)So I, J. Streiten, M.D., officially declare Agent Phillip J Coulson ready to resume normal duties at the now-elevated level of 9.

July 25, 2013

Dr. J. Streiten

SHIELD Medical Center, Bethesda

Classified by: J. Streiten, Chief of Neurosurgery

Reason: Level 10 Content

Declassify on: N/A

To: njf0002 @SHIELD.gov

From: nockitoff@gmail.com

Subject:

Fury,

Hands off the socialite. She’s a Hawkeye through and through, and I’ll keep my eyes on her. Although if she should get herself, I’d appreciate your tossing a little help her way. She's going to be good.

Phil’s inheritance is the “gift” that keeps on giving. I wonder how we both managed to miss so much about the man. Thanks for giving me the time to deal. And thanks for trusting me to be back out in the field.

Team’s great. Nat sends her love, or whatever she meant by “give mine to Fury.”

Clint
To: njf0002@SHIELD.gov

From: pjc0002@SHIELD.gov

Subject: (U) Requested Update re Bus and Team-- no action

CLASSIFIED L7

Nick,

(C) It’s good to be back, sir. I find my team and my plane both excellent, although I have some reservations about Agent Ward. Hill was correct in her assessment of him being a little poo with knives stuck in. The rest of his scores are high enough that I will reserve judgement until I see how he manages with the team.

(C) I’m certain you pulled some strings to allow me to recover in Tahiti. Thanks for that. It was lovely. The massages in particular will be missed.

(C) Phil

Classified by: Phillip J. Coulson, Agent of SHIELD
Reason: Level 7 Content
Declassify on: September 20, 2063

[Handwritten letter, in a loopy cursive, burnt after reading]

Darling,

Gracious but you kept much to yourself for entirely too long. You know we would have provided our support. In person, if necessary. We wish you had allowed us to attend you, to hold you as you watched your agent and friend suffer. You are right; it was a terrible thing that you did to him, but you are also correct in your assumption that you could not go back on it, once you had begun. A man like your Coulson would never have been able to survive a normal life, no matter what history you wrote for him. He was your best, and I do hope that he will be again.

Darling love, your job is ugly, and it is so easy to lose yourself in that ugliness. You must not ever mistake yourself for the decisions you make. If you would only learn the facts as we see them: life is for the good, and, lacking a God on Earth to make those calls, it is left to people like us to make them. Do not judge yourself too harshly, love. Keep the faith, in your belief in Good and in yourself.

Know that we see you as you are and that we will never desert you. Dessert you, maybe. Perhaps with whipped cream. Or...

[Fury read the next several paragraphs in silence, his ears and face hot, an uncustomed soft smile on his face]
Our time apart grows tedious, but we will man the watch on our side of the ocean. Keep your ear to the ground. We are afraid that the first tremors are felt even on this continent. Trust no one without proof and always, *always* be ready to run.

Your Zeg

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 13, "Parsley, Sage..." starts tonight on the [tumblr tag](https://example.com).
Parsley, Sage
Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

... Rosemary, Thyme-- and Basil.

Chapter Notes

We're back! This one was a long one-- next one will probably be too. Are you following along on tumblr?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Rosemary,” Laura Thyme hissed, “give me that tree pruner, I think I can reach the rope….”

Clint could see them vaguely in the darkness of the shed as Rosemary Boxer, all her elfin British good cheer erased from her face in favor of determination that would have satisfied even Nick Fury, scooched back to the wall and slammed at it until the saw-tipped tree pruner, taller than she was, finally tipped over. Laura rolled over and caught it between her sturdy knees, then began wriggling her way towards Clint.

"C’mon, Mr. Burton,” she whispered as she went, “just slide over here and run your wrists over this and we’ll have you free in no time. Then you can call the police to come take these blasted handcuffs off us.”

“Except Laura,” Rosemary sighed, “aren’t you forgetting that it was the DCI himself who locked us in here?”

“Yes but not because he’s in on it, Rosemary, I think he was just annoyed at us for insisting that the begonias were the key to the whole thing-- oh I say, Mr. Burton, are you free already? Good heavens no wonder Mr. Jiminez thought you could help us. Such a thoughtful man-- it was such a pity.”

Clint, who had actually untied his bonds nearly as soon as he woke up in the gardening shed, simply grunted yes and started picking her handcuffs. Phil must have loved them; it still confused him that he had left them with only an alias to remember him by. They were far from the only ones, but it always hurt Clint a little to think that his friends wouldn’t even recognize the name on his gravestone.

“Not a moment too soon!” Laura sighed, “I hear someone outside!”

“It’s okay,” Clint said, grabbing the tree pruner, “just keep quiet and I’ll take care of the--”

And then his cell phone went off.
After everything was cleaned up, the DCI (who was in it up to his neck, as it turned out) arrested, and the Pagford Commons Tea Garden successfully re-opened, replete with all the begonias that could be desired, Clint was finally able to listen to his voice mail.

“‘Never blaspheme the aspidistra,’ bro,” the voice huffed into the line. “You need to see me, seriously, bro. Or will be too late for Basil, bro. Soon, yes? Real soon.”

And that was it. Clint found himself sitting on a stone bench, half-hidden behind a planter overflowing with marigolds, and staring at his phone. Because that code hadn’t been in Phil’s ledger, that code was Phil’s personal code with him.

Whoever this was, he highly doubted they knew Phil as any name but his own. And Clint had no clue who they might be, or more importantly, where the fuck ‘here’ was.

---

The code hadn’t been in the book, so he wasn’t sure if the Palm Pilot would help him find his mysterious caller. It was a Brooklyn area code, so he started there. He narrowed it down to a couple of possibilities on the plane back to New York. Calling the number back hadn’t resulted in anything but a default voicemail recording, and he’d been reluctant to leave much in the way of specifics, contenting himself with a “hey, got your message. Call me back!” that had so far not yielded anything of value.

The top candidate on his list wasn’t one of the IOUs at all, but a building that one of Phil’s aliases--and now, apparently, one of Clint’s aliases--owned, a four-story walk-up in Bed-Stuy. The file’d had a keycode, and a post-it note with a scribbled “apt 2a-Basil” in Phil’s writing. So Clint figured he’d start there. If nothing else, he should probably figure out if he needed to do anything in particular for the tenants. He’d hate to make Phil’s memory an accidental slumlord or something.

He got out of the cab a few blocks away and tried to look non-shifty as he walked by to case the joint. He should have picked up a pizza or something, tried to do the delivery thing. He didn’t notice anything especially suspicious looking about the building, so he decided to take a chance.

There was a surprisingly robust security system; the code from Phil’s file worked to let him in to the lobby of the building. Inside, it was shabby but clean; nothing was brand-new but nothing was broken or obviously shitty. It looked like a nice building, honestly, like a place where the neighbors probably wouldn’t deal in the stairwells or piss in the corners. The label on the mailbox for 2A said “B Malarenko,” the name made on one of those label makers that does white letters on blue plastic tape.

Clint took the stairs up to 2. The building was quiet; it was the middle of the day, so likely most people were at work or school. Still, you never knew what you’d find, so he concentrated on radiating I’m Supposed To Be Here.

Outside of 2A, he pulled out his cell and hit redial again on the mysterious message, leaning close to the door. He smiled to himself as he heard a phone start ringing on the other side of the door, and hung up.

He knocked.

The floor creaked; someone was moving inside. Clint made sure he was in line with the peephole.
and smiled. He likely looked goofy, but he didn’t want to give maybe-Basil his Resting Murder Face.

There was a long moment of silence, then the door opened a sliver. Clint could see a reddened eye and half of a long, droopy mustache.

“What you want, bro?”

“I’m not a shabby tiger,” Clint said. Phil’s passcodes were weird sometimes.

“Oh! Shit, bro, took you long enough.”

“Yeah, well, I was in the UK,” Clint said. “I just got in, my body still thinks it’s yesterday. Or was that tomorrow?”

“Dunno, bro. I’m bad at time zones.”

“So… you called,” Clint prompted.

“Right, yeah.” The mustache moved when he talked, like a cartoon. In Clint’s jetlagged state, it was mesmerizing. “You better come in.”

“Thanks,” Clint said. “…bro.”

---

The apartment itself was no great shakes, just a long open-plan with a loft above the entrance. Open brick on the walls, wood floors that had seen hard use but also care-- all a piece with the building. The curtains on the long windows were purple, and Clint had a split-second to wonder if Phil’d done that, and for him.

Then the man-shaped walrus (or walrus-shaped man) who’d let him in turned around, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“Sympathy, bro,” he said, holding out his arms and, when Clint froze, blinking, drawing him into a sweaty, enveloping hug. Clint patted his back awkwardly until he was released. “Is sad, bro, losing Coulson. No?”

“It’s… taken some getting used to,” Clint said, and then winced. I’ve gotten used to Phil being dead.

“Ah,” the man nodded sagely, watching Clint, “is up, is down. One breath good, one breath bad, yeah? Basil’s cousin, bro, when she had her baby. She said that how she got through pain, seriously. Only got to make one more breath. Then decide again, next breath. One more. Right bro?”

For a moment, Clint had a flashback to the orange grove.

“Who are you, exactly?” he asked.

“Ah, bro, Coulson not tell you? Bro played close to chest, seriously. I’m Basil, bro.” He hit his chest with two fingers. “His tenant. Basil keep his mail for him. Or… when he got mail. And you, bro, you’re Hawkeye.”

“Did you… did he tell you that, or did you,” Clint waved vaguely at the flat-screen tv mounted in the corner, currently playing soaps with the sound on mute.

---

Beer in hand, Clint listened as Basil told his life story. Well-- a slightly-shortened, Phil-centric version of his life story. Clint’d heard more than one since he started following the IOUs. This one involved a fairly typical bad beginning-- in Basil’s case, being forced into the family business early, where the family business was actually a Family Business in the import/export industry if you get Basil’s drift, bro. It involved a not-uncommon middle, too: Basil getting into hot water with a cousin and brother when he objected to the family’s acquisition and merger practices, Phil careening accidentally onto the scene and saving the day, and Basil turning state’s evidence and sending a significant portion of the Malarenko family behind bars for 15-20. After the trial, Basil had been in the loving care of the FBI, who weren’t interested enough in his safety for Basil’s taste (seriously, fuck those bros, bro) and Phil had intervened again, buying this apartment building and installing Basil as super.

Where the story changed, as far as Clint could tell, was that Phil came back a year later with a request, and his real name-- and Clint’s.

“What I gonna do, bro, say no?” Basil shrugged, his moustache quivering with sincerity. “Is easy request; take packages, call Coulson, keep in safe place. When he comes, give Coulson packages.”

“By packages,” Clint said, leaning forward, “you mean--”

“Sometimes envelopes, bro. Sometimes boxes. Onetime, pigeon.”

“Pigeon?”

“Pigeon with paper on ankle. Basil used discretion and let pigeon go, bro. Kept paper. Coulson said okay.”

“Yeah, no-- good call,” Clint agreed.

It explained a part of the puzzle of Phil that Clint hadn’t known was missing-- how he handled the IOUs between trips to the safe deposit vault and the chest he kept there. He wouldn’t want a random pigeon showing up to his seldom-used condo off the Columbia Pike, after all. Or an assortment of napkins and receipts and birch bark and Rubik’s cubes. It sounded like Phil had made his request along about the same time Strike Team Delta had started splitting-- after Puente Antiguo and Thor’s arrival.

After the one last time Clint had kissed Phil, dusty and exhausted and desperately relieved he hadn’t been stomped under the big space-metal boot of an invading nordic robot. After Phil had made that complicated little face of his, muttered “no problem” for no reason Clint could see, and walked back off into the cover-up in progress.

Clint had wondered if they’d talk about it. Phil would have had to be in town for more than 24 hours at a time at the same time as Clint in order to do so. At the time, Clint’d assumed Phil had just held to their Understanding, had known Clint hadn’t meant to start anything.

But if he traced it back now, not only did it mark the start of Phil’s disappearance, but also his deal with Waarzegster-- and the one with Basil. Basil, who Phil’d told Clint’s real name, his private code, had arranged for Basil to know when Phil died and expect to hear from Clint.

“Bro?” Basil asked, and poked Clint on the knee with one meaty finger, jolting him back to the
“Sorry,” Clint said, which earned him another reassuring knee pat.

“Is okay, bro.”

“So, but,” Clint tried to pick up the thread of the story, “why are you calling me now? Did… did another IOU arrive?” The thought made him breathless. Anything arriving now would be seriously delayed-- and likely from someone who’d talked with Phil in the weeks or days before he died.

Unlike Clint, who’d barely had time to see Phil in passing when he’d arrived at PEGASUS to check progress. It had all come crashing down far too fast.


He said it apologetically enough that Clint reached over for a reciprocating knee pat as a gesture of encouragement.

“What happened?” he asked.


“Well,” Clint said, sitting back and contemplating the nervous-looking mountain of man before him, “we can’t have that.”

---

“This is so cool,” Kate Bishop said, looking around the apartment as though she expected a masked intruder to leap out from behind the straggly ficus.

“You keep using that word,” Clint said, testing out the security camera rotation on the crappy Dell he’d liberated from one of his boltholes. “I do not think it means what you think it means.”

She scoffed. “Whatever, nerd,” she said. “This is my first actual stakeout, nothing can ruin this for me.”

He groaned. He almost wished that he’d called Natasha in to help with this op, only Natasha was currently in Belarus--or was it Burundi? She was moving around a lot these days--with Cap, doing actual real spy work, and wasn’t to be disturbed.

Besides, the day Clint couldn’t handle a little Russian mob action by himself was the day he’d hang up his tac suit. He really mostly wanted Kate around for company, and to give her something like a training mission. He thought that’s what Phil would have wanted.

“You know how I knew it’s your first stakeout?” he said, fiddling with the video cable that would hopefully project the camera feeds onto the TV. “Because you’re excited about it. Nobody looks forward to stakeouts, they’re terrible.”

“You’re not doing a real good job in the whole ‘recruiting me into the glamorous spy lifestyle’ thing, Hawkeye,” she said, stowing an extra quiver of arrows down the back of Basil’s La-Z-Boy.

“Hey, truth in advertising,” he said, as he finally got the picture to hold.
“Getting Basil out was fun, though,” Kate said thoughtfully.

Getting Basil out had involved an elaborate scene where he and Kate had come into the building talking loudly about ‘picking up Nana for her trip’ and had come out pushing Basil in a wheelchair, dressed in a flowered housedress, hot pink fur boots, a kerchief with a sheaf of fake gray hair poking out from underneath, and a gigantic fuzzy shawl in puke green and mustard yellow, which they’d wrapped around his neck and attempted to use to hide his moustache.

“Yeah,” Clint agreed. “That was pretty fun.” He leaned back in his chair, cracking his spine as he stretched. They’d laid their traps and set up their cameras; now, all there was to do was wait for Ivan Malarenko to show up at their door with fratricide on his mind.

“So,” he said. “How’s your friend’s moms’ gallery doing? Were they able to get the insurance to pay out?”

“They’re trying to fight it, but fortunately, they got the superhero clause,” Kate said. “Also, get this, the evil circus actually was using a real event planning company that had real liability insurance, so they’ll probably sue those guys to recover the claims.”

“I feel kind of bad for the event planners now,” Clint said.

“Don’t, they’re totally evil,” Kate told him. “They’re a tax shelter for, like, the mob or something. I mean, probably not the mob we’re here for now? I think these guys are more old-school Godfather types. But definitely shady, anyway.”

---

A week, any number of frozen pizzas, and enough games of trashcan basketball to fill a ten-gallon garbage bag later, the shine had somewhat worn off stakeouts for Kate.

“Ugh,” she sighed, lying on her back and flicking unbent paperclips idly at the ceiling, “I hope Basil is having a better time than we are. This is devastating.”

“This is spycraft,” Clint said, putting down his phone when it became clear that constant refreshing wasn’t going to magically produce anything new in his inbox. “And this is nothing. Phil’n’I once spent two weeks in a shack in Antigua watching an empty vacation house.”

“Antigua sounds nice,” Kate grumped. “Sunshine, palm trees….”

“It rained all the time, the cockroaches were as big as my thumb, and the mosquito netting all had holes, so we ended up with bites all over our--” Clint bit his lip just before ‘asses’ slipped out. And thighs and backs and really anything-- they’d still been in the new relationship stage when they got to Antigua. By the time they left, Clint’d been sure their relationship could survive anything if it could survive that level of boredom.

He’d been wrong, of course-- it couldn’t survive him.

“All over your what?” Kate asked, showing a real disregard for her own mental well-being.

“Hey look at that, we’ve got movement,” Clint said, rolling over and pointing at the feed from the camera trained on the alley.

“Okay, that’s Ivan,” Kate said, sitting up and reaching for her bow. “I’d recognize those last-season Adidas anywhere. And who’s with him?”
Clint called up the mugshots of some of the little Malarenko fishies, the ones small enough to have slipped through the FBI’s dragnet.

“Survey says… Marko “Knucks” Malarenko and… Roger Malarenko.”

“Roger?”

“Beats me,” Clint shrugged. The aforementioned Roger appeared to be using the fire escape, while Ivan and Marko each took a door to the building. Clint waited, holding his breath, to see whether they’d break in the doors or jimmy the locks-- were they going for the Russian mob version of stealth, or for maximum confusion.

As he waited, his senses sharpened, narrowing into pre-action acuity. He could see every mote of dust in the damned place floating down, feel the breeze from--

The breeze from--

“Katie Kate,” he whispered, and she flicked her eyes to him, “look down at the floor.”

“Yeah, what’s there?” she hissed back.

“Nothing. I just didn’t want you giving it away by looking--” and then he pushed her out of the way and rolled himself, just as a circle of ceiling gave way with a crash, falling between them.

Clint had his bow out and aimed by the time the fourth tracksuited Malarenko cousin dropped from the hole above them. He didn’t get a chance to use it; Katie clonked him neatly over the head with her baseball bat and he dropped.

“Wow,” she said, blinking down at his prone form, “people actually do that?”

“Oh yeah, onetime Nat and I--” Clint started, before a passing glimpse of the tv shut him up. Kate turned to look; there were at least twenty tracksuits descending on the building from all sides.

“What the hell did Basil do?” Kate asked, and Clint just shook his head.

“Dunno, Katie-Kate, but tell you what-- you take advantage of that hole up there and go high. I’ll go low, and let’s see what we can do?”

“Sure,” she said, and let herself be boosted up into the rafters. As she grabbed her bow, a fit of laughter hit her, hard.

“What the hell?” Clint asked, when her sniggers finally simmered down.

“Ceiling Kate is watching you,” she burbled.

And then the door burst open, and they were a little busy.

----

“Well that could have gone better,” Clint sighed later, as he and Kate finished delivering a white van full of unconscious Malarenkos to the nearest precinct station. He’d put a very large bow through the handles of the rear door, and narrowly refrained from leaving an oversized gift tag as well.

“Yeah.” Kate was mostly mumbling, starting to come down from the adrenaline high already, a long week of bad sleep, worse food, and inaction clearly catching up with her. She heaved a big
sigh, and unlocked the door to her purple Beetle, which had been parked in a long-term garage around the corner.

“Lemme drive,” Clint told her, removing the keys from her mostly nerveless hands. “And get you home.”

“No but… there’s still clean-up,” Kate protested, and then winced. By clean-up, she meant the two bodies currently staining the apartment’s area rug. One of them was Ivan’s, the other Roger’s. In the confusion, he couldn’t tell how they’d died. Not by arrows, at least, but near the end there Kate and Clint were wielding baseball bats and any guns they could remove from their owners about equally, and anyway it was more than possible that they’d died of friendly fire.

Clint’d seen way, way worse-- by the time he had been Kate’s age, exactly.

Seeing the look on her face now, the attempt at bravery that was cracking at the edges, he thought he finally understood the look on Phil’s face whenever Clint or Natasha had talked about their childhoods. It was a terrible face to see on a kid.

“Maybe Phil was right,” he said, half to himself, as he started the ignition. “I should’ve waited.”

“Fuck you,” Kate snorted. “I contacted you, remember? Let’s go.”

“Kate--”

“Just go.” She hissed.

---

Some time after dropping Kate off in the arms of her friend from the gallery, Clint pulled up in front of a somewhat shabby two-story in Hoboken, with a flowerbed full of hostas and an algae-ridden birdbath along the side. He nearly started up the rickety brown staircase that curved the side and back, before ending in an external second-floor door, but music and laughter from the back of the house stopped him.

He knocked before easing the back door open, and was greeted by a revelation.

Basil was looming over him in the doorway, moustache curlier than ever and an enormous gingham apron swathing his proud belly as he wielded an upraised rolling pin.

“Oh. Bro! Is you!” he said, and carefully placed the pin on the kitchen table before reaching out to pull Clint inside. “Is all good? Is all safe?”

“Yeah,” Clint said, “It’s all taken care of.” Ivan had been right up there in the running for world’s worst brother, in a way that made Clint want to send a thank-you card to Barney for at least trying to be decent. But presumably there was filial feeling in there somewhere, and he couldn’t face telling Basil quite yet.

“But um…” Clint looked past Basil’s shoulder, to where Edna stood at the counter, mixing corn flakes into melted butterscotch, “but if you’re still up for the second half of your IOU, Edna, I could use you.”

“About time!” Edna cried, brushing off her hands. “Basil, dear, you keep stirring. Clint, there’s quicklime in the garage. And grab the shovel, just in case.”

----
Edna, it turned out, was terrifyingly good at body disposal. Clint reminded himself multiple times that she was too old and frail to lift a corpse alone, and if she needed to be reported to any authorities, Phil would have done so.

“Well,” she said with a sigh, when they had finished their business and cleaned up and were standing at the base of the stairs again. “That makes us square.”

“Yeah,” Clint said, feeling an ache in his chest at the thought. “Sure does, Edna.”

“Don’t think that means you’re excused from coming to visit, mind,” she told him. “My grandson never lets me do anything fun. Plus, ever since he moved to Palo Alto he never visits anymore, just keeps trying to get me to call him on the television.” She rolled her eyes. “That’s what he calls it, too, ‘call me on the television,’ like I’ve never heard of FaceTime. Little shit.”

Clint laughed. “I would never underestimate you like that, Edna,” he said sincerely, and she patted his shoulder approvingly. He got the feeling she’d have patted his head if she could have reached it.

“Come on inside,” she told him. “Have a cookie. Stay the night, if you want; Basil’s got the guest room but there’s a hide-a-bed that only stabs you in the kidneys if you sleep on the right side.”

“I like the left, anyway,” Clint told her, and meekly allowed himself to be shoed inside and fed cookies and hot chocolate with an eye-searing amount of brandy. Once fortified, he turned to Basil, who was sitting at the table next to him knitting something bright purple and fluffy.

“I, ah, I kinda trashed your apartment,” he said. “You know, in the fighting.”

Basil shrugged. “Better apartment than Basil’s face, bro,” he said. “Coulson had good carpenter on retainer, I call her.”

Clint winced. “Maybe give me a chance to finish cleaning, first. It got a little… messy. And, um…” he rubbed the back of his neck, not sure how to proceed. It seemed like an asshole move to just come out and say it, but he couldn’t not tell Basil what had happened. “Um, so, there were a lot of guys that attacked us, and in all the confusion, Ivan…” how did you say “got his head bashed in with a bat and was also shot, and we don’t know which one killed him” without sounding insensitive? This was why Phil always talked to the civilians.

“Ah,” Basil said, his voice gone quiet, his mustache drooping. “No, don’t say it, bro. I see.”

“I’m really sorry,” Clint told him. “It was an accident. It might have even been friendly fire. We were so busy fighting…”

“Nah, bro,” Basil said. He set down his knitting and helped himself to a cookie. “Ivan, he made his choice. If not for you, bro, would be Basil needing cleaned up. Not your fault.” He sighed around his mouthful of crunchy butterscotch. “Is just, bad family is still family, you know? And he was the last.”

“Aw, Basil, no,” Clint said. “I mean, you still have me and Kate, right? And Simone and Grills and all the people in the building, they love you, man. They couldn’t wait for you to get back.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Edna demanded, putting another slug of brandy into everyone’s mug. “You still have to show me how to make those jam things.”

Over breakfast the next morning, when they were discussing whether Clint might want to move into the building in Bed-Stuy, the Phil Phone chimed its email notification. Clint pulled it out of his pocket and scanned the new message. Then he backed up and read it again, slowly. Then he flopped forward dramatically to bang his head on the table.

“‘You just put your hair in your pancake syrup,’” Edna told him. “‘What’s the problem? Aliens again?’”

Clint just groaned. ‘Goddammit, Phil,’” he muttered. “‘Steve is gonna kill me.”

Chapter End Notes

Rosemary Boxer and Laura Thyme are from, well "Rosemary and Thyme," yet another cozy BBC mystery series. Basil, like Waarzegster, made his debut over in the Two Man Rule series, ported over to Male Order Bride, and has since popped up in off-screen roles in Operation Snapdragon and other fine fics.
The Convention Job

Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

Clint gets an IOU request he can't ignore-- and neither can Steve.

Chapter Notes

Yeah we're still updating! This is just a nice, long, juicy chapter. If you can't wait for the updates on AO3, go to tumblr for the daily update!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can’t believe you talked me into this,” Steve said as he adjusted his shield. He fiddled with it for a long moment, trying to get the weight to settle right on his arm, then moved on to pulling at his chin strap. It was the most nervous Clint had ever seen him.

“Excuse me, I’m pretty damn sure I remember you insisting, even after I said ‘oh god, Steve, that’s a horrible idea.’”

“Exactly,” Steve said. He poked his head out the door and grimaced. Clint was nearly sure he heard Steve, Captain America himself, supersoldier and Avenger, eep.

“It’s not so bad,” Clint told him, and reached out to open the doors, “once you get used to it.”

“How could anyone ever get used to… that?”

Clint clapped Steve briskly on the shoulder and adjusted his bowler hat. “Chin up, soldier,” he said, trying to sound like an old movie. “You’ve lived through worse.”

Steve looked pained.

“Just remember,” Clint said, in his normal voice. “It’s all for the mission.”

“The mission. Right. Yeah.” Steve took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and stepped out into the stream of cosplayers headed toward the admission line. Clint pulled out his camera and snapped a quick shot of him looking mournfully at the big sign welcoming everyone to the convention, his slightly-too-small Captain America costume pulling funny across his shoulders, his plastic replica shield drooping in his hands as a sea of Captain America enthusiasts made their way into their holy city.

WELCOME TO CAPCON 2014, the banner read.
STEVE ROGERS LIVES!

--
The real stroke of genius, Clint thought, had been convincing Steve to cosplay as himself.

“Look, man,” he’d told him. “If you show up with a baseball cap and aviator shades, every nerd in the place is gonna know it’s you. These people are serious, okay? They have pictures of you on their walls and shit. They probably know your face better than you do at this point.”

“I just don’t see how dressing me up as myself is going to make me less recognizable.”

“Because there’s going to be hundreds of people dressed up as you. Here, look.” He fiddled with his phone and pulled up the Instagram feeds from CapCon 2013, searching for the #capcosplay tag, and handed it to Steve.

There were old Steves and young Steves and black Steves and female Steves, World War II Steves and USO Steves and Battle of New York Steves, sepia-toned Steves and skinny pre-serum Steves. There were people dressed up as stormtroopers dressed as Steve. There were people dressed up as robots dressed as Steve. There were people dressed up as steampunk Steve. There were people dressed up as the terrible, terrible movie version of Steve from the 70s, complete with fake pornstaches. One inspired person was wearing a llama costume, and the costume was dressed up as Steve.

“I think Captain Llamerica there is my favorite,” Clint said.

“What the hell is wrong with the future,” Steve said weakly.

--

To: nockitoff@gmail.com
From: CapCollectr44@yahoo.com via Mailbot Auto-Forward: jiminezpc@aol.com
Subject: Fwd: calling in a favor

Phil,

Hey, man, how’s it going? I haven’t seen you around the forums in a while. Hope you’re still enjoying the cards.

Remember when I found you the USO 45 in near-mint, and you said you owed me one, and I said forget it? Well… shit. I feel terrible saying this, P, but I think I may need to call in that favor after all.

Do you remember Brandon? Thing is, he got himself in a little bit of trouble. Money trouble. The kind of money trouble where baseball bats get involved. He got roughed up on the way home one night last week; a warning. Then someone came to pay me a little visit. Said he was there to help, give me a way to pay Brandon’s debts off.

He called it “consignment sales” but I’m pretty sure it’s something illegal. He knows I’m vending at CapCon this year again and he wants me to carry some merch in my booth. Worthless crap, bad fakes, but I’m to mark it up and only sell it to people that give me the code word. Then after the show I pass along the “consignment” money back to him.

I don’t know what to do. If it gets out that I’m selling fakes, my reputation is shot and my business will tank. But if I don’t… I don’t have the kind of money it would take to buy Brandon out of his debt, and I sure don’t want any more attention from the guy who came to see me.

Is there anything you can do to help? I know we joke about how you’re probably a secret agent or something but I’m serious, I really need help right now.
I think they’re watching the house, but the con will be slammed. If you come by I can find a way for us to talk, make it look like we’re negotiating a sale. There are rumors of one of the prewar sketchbooks coming on the market.

Seriously, anything you could do would help.

Laurie

1. R. Foster
   Foster’s Fine Antiques and Collectibles
   Specializing in WWII and Captain America
   (347) 227-8246

---

They picked up their badges from the pre-registration line, clipping them to some of the plentiful straps their costumes featured. The badge art was actually pretty cool, a montage of people of various races, ages, and genders, all dressed up as Captain America. Steve didn’t seem to be in the mood to appreciate it, though; Clint could see the whites of his eyes rolling around like a spooked racehorse. He elbowed him behind his plastic shield.

“Lighten up, man,” he said. “You’re supposed to look like you’re having fun, not a colonoscopy.”

Steve snorted, which didn’t do much to lessen the impression of horsiness. “You know, I’ve had one of those,” he said. “Back when I first…” he glanced around, completely unsubtle. “Got here. And you know what, I’m still not a big fan of having people this far up my ass.”

Clint straight up guffawed; he couldn’t help it.

(“Captain America was a soldier,” Phil said in his memory, the two of them shooting the shit over a campfire on some mission somewhere. “Of course he swore. The whole ‘watch your language’ thing was all propaganda from the fifties.”)

Phil would have loved this so much. It was Clint’s duty to enjoy it in his honor.

They barely made it inside the main convention hall when the requests for selfies started. It wasn’t that their costumes were especially good--on the contrary, they had been specially designed to convey a certain “happy hands at home” aesthetic that in no way bore the aura of Stark money or authenticity--but even in a building full of Captains America, Steve was still a lot more beefcake than was generally in evidence at any gathering of regular people. Hell, Clint was getting his share of attention, and he was wearing a bowler hat and a tragic fake mustache that he’d nicknamed “Wendy.”

A lot of the selfie requests were people who seemed mainly motivated by the desire to poke Steve’s chest to see if his muscles were real or padding, but as they approached the dealer hall they started hitting the heavy cosplay crowd, and a lot of them wanted Clint and Steve to actually do poses. Clint could actually see the moment when Steve shook his head, rolled his shoulders, and turned on the biggest, cheesiest Captain America voice Clint had ever heard--and Phil had had bootlegs of every recording of Captain America’s voice ever made, Clint was pretty sure.

A pair of sisters dressed as USO girls who were, apparently, great-granddaughters of one of the actual USO girls--and Steve had had a narrow escape from saying that he remembered her, Clint could tell--actually got Steve to pose between them and say “Every bond is a bullet in the barrel of your best guy’s gun!” while Clint recorded it on video.
He might have sent a copy to himself. For posterity.

Things were going pretty well, all told, and then Clint turned back from taking a selfie with a woman dressed as female Dum Dum when he heard Steve suck in a strangled-sounding breath.

Walking past them was what appeared to be a pitch-perfect period-correct Bucky Barnes and Peggy Carter, holding hands.

Clint could see the small differences--their faces bore only superficial resemblances--but the overall impression was startling, even in that setting.

“Hey, man,” Clint said, nudging Steve with his elbow. “Come on, dealers are this way.”

Steve followed him without a word.

---

Foster’s Fine Antiques and Collectibles apparently traded as Howling Homefront on the convention circuit, but Clint found it just where he’d expected it to be, mid-way down a middle aisle. It was marginally less-crowded than some of the surrounding booths, and flanked with zig-zagged plexiglass cases full of cards and trinkets. Pride of place went to a wind-up tin Captain America flanking one side, fitfully marching whenever someone jostled it.

“Oh god,” Steve groaned when he saw it, and Clint patted his back.

“Hi,” he said as he sidled up between a fem!Falsworth who was flipping through cards in a protective binder and a larger guy in a reproduction Cap uniform from the war years who was poking at the mechanical Captain to see if he could stop its march.

“Hi,” said the small, rather frazzled-looking woman behind the counter, pasting a smile on her face. “What can I do for you?”

“Well…” Clint said, adjusting his bowler upwards so his face showed a little better, “I heard you were the place to go for the good stuff?”

“‘The good stuff,’” the woman repeated, looking at him skeptically. “Well, feel free to look around.” She indicated the booth with a sweep of her hand, and removed the little tin Cap from the reach of its tormenter as she did.

“Yeah, no, I see that,” Clint said, “that Cap and Bucky looks like it’s from the ‘52 run, the one they pulled with the blemish. Nice. Friend of mine had that-- whole set really. Slight foxing. But that’s not what I’m here for. I go more for the real one-of-a-kind stuff. I hear you can get a hold of that sometimes?”

“Maybe,” the woman asked, side-eying Steve as he came up to look at a set of old Women’s Home magazines, “depends on what you’re looking for.”

“ Heard a prewar sketchbook that’d been in private hands was coming up for auction? You hear anything about that?” Clint asked, and had the satisfaction of seeing her sit straight up, her gaze turning sharper-- and confused.

“Yeah, yeah I heard about that. Hasn’t been authenticated yet-- can I help you?” she asked Steve.

“Who’s Betty Carver? I mean-- why’s she-- what’s this?” Steve asked, poking at the magazines, which featured Arlene French, Voice of Captain America’s Sweetheart, on the cover.
“Well,” the woman-- Laurie-- started, and was promptly cut off.

“Oh, everybody knows who Betty Carver was,” said the cosplayer who’d been tormenting the Cap Tin America (Clint cracked himself up sometimes), “don’t be stupid. The radio shows? ‘Oh! If only Captain America were here to rescue me!’ Or-- oh. I see. Let me guess; you’re new to the fandom, right? Just got in after they unfroze Rogers? Yeah I can tell by the costume. It’s kinda basic. Congrats on the voice, though.”

Steve blinked at him, hard, and Clint was desperately glad he’d held firm on the plastic shield. He didn’t want to see what vibranium would do to the guy’s skull.

“So she was supposed to be a fictional version of Peggy Carter?” Steve asked, ignoring the implications about his lack of long-term Captain credentials. “Really? That doesn’t sound like anything she’d say. Ever.”

“Yeah well,” the guy sniffed, “it was the ‘40s, whaddya gonna do? Not like anyone cared what Carter was like, right? She wasn’t that important then—”

“Wasn’t—” Steve choked, and Clint grabbed his wrist. “Wasn’t— look here, you—”

“Are you interested in Peggy Carter,” Laurie asked loudly, while yanking her display cases back from the edge of the table, “because I know where you can get her.”

Steve froze.

“Um,” Laurie said, probably as aware as Clint that could be misconstrued in a venue with at least a dozen Peggy Carter cosplayers wandering around. “I mean, Strategic Scientific Replicas, over in aisle two. They’re the best. For Carter items. They uh, they uh, they even have signed programs from her Medal of Freedom award ceremony. Not signed by her of course. Or by Gerald Ford. That’s way too spendy for anybody here. But, by some of the other commandos.”

“Her—” Steve went blank, and looked at Clint, who licked his lips. He never had been sure whether Steve had found it too painful to read up on Peggy Carter much, or whether he’d devoured every scrap of her he could find, like Clint had been doing with Phil. Before he could say anything, Steve started up again. “Oh. Oh yes... When she was Director. I was... I was confusing it with... right. I’ll—” he darted a glance over at aisle two, clearly actually torn.

“I’ll be all right, buddy,” Clint told him, “this could take a while. Just stay in shouting distance?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, nodding his head and scratching his ear to indicate that he’d be on comms if Clint needed him. “I’ll go.”

He shot a last, invidious, glance at the cosplayer and turned on his heel.

“Wait a minute,” he heard Laurie mutter as Steve walked away. Clint turned back to find her watching his ass.

The penny dropped.

“Was... is... was...” she said.

“Yep,” Clint told her, and she looked back up at him. She squinted. Clint pasted a smile on his face and resisted the urge to show her his own backside, for verification purposes.

“Does that make you...”
“I’m Clint,” he told her, holding out his hand and putting her out of her misery. “Looks like I hit a bullseye when I came to you. Friend of mine, Phil, told me you’d have the goods.”

“How is… how is Phil?” she asked faintly, clearly re-categorizing him in her mind, “we haven’t seen him in ages. He had a-- oh! He’s your friend with the slightly foxed--”

“Yeah uh,” Clint said, watching the cosplayer out of the corner of his eye and deciding the guy had moved far enough away-- to the next booth over, which was hawking replica Commandos gear-- that he didn’t have to worry about the catch in his voice, “he uh, died. In the Battle of New York.” (Clint always hated that bit, the implication that Phil’d been caught by the Chitauri or by the collateral damage, but before the battle was… it gave too much away and simultaneously not nearly enough.)

“Ohhhhhhh,” Laurie sniffed. “Oh, noooooo. Oh shoot, and here I’d finally found that Captain America Code Book he was looking for.”

For a moment, she clearly forgot what Clint had come for, but then her gaze sharpened.

“You’re um, he… he recommended me?”

“He did,” Clint said firmly. “About the sketchbook. But you know what I’d really like, if you’re okay with me killing time while Stevie over there indulges in his Peggy obsession? I’d really like you to tell me about Phil.”

---

“…and then he just shot his cuffs and looked over his sunglasses at Bernard and said, “that’s the last time he’ll fish over the limit.”

“Oh my god, he didn’t. No, what am I saying, of course he did, that’s him all over.” Clint sniffled a little under his moustache.

“It was certainly the most excitement the Great Lakes Captain America Society had ever seen. Even more than when Mary Ellen Sanders found a picture in her attic of Captain America kissing her mother as a baby.”

Clint noticed movement out of the corner of his eye; Captain ‘Who Cares About Peggy Carter ‘ was back, poking at an album of postcards at the next booth. Dick. He sighed, lowering his voice. “So, I guess we probably should discuss the… sketchbook.”

---

“Yeah, the sketch-- goddamnit I thought he left,” Laurie muttered, glancing to her side. Clint followed her gaze to see that she’d noticed Crappy Cap the Capsplaining Cosplayer too. When the guy had left after Steve, and Clint had been relieved to see the back of him. (Well, relieved to see him walk away-- his backside was… not his most Cap-accurate feature.) Clint didn't really want hostile witnesses when shit went down with the money launderers.

Crappy Cap looked like he was at least partly chastened, anyway. He darted a glance at them but then pretended he hadn’t been looking. Sadly, he seemed determined to remain at the next booth, hovering and getting fingerprints over all the plastic jackets.

“Excuse me,” said a young voice, and Clint looked back over his other shoulder. A Peggy Carter
cosplayer who couldn’t have been more than a sophomore was standing there, looking earnestly at Laurie from under her oversized victory rolls. “I heard you had some in the box 1776 Star Spangled Captain Sunshine Family dolls?”

Clint watched Laurie’s hands start to shake.

“Uh,” she said, and then, wordlessly, “oh god.”

Clint found himself repeating the sentiment, ’cause it was pretty clear that this was their mark.

Glancing up at Clint nervously, Laurie reached down and pulled a blister packed doll out of a box. It had painted-on blonde hair and a fatuous smile, and was wearing a Cap outfit with a tricorner hat on top of it.

Clint was suddenly very glad Steve had disappeared.

“Yeah um, yeah um that,” the girl said, poking at the box and grimacing. “How much?” She was already starting to dig a crisp roll of bills out of her purse, because whoever had given her instructions hadn’t even thought to make the money not look like it came right out of a pimp’s pocket.

There was no way in hell Clint could let the kid get picked up as part of a money laundering scheme. Except he needed proof, he needed the thing to change hands-- the girl fluffed her victory rolls nervously, and Clint realized Steve’d kill him if he let an underage Peggy-admirer get in trouble.

He closed his eyes and threw his plan in the metaphorical trash.

“Yo, woah,” Clint said, leaning over and grabbing the doll out of Laurie’s hands. He flipped it over and squinted at it. “Woah um… you promised me this one.”

“I-- what?” Laurie asked, as the girl’s eyes grew wide.

“You promised me this one. C’mon. What are you trying to pull on me, lady?”

“But--” the girl said, wringing her hands. “But but… I… I need it! For um, for my brother!”

“Your brother can go--” Clint started, pulling the box out of her reach. Her face crumbled and Clint fought down the urge to apologize to her and Steve and Director Carter and Phil himself. I’m not really a dick, I promise kid.

“Wait a minute, son,” someone said next to him, and it took Clint a moment to realize it was the Crappy Cap with an even crappier Cap Impression, “I’m pretty sure the little lady got it first.”

Speaking of dicks, here's one now!

“Look, dude,” Clint said, rounding on him, “I don’t appreciate the interference.”

“You’re not meant to. We don’t like bullies here,” Crappy Cap told him. A murmur of agreement from behind him told Clint that a crowd had gathered, and was starting to consider becoming a mob.

Shit.

Oh, well, may as well go with the flow and hope he could figure out a way out.
“Nobody’s trying to bully anybody,” Clint snarled at him. “I just want what I was promised.”

“Yeah well yelling at a kid isn’t going to get you what you-- hey, come back here! Kid! I’m trying to get you your doll!”

While Clint and Cap had been going toe-to-toe, the girl had started to slink away. Crappy Cap reached out and grabbed her, pulling her back to him. She looked like she’d rather be pretty much anywhere else, but froze in place.

“She doesn’t look that interested in it now,” Clint said, and CrapCap snorted.

“She’s scared of you. But we’re gonna make sure she gets that doll one way or another, right kid?” He shook her when she didn’t answer.

“Who’s she scared of?” Clint sneered at him, sensing his moment. “‘Cause you’re the one who yanked her back over and is fucking shaking her. Can’t honestly tell me that’s something Captain America would do, can you?”

Murmurred nos from the crowd, and Clint decided he just might salvage this one yet.

“She doesn’t mind, do you girl? And I don’t know what your problem is, not like there aren’t more damn dolls,” Crappy Cap said.

“How do you know that?” Clint snapped, “and if there are why do you-- wait.” He looked down at the box, flipped it over, squinted real hard, and held his breath until he felt the silence stretch as far as it could without breaking. “Waaaaait a minute. Look at this! D’you see this, man?” He shoved the box in the guy’s face, then pulled it back. “The hat! It’s black! Not navy! This is… good god. This is the Black Hat variant Cap! Holy shit! Holy fucking-- wait. You. How much were you selling this for again?”

Laurie opened her mouth, but Clint ran right over her-- the last thing he wanted her to do was actually throw out a number.

“Not enough,” he said, peremptorily. “Didn’t notice the hat, did you?”

She shook her head.

“But you did,” Clint said, whirling to poke at Crappy Cap some more. “I saw you lurking around earlier. You knew how much it was worth but you didn’t want to tip the lady off, did you? Didn’t want her to look close. So, what, you gave this kid some cash and asked her to pick it up for you? I mean really, look, that’s not even-- that’s an actual cash roll, dude. You planning to have her turn it over then make some bank on it yourself later on? What, were you planning on having her buy a whole box or what?”

“No… no that’s not it,” Crappy Cap said, looking startled, as well he might. “I wasn’t-- I didn’t. Look, you’re the one who was so fucking excited to get this doll, so it was probably you who was trying to put one over on the lady. Wasn’t it?”

Which… was a perfectly logical alternate explanation, indeed. Clint’s mental hamster wheel spun.

As it did, he could feel the crowd poised, wobbling back and forth between them, trying to decide who to believe. If he couldn’t push them over--

“Excuse me,” said a small voice, and they all looked down to see a skinny kid in a Bucky outfit standing in front of the booth. “I uh--” their eyes darted nervously towards Crappy Cap, then back,
“I uh want to buy a doll?”

And they held out a fat roll of cash.

“WELL,” Clint said, rounding on Crappy Cap, “I never.”

“Eep,” Crappy Cap replied-- and took off running.

---

There were a few angry shouts as he shoved through the crowd, but it was a crowd of civilians--of civilian Captain America fans--so Clint’s attempts to get after him were hampered by the pack of them, affronted and rubbernecking.

“Keep the kids there!” he called over his shoulder to Laurie, then hit his comm.

“Suspect heading your way, it’s the guy who said Director Carter wasn’t important,” he said, struggling through the crowd and nearly getting impaled on the end of an over-enthusiastic Bucky’s sniper rifle. “He knows I’m onto him and is trying to make a break for it.”

“What happened to ‘follow him from a distance and find out who the mastermind is’?” Steve demanded.

“That plan was overtaken by events,” Clint told him. “I’ll tell you later, but we have to stop this guy now!” The vendor in the booth next to him had stood up and was showing off some cufflinks to a gender-swapped Gabe Jones cosplayer; Clint jumped up on the seat of the vacant chair, ignoring the indignant “Hey!” of its owner, and looked for Crappy Cap. “Okay, he’s about ten meters away from the north end of Aisle 234,” he said. “Can you get there? Block him from the exits?”

“I think we can handle that,” Steve said.

“We?” Clint asked. From his vantage point on the chair, he could see the suspect getting close to the end of the aisle, and he wished he’d been able to find a way to work a bow and arrows into his costume. He had a few weapons stashed on his person, of course, but nothing he was confident he could use non-lethally in such a dense crowd.

“Come on, come on,” he muttered, and then Crap Cap reached the end of the aisle--

And stopped short, skidding a little--

And turned right back around the way he came and ran, his way blocked by a wave of--oh god--of Peggy Carter cosplayers, standing arm in arm across the full width of the aisle, a sea of angry faces set off by crimson lipstick and glossy curls, like some sort of terrifying erotic nightmare that Clint was probably definitely going to have now.

One of the Peggys brandished her replica Medal of Freedom threateningly, and Clint shook off his stupor and gathered himself, ready to leap as soon as the suspect got close enough. From the other side of the aisle, Steve stepped out from in between two booths.

Crap Cap caught sight of them as he approached, and before he got into range he grabbed the closest cosplayer and yanked them over against him, pulling a-- shit, a real knife out of his utility belt and putting it to her throat. She couldn’t be more than about eighteen, and was wearing an old-fashioned Stark Industries lab coat. He whispered something into her ear, and she froze, her eyes wide with terror.
“It’s a Hydra spy!” Crap Cap proclaimed in his terrible Cap voice, and--was he--was he seriously going to try to bluff his way out of this by pretending it was some kind of role play?

“Y-you’ll never convince m-me to talk!” the girl said, voice quavering.

“Hey, no LARPing on the dealer floor,” a passing Falsworth said, annoyed. “It holds up traffic.”

Clint exchanged glances with Steve. It was ridiculous, for two Avengers to be thwarted by a low-level penny ante crook like this, but you couldn’t exactly neutralize someone in the middle of a literal shoulder-to-shoulder crowd of civilians. Crap Cap got past them, moving away from the blockading Peggys toward the other end of the aisle. Steve and Clint tried to keep up without blatantly shoving people over, but they still ended up a good distance away. Once he was close to the last booth, Crap Cap shoved his hostage away into a rack of hoodies that looked like Cap’s uniform and made a break for it.

“Shit!” Clint gave up on the packed aisle and started making his way through the booths, vaulting over barriers in an effort to catch up. He couldn’t believe that after all this, the guy was going to get away--they’d have to track him down outside the convention, the whole thing was going to be a tremendous mess, he should have swallowed his pride and read someone else into this--fuck, Phil, he was so sorry--

“Stop!” Steve straightened up to his full height, ripping off the cheap polyester cowl. “Everyone down!” he bellowed, in his deep, resonant, unmistakably real Captain America command tone. Straight down the aisle, dozens of cosplayers folded to the floor, their faces turned Capward like some kind of painting of a heavenly visitation. Clint’s own legs quivered with the impulse to obey, but he kept running, jumping over tables of merch toward the place where Crap Cap was trying to make it to the fire exit.

Steve grabbed his plastic shield off his back, muscles straining the seams of his costume, and hurled it down the aisle, over the heads of the cowering conventioneers. It banked off a support pillar and caught the fleeing man square in the ankles of his (historically inaccurate) boots, sending him flying.

“Detain that man!” Steve yelled, and before Clint could make it over with his cable ties, the suspect vanished beneath a mountain of red, white, and blue sequins as a group of at least twenty USO chorus line dancers came around the corner and threw themselves on top of him.

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By the time convention security had made it through the muddle, Crappy Cap seemed resigned to his fate; one of the USO girls had tied him up using her stockings, and two others were standing guard. Steve seemed very pleased with this turn of events, and was taking the opportunity to lecture the guy on the merits of Director Margaret Carter. He was backed up by a kind of Greek chorus of Peggys.

Clint left them to it and went to make sure the kids he’d left with Laurie were all right. They were; Laurie had taken them behind the table at her booth and was jollying them along. They’d also been joined by another four tweens, each with their own cash roll.

“Holy--” Clint said, before Laurie’s glare made him bite back the curse at the end of it. He didn’t bother telling her the kids probably knew anything he’d have ended that sentence with already.

He took them off her hands and led them back to Steve, all six of them clearly half-convinced they were about to land in jail.
“Absolutely not,” Steve said, with all the righteous conviction he was capable of, even in a Made in Korea cowl, “you helped us apprehend a dangerous criminal. Doing your civic duty.”

Clint bit his lip against laughter this time and followed along after them. For a guy who seemed to genuinely hate the showman aspects of his early career, Steve sure did know when to pull out the melodrama.

Not that Clint had much room to talk.

The convention staff found them a room to use, some kind of dispatch area for the AV staff. With Steve leading the interrogation, Crappy Cap gave up way more than expected. He was also a hell of a lot higher on the mobster food chain than Clint had figured he’d be. As it turned out, he’d decided to run this operation personally because he was going to be at CapCon anyway-- he went every year.

He was a big fan.

“And yet,” Steve sighed, in his best Disappointed Cap voice, the one that made Tony glare and leave rooms, “you clearly misunderstood what Captain America stands for.”

“Yeah yeah, truth, justice, the American Way, law and order,” Crappy Cap grumbled and that was it, Clint was done. This whole damn operation had gotten way the hell out of hand already but the last thing he was going to do was stand around while someone who supposedly admired Steve cast him as a fucking Dudley Do-Right.

“Law and order my ass,” he said, and Steve gave him a rather amused side-eye. “If that back there in the hall was your idea of order what the hell is your definition of chaos. Nuh-uh. Steve’s more like truth, justice, and a complete and total inability to just fucking stand down for a minute. He probably stands for recklessness, too.”

“I don’t think that was really my point,” Steve protested, and Clint shrugged.

“I call it like I see it. But go on, don’t let me stop you.”

“No, it’s fine, the speech has kind of lost momentum now,” Steve said, sighing. “I think I was just going to finish with something like ‘and the one thing Captain America tries not to do is be a dick’... only I was going to make it more, um, I was going to do it in my own particular…”

“Idiom?”

“Yeah… that. Oh well, as long as I’m here--” he pulled his cowl back up, turned to the utterly morose Crappy Cap, and intoned in his absolute best command voice, “don’t be a dick.”

----

“Honestly,” Laurie said later, “Thank you so much. I was so afraid that Brandon… well. I’m sure you understand.”

“Yeah.” Clint smiled at her. “Maybe he’ll stay out of trouble this time, huh?”

“He will if he knows what’s good for him.” She sighed. “Seriously, though, if there’s ever anything I can do for you…”

“Actually,” Clint said. “You mentioned you’d found something Phil had been looking for? Do you think I could buy it? Like… in his honor, kind of.”
“Oh.” She looked a little misty. “Oh, of course. I think that would be perfect.” She patted his arm. “You know, Phil was such a friendly person; people liked him everywhere he went. But he just seemed so lonely sometimes. I used to worry about him. I’m so glad he had someone like you in his life.”

“I think the pleasure was all mine, honestly,” Clint said, his voice gone rough. “But I hope you’re right. I hope he knew how much he meant to me. I… I think he did.”

“I’m sure he did,” Laurie said.

“Excuse me, Clint,” Steve said, coming up to hover awkwardly at his elbow. “Can you take my picture with Captain Llamerica?”

---

Sometime later, after Steve had finally gotten his—and his SD card’s—fill of pictures with cosplayers, he and Clint slumped together against a wall. Wendy had fallen off Clint’s face sometime ages back and been handed back to him with due reverence by a kid Gabe Jones. Clint’d stuck it on the kid’s upturned lip, and from there Wendy’d made its way around the convention hall, reappearing once or twice beneath strangers’ noses in the crowd.

Clint felt about like Wendy, he figured: frazzled and half unglued. He sighed, and turned back to Steve, who was flipping through pictures of himself Peggy cosplayers. One wore Wendy.

“Harder than you thought?” he asked, as Steve chuckled weakly over the peripatetic mustache.

“It’s just…it’s good to see that some people still remember her.” Steve shook his head like he was trying to clear off cobwebs. “The right way, I mean. As…as she…” He heaved a sigh before finishing in a small, sad voice, “was.”

Clint’s stomach twisted, and he wanted to pour out the whole story about Phil, about himself, about Phil and himself, suddenly certain Steve would understand. It was not the time or place, though, so he just nodded to show he was listening. Steve kept scrolling through the pictures on his phone, a strangely nostalgic smile tugging at his lips.

“She’s always happy to see me when I go.” Steve wore his most earnest eyes, and Clint thought again that maybe Phil had Steve dead to rights when he talked about him being an ordinary man in extraordinary circumstance. “Sometimes she just…she forgets that I’m back. That I’ve been back. It’s…it’s hard.”

Clint patted his shoulder in a comforting kind of way. He’d gotten more than his fair share of comfort since taking on the IOUs, and it felt good to give some back.

“So that’s why I’ve stuck with SHIELD, even though…” Steve shook his head again. “Anyway, this was a…an interesting experience.”

No one has ever put so much meaning into the word “interesting” before, Clint was certain.

“The costumes, the enthusiasm, the…the…” Steve looked around the quickly emptying hall, watching a few tired con attendees peel off the last few pieces of their costumes and pack away their purchases. “I think it was…was hardest seeing that Sergeant Barnes cosplayer with the gal dressed as Peggy. Just…”

Steve trailed off again, and Clint swallowed hard around the lump in his throat. The loss of his boyhood best friend and the loss of what he could have had with Peggy obviously were holes that
still hadn’t healed yet. Clint understood; he might have gotten used to Phil being gone, but he didn’t think he could ever get used to not having him anymore.

Which didn’t make a bit of sense, but it was how Clint felt, especially with the neat little paper parcel held reverently in his own hands. He had started out without a clear idea of what to do with his purchase, but then it hit him like a bolt. The next time he could get to DC, he’d put it in Phil’s vault, one more momento to a promise that, while not broken, hadn’t exactly been kept.

A vibration from one of Clint’s many pants pockets startled him out of his morose reverie, and he fumbled package and buttons and phone before he managed to glance at the screen. He gave Steve the universal I gotta take this apologetic grin and swiped his thumb across the screen to answer.

“Hey, Basil, what’s up?” Clint asked, wedging his phone under his shoulder to free up his hands.

“You got mail, bro,” Basil said, almost over his greeting.

“Yeah? Okay, set it on the, um, on a pile or something and I’ll pick it up when--”

“No, you got mail, bro. The kind mail you keep in a pretty little chest.”

“Jesus,” Clint said, nearly dropping the phone as he straightened in shock. “From-- how the hell long was that in transit?” It’d been, what, close on two years since Phil could have drawn up his last IOU. Had it come by actual snail?

“No, no, bro, you don’t understand.” Something in Basil’s voice gave Clint pause, and he felt his heart begin to thud in his chest. “Is recent, bro. Is dated two days ago.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Chapter 15 has started on tumblr.
Art by Snow: Will You Take My Picture With Captain Llamerica?

Chapter by Laura Kaye (laurakaye), zappedbysnow

Chapter Summary

Amazing illustration of Chapter 14, The Convention Job, by the ever-talented Snow!

We're extremely excited to present this great illustration of one of our favorite moments in Passepartout - CapCon!

Please make sure to tell Snow how amazing her work is! (Click to embiggen)
You've Got Mail

Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

Clint picks up the mail.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Bro?” Basil’s voice called from the floor, echoing in the hall, “bro?”

“Yeah,” Clint said, then looked down at his phone, still lying where he had dropped it in his shock. He scooped it up with shaking hands and held it to his ear. “Yeah, I’m here Basil.”

He looked back reflexively, not sure who he was afraid of overhearing or what would happen if someone did. Not like anyone would understand the importance of a couple day old bit of mail from someone who… no, from someone who might have spoken to… no.

Impossible to finish that thought; while post offices might feel like portals to the underworld this’d be the first time he’d heard of mail from beyond the grave.

Except Clint’s never that dormant intelligence training was reminding him that he’d never seen the body. He might not believe in ghosts-- not even after all the weird shit he’d been through-- but he’d seen dead guys come back to life. It was just a risk of working at SHIELD; it happened sometimes that people you thought were kaput were actually only undercover or in retirement or had been given new names and faces and shipped to Boca Raton.

But it seemed like a hell of an effort for Fury to go through, forcing them all to sit through the fucking farce of reading the will, Fury making himself cry crocodile tears, just for this. What the hell would be bad enough to make that seem reasonable?

Clint shook his head, trying to dislodge the thought. That was where it started, the descent into conspiracy theories he couldn’t afford to indulge.

“What… what you want me to do, bro?”

“I.” What did Clint want, besides immediate answers? A fingerprint kit? Handwriting analysis? 8x10 glossy photos with circles and arrows on the back of each one? A miracle?

He closed his eyes and tried to force his breath to come out normal. It was going to be something completely mundane. The post office was late, someone fucked up the year they wrote it, Basil misread something, it was someone else’s mail entirely, and he was going to feel lost and bereft all over again, as if Phil had died twice, even though he didn’t believe a scrap of the conspiracy theories his mind was reeling in front of him.

But the only way to be sure was to see the fucking paper. To confront it, debunk it, and deal with the hole it was going to leave in his heart.
“I’ll be right there,” he told Basil. “Keep it safe.”

---

In the end, Clint came alone. He’d thought about bringing Kate for backup, or Natasha for another set of eyes, or Edna for moral support and possibly her body disposal skills. But that would be silly, because any of the above would imply that this… this thing Basil had received had come from Phil and last week, and that was bound to be untrue.

Then, when he finally had to confront that for real, he’d be stuck with Kate or Natasha or Edna or whoever looking at him with that weird crinkled sympathy-face like maybe he was cracking after all. And it would be all over some dingy piece of paper with a smudged date that could have been a ‘14 yeah but clearly was actually a… a… a something. A really weird ‘12. Or it had gotten misdirected. Or it was just, like, an invoice for drycleaning.

It wasn’t going to be the hundred-to-one shot coming home.

Not with Clint’s luck.

So Clint came alone, and Basil met him at the door to the little apartment, now cleaned and repaired. And Basil brought him over to the new couch that still somehow looked ratty, on top of the new rug that still somehow looked worn. And Basil sat him down.

He put a beer down on the coffee table next to Clint, and a stained manila envelope in his hand. The envelope was upside-down. Clint left it like that as he opened it and drew out the paper inside. It was a kid’s menu from a diner, stained with ketchup. Written on the back, in purple crayon, were the words

_I owe you three fifty._

Clint blinked. The words were written in the block caps of a man who’d never felt comfortable in his handwriting-- which was most of the male population under 50, but definitely did not describe Phil. Clint flipped the menu over twice, then looked up at Basil in confusion before turning over the envelope at last.

Phil’s neat handwriting, executed in his usual black extra fine, scrawled across the front. He’d written the mailing address; there was no return listed. A black forever stamp with flag and firework graced the front.

“What?” Clint asked, when he could think through the shock enough to form a word.

“SASE, bro,” Basil said, sitting next to him. “He gave ‘em out with IOUs sometimes. Lots of ‘em arrived in these.”

“So… someone could’ve been holding on to this a while.”

It had to be. Had to.

“Naw bro, Basil’s not born yesterday. He googled. New issue.” Basil tapped the stamp. “Anyway, is post-it, yeah?”
“Is?” Clint asked and, on having that confirmed, opened the envelope and looked inside. There was a mangled post-it stuck to the inner surface. As he drew it out, Clint tried to calm his breathing. His brain kept trying to get back on track and he couldn’t let it, he wouldn’t survive.

No use thinking yet, better just to see.

For the chest, the post-it read, in Phil’s old personal code. Giver “Kurt,” code A-21 variant B. And, in clear, a date: 3/27/14.

Well that was fairly unambiguous.

“…” Clint said, staring at the post-it stuck to his fingers.

“Yeah bro, Basil knows. Heavy, bro.” Basil reached out to pat him on the shoulder, then stopped, like he thought Clint’d tumble down if nudged.

Clint wasn’t so sure he wasn’t right.

“It could be…” Clint started, then stopped. It couldn’t really be an impersonator; Clint was the only one who knew Phil’s code system. The envelope could have been old, the menu a random hoax, even the post-it could have been done by someone mimicking Phil’s hand, but they wouldn’t know the code. And the date— why on earth would Phil have post-dated a post-it?

The hundred-to-one shot might’ve come home after all.

“I…” Clint said, and then felt his voice leave him. I think he’s alive, he mouthed.

There was no conviction behind the words, no sense it was really true. It just… couldn’t be otherwise.

“What… what we do, bro?” Basil asked, finally.

Clint felt like the walls had fallen away and the room was surrounded by sea to all horizons.

He was glad Kate wasn’t here, or Edna, or Natasha— especially Natasha. He didn’t want sympathy, or comfort right at the moment but worst of all would’ve been someone making suggestions, being practical, pressuring him to act.

The hollow feeling in his chest was expanding outwards, demanding room. Basil, big and garlic-breathed though he was, somehow didn’t crowd in on him. He did deserve an answer, though.

Clint took a deep breath and looked around the room helplessly, trying to read hidden runes in the patterns on the curtain.

There was nothing.

“You… you… I don’t know, Basil. Hold down the fort.”

“And you, bro?”

“Me?” Clint looked down at the post-it again.

It was Phil all over, undeniably and undoubtedly Phil, an act at once as complex as a rube goldberg machine and stupidly simple. A quick hi here I am that didn’t even go out of its normal way to find
Clint. It just trusted that the wheels that Phil had set in motion years ago, and his knowledge of Clint’s heart-- or habits-- would work the way they ought to and deliver his message.

If, that was, it was actually meant to be a message to Clint. If it wasn’t just Phil picking up where he’d left off as if death-- supposed death, whatever-- had just been a vacation.

Which, who knew, it might have been. Phil had-- presumably-- spent nearly two years not contacting Clint. That… it looked… well, maybe it looked bad. Or maybe it looked SHIELD. There wasn’t any way to tell if Phil hadn’t been able to contact Clint-- hadn’t been alive maybe, or didn’t want to, or flat-out didn’t think about it. No way for Clint to judge until he actually talked to Phil.

And if he was gonna do that, he either got to wait until another IOU showed up-- if one ever did-- or get busy. Clint screwed his lips together one last time, then nodded and looked up.

“I uh, I need to see Director Fury.” Even as he said it, though, it struck Clint the wrong way. That was a hell of a hand to tip to Fury when he didn’t know what role Fury might have played.

“Or this Kurt guy,” he amended. “Yeah, fuck. Him first; I need more intel. Dunno what Phil is up to and I don't want to--”

Clint trailed off as he hit him how strange “Phil is” felt on his tongue after so long. How Phil might actually be currently doing things Clint might mess up. How the two years of no contact might have a real and desperate purpose and Phil might currently be in danger.

He'd gotten unused to Phil as potential not past.

He stood up and started heading rapidly to the door, only to stop in the middle of the rug.

“Gimme the envelope.”

Basil gave, and Clint flipped it over, looking for the postmark. San Francisco.

“Okay. Okay okay.” Clint gave it back, his thumb rubbing hard over Phil’s handwriting. “I’m gonna go. Basil, lemme know if you… yeah.”

He turned away so he didn’t rip the envelope back out of Basil’s hands. He needed it somewhere safe.

“Good luck, bro” Basil told him.

Clint was already nearly out the door, the hollowness turned into a nearly-reflexive need to move, to be gone, to find his answers now. He’d save Basil’s good luck for when he knew what the fuck was going on, and had to figure out how to live with it.
Chapter Summary

Events overtake Clint

Chapter Notes

We spent more time than is probably healthy discussing SHIELD email address formats.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

March 31, 2014
To: njf0002@shield.gov
Cc: mgh0018@SHIELD.gov
From: nockitoff@gmail.com
Subject: taking leave

Fury-- gotta see a man about an IOU in CA. Taking leave like we agreed. Text if needed.

Clint

April 1, 2014
To: nockitoff@gmail.com
From: mgh0018@shield.gov
Cc: njf0002@gmail.com
Subject: re: taking leave

Barton,
Leave rescinded. You’re needed for an urgent mission, eyes only. Report to nearest SHIELD base and contact a Level 10 immediately.

Hill

Text log, Clint Barton’s Starkphone

4/1/2014 07:02 PST
M. Hill: If on ground, report to nearest SHIELD base.
M. Hill: If in transit, respond.
4/1/2014 07:09 PST
M. Hill: Barton, report. Code X22-9-14-Jellyfish

4/1/2014 08:32 PST
M. Hill: Report.
M. Hill: Damnit Barton report now. This is level 10 priority.

4/1/2014 08:47 PST
M. Hill: Damnit Clint if this is a game you are finished
M. Hill: You need to report now

Text log, Nick Fury’s personal phone, registered to Marcus Johnson

4/1/2014 11:49 EST
M. Hill: Barton’s not checking in
M. Hill: he hasn’t contacted any current associates
M. Hill: or received any mail or calls outside the ordinary. Just KB and his caretaker
M. Hill: I can’t tell if it’s more of this IOU wild goose chase
M. Hill: or if he’s compromised
M. Hill: orders?

4/1/2014 11:52 EST
M. Johnson: keep trying
M. Johnson: could be Cheese
M. Johnson: MM is worried
M. Johnson: equally could be legit
M. Johnson: I need his ass here
M. Johnson: Going to see Pierce in a few minutes
M. Johnson: Rogers needs to have backup
M. Johnson: in case

Clint Barton’s text log
4/1/2014 09:00 PST
N. Fury: Barton fucking report damnit

4/1/2014 09:10 PST
Clint: Sir im on my way to report in like Hill asked
N. Fury: about time
N. Fury: Get your ass back here now
N. Fury: This better not have been a damn IOU
Clint: Phone died. Forgot charger. Didn’t get texts till now
Clint: Getting ride but traffic sucks
Clint: borrowed someones harley
Clint: fucker left it on e
Clint: who does that
Clint: also I saw the guy about the IOU
Clint: and I got shit to ask you about that
N. Fury: can’t ask me till you get here
Clint: soon as I get on base I’ll requisition a quinjet
N. Fury: Yes

4/1/2014 09:22 PST
N. Fury: If you’re not on the base stay the fuck away
N. Fury: grab a flight and come home commercial
N. Fury: quiet but quick
Clint: why
N. Fury: don’t ask
N. Fury: just come
N. Fury: I’ll tell Hill to expect you

4/1/2016 12:05 PST
Clint: flight is delayed
Clint: fuck san fran holy fuck
Clint: finally stole a speedboat to get to the airport
Clint: a fucking hour and a half in security
Clint: really could’ve used that quinjet
M. Hill: hurry
Clint: unless you want me to hijack something were working on airline time
M. Hill: keep the possibility open

Text log, private number formerly owned by Phil Coulson, now forwarded to Clint Barton

4/1/2014 12:23 PST
M Johnson: Barton go dark
Clint: who the hell are you
M Johnson: dont be a dumbass
M Johnson: go dark
Clint: sir
Clint: sir?
Clint: shit

4/1/2014 12:35 PST
M Hill: barton go dark

4/1/2014 12:37 PST
M Hill: god I hope you’re on a plane right now

4/1/2014 15:33 PST 1 missed call from a blocked number

4/1/2014 16:24 PST
N Rushman: Clint call me
N Rushman: Clint please call me
N Rushman: Clint Fury’s dead
N Rushman: Steve and I need you
Clint: fuck you Nat
Clint: that’s the worst fucking april fools joke ever
Clint: even worse than Phil and the alpaca
Clint: what the fuck
N Rushman: not a joke
Clint: calling now

4/1/2014 16:36 PST
M Hill: Barton if you’re in the wind stay there
M Hill: get to DC soonest
M Hill: stay quiet and wait for orders
Clint: still in CA
Clint: flight returned after mechanical problem
Clint: unglued armrest in coach
Clint: seriously
Clint: its like someone wants me out of the action
Clint: is Fury dead? Nat called me I need
Clint: I need
Clint: it to not be true I guess
M Hill: im sorry
M Hill: doctors called it
Clint: no
Clint: fuck
Clint: no
M Hill: just get here

4/1/2016 16:37 PST
Clint: yo kurt you know I said we were even?
Clint: I need help
Clint: you got me connections that can get me to the east coast quiet?
Kurt: yes. I will hook you up with my man
Kurt: name is luis
Kurt: Luis knows everybody
Kurt: he get you to east coast pronto

4/1/2016 16:39 PST
Clint: Nat hold tight
Clint: Im on my way

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter starts tonight on tumblr.
Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Planes, no trains, and automobiles.

It wasn’t his heart he’d left in San Francisco, Clint thought morosely as he stared out the window of the plane, it was more like his stomach. Or possibly its contents, if he couldn’t manage to tamp down on the nausea soon. He shifted as far as his seat would allow from the woman next to him, trying to slump down without looking too obviously miserable.

“Hey champ,” she said, glancing over at him, “how’ya holdin’ up?”

The plane banked right slightly, and Clint closed his eyes.

“Fine,” he said. “Just fine.”

“Oh yeah? Not your usual flying style, is it?”

He could smell stale coffee and tobacco on her breath, and it wasn’t helping anything. He shook his head, trying not to regret it.

“Ya, well, got a barf bag if ya need it--” she started to rummage around behind her-- “or a piss bottle. That it? Ya need the bottle?”

“No. But thank you.”

“No problem, you lemme know. Actually, I could use it. Here, you take the con,” she said, releasing her yoke in order to unzip her fly. Clint lurched forward and grabbed his, while averting his eyes. As she shuffled and huffed and things hissed he concentrated on keeping the damn plane in the air.

San Francisco had been one damn gut punch after another; fitting that even getting out of it was making him want to hurl.

It hadn’t been that hard to find Kurt: the placemat IOU had the restaurant name, he had a date, he had Phil’s description, and, after buttering up the nice waitress, he had Kurt’s description too. Kurt turned out to be a tall, Kraftwerk-looking kinda guy with a vaguely eastern European accent and a not-insignificant criminal history.

After he finally seemed convinced Clint wasn’t there to talk about said history, he was amiable enough, and he described meeting Phil. Yust a man in a suit who gave Kurt money to tip his waitress. Kurt didn’t leave less than twenty percent. Kurt knew what it was like, in this economy. Kurt had insisted he owed the man, and had given him the IOU. The man had driven off in a pretty red car. Did Clint know this man?

Yeah, yeah Clint said, he knew that man.
And that man had apparently been reunited with Lola, which meant Fury was in it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Not that Clint had doubted, much. Oh, there’d been the possibility that Phil had clawed his way out of his grave, zombie-style, and set off on a two-year cross-country shamble with Fury none the wiser-- but it was about as likely as winning the Powerball, really.

Clint had left his phone elsewhere when he’d met with Kurt, out of an abundance of caution. And he’d missed-- everything, it seemed like now. Fury was the one person he most needed answers from. Fury was the one who’d given him grief for grief, talking about Phil, all the while-- all the while-- what? Had he known then Phil was alive or not? Had Phil never been dead or had Fury just decided death wasn’t an excuse for Phil slacking off? And why had Phil been reduced to using an otherwise-trivial IOU to let Clint know he was alive?

Seemed like Clint was never going to get to find out, because while he was fucking around in San Fran, Fury was getting attacked on the streets of DC, dragging himself to Steve’s apartment, being killed. The Winter Fucking Soldier was roaming the streets and Natasha-- in between the lines-- was certain something was rotten at SHIELD.

Neither she nor Maria Hill had responded since they’d told Clint to go off-grid, to get the hell home. He hadn’t even bothered to try Steve.

Whatever was going down, Clint was needed, and finding Phil was just going to have to wait. Not like Phil wouldn’t have understood-- pardon. Not like Phil wouldn’t under

Clint could sooner believe Phil was off eating brains than he’d believe Phil had somehow lost his sense of duty.

Clint’d tried to fly commercial, he really had, it just… had not worked out. In such a spectacular fashion he was nearly certain someone was trying to keep him from getting back to DC to help. Whoever it was had managed not to tip their hand, though Clint had some suspicions. He just didn’t like them. Or the implications of don’t take a quinjet. Don’t contact SHIELD. Don’t call… home.

So Clint’d done what he did whenever he was fucking lost-- he fell back on Phil, or Phil’s plans. He called Kurt. Could Kurt find someone who could get him back to the east coast quiet?

Kurt knew someone.

Someone was Luis.

Luis, Clint found out as he sat in the man’s dingy apartment and pretended to drink a Modelo, knew a guy, Antonio, who used to work at a mini-golf palace grooming the grounds and retrieving lost balls, you know, with those long wands with pincers on the end, man. And Antonio had a cousin who had wanted to learn how to fly, right, so he could get a side-gig as a crop-duster because then he didn’t have to listen to nobody all day so the cousin’d got a hook-up at a flight training school with a lady named Yolanda who sometimes flew to Pensacola to see her abuela and if Clint wanted, Luis could tell Antonio to tell his cousin to ask Yolanda coul--

Yes, Clint had said, Clint wanted. And Clint could pay Yolanda pretty well-- and the cousin, and Antonio, and Luis, too.

That had been an hour ago. Luis worked nearly as fast as he talked.

Clint had nearly changed his mind when he saw the ancient Piper Tomahawk sitting on the runway, though, with Yolanda nearly dwarfing it as she leaned against the doors. He was still, now that they were in the air, not certain it wouldn’t be smarter to just grab the parachute bag and jump.
“So,” sniffed Yolanda as she retook controls, “you look ’bout as comfortable as a snake in a boot factory. What’d you say you flew?”

“Jets,” Clint said, and stared out the window again at the desert rolling beneath them. “Jets.”

“Yeah?” Yolanda said, then cursed as the Tomahawk stalled.

Both Clint’s stomach, and the airplane, dropped.

“Fucking--” Yolanda said, reaching for the throttle and pushing the yoke forward as Clint fumbled for his rudder pedal with his feet, just in case-- “does this alla fucking time .”

It was going to be a very long flight.

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The Tomahawk only carried about 30 gallons of usable fuel, so they had to stop near Vegas, and again near Albuquerque. It was just as well, honestly; the short breaks for shifty-looking refueling at the tiniest, most out-of-the-way airfields Yolanda could find were Clint’s only chance to try to shake out the tension brought on by the conviction of impending doom he got every time the plane stalled or a gust of wind looked like it was going to slam them into a mountain in the dark.

At least he’d picked up his own piss bottle in Vegas. There were some things you just didn’t want to share with a stranger.

They’d landed at another sketchy little airfield, this one on the outskirts of Oklahoma City, and Clint was jogging around the perimeter trying to loosen up when he saw a suspicious movement in the distance. A black SUV, shield on the door, driving slowly toward them--not regular police. SWAT.

Shit.

They might not be coming for Clint, but he wouldn’t lay money on it. He cut his last lap short and moved back to Yolanda as fast as he could without looking too much like he was making a break for it.

“Yolanda,” he said, interrupting her as she was shooting the shit with the attendant helping her refuel the plane, smoking despite the risk of a horrific fiery death. “We got trouble.”

She took her cigarette out of her mouth. “What kinda trouble?”

He moved closer, speaking quietly. “SWAT trouble.”

“Motherfucker,” she spat. “You pay for it if they fuck up my plane.”

“Fine,” Clint said. “I need to be outta here five minutes ago. You in?”

“You pay me double,” she said.

“Done.”

She snapped her fingers at the attendant, who was trying to look like he wasn’t listening. “Manuel,” she said. “Gimme your keys.”

He groaned. “Again?”
“You owe me,” she said.

“Yeah, yeah, fine,” he said, pulling a set of keys out of his pocket and tossing them to her. “Don’t scratch the paint.”

“No promises,” she said. “Come on, Jets.”

Clint followed her out to the dusty parking lot, all the way to the far end, where, at least fifty feet from the next closest car, a glossy blue early 70s Impala sat in solitary splendor.

“Oh my god,” he said. This ride had been, as it were, well and truly pimped. Riding low on whitewall tires with giant chrome rims, the inside was glossy white leather with electric blue piping and a bank of speakers filled the back window. There was an airbrushed mural on the trunk of Manuel, barechested and sporting an improbably muscled physique, seated on a rearing white stallion, brandishing a flaming sword.


Clint obeyed, stunned, and Yolanda threw a blanket over him, then fired up the engine. The aftermarket exhaust system rattled through the floor of the car with a bone-rattling roar.

“I’m gonna turn on the radio,” Yolanda hollered. “You might want to cover your ears.”

“Why should I--” he started, and then the bass boomed so loud that the windows rattled and Clint’s jaw snapped shut. On his tongue.

“Ow,” he said. He couldn’t hear himself. Or anything.

He wouldn’t necessarily have chosen to hide a fugitive from justice in the world’s most ostentatious car, blaring bass at a volume that likely violated several city ordinances. He could kind of see it, though. It almost seemed like one of the sorts of twisty, reverse-psychology plans that Phil used to come up with.

Maybe he still did.

Once Clint got back to DC and figured out what the hell was going on with SHIELD, he was gonna find out.

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Apparently the SWAT team at the airport had been just the beginning. Oklahoma City was, for reasons best known unto itself, locked down. Some kind of “credible terror threat.” They were about four hours getting around and out, with Clint curled up in the back getting a magic fingers massage only a giant could have loved from the thumping subwoofer.

At first, he checked his phone every twenty minutes, hoping to hear from Nat or Hill or Steve or Basil or, hell, anyone. After they were nearly stopped at the state line, he decided he couldn’t be too careful, and tossed the phone out a window.

From the front, Yolanda snorted her approval. She finally let him get up and ride shotgun like a civilized fugitive midway through Arkansas.

Twenty minutes later she proved human at last, and nearly drove them into a ditch when she fell asleep mid-sentence. Clint took over driving.
While standing in the parking lot of a Piggly Wiggly in Tennessee, pretending to smoke one of Yolanda’s cigarettes and listening to the radio, he finally got an update on SHIELD. The DJ fit it in right between one set and the next, all casual-like:

“That was Florida Georgia Line with ‘This is How We Roll.’ Speaking of rolling, breaking news: the AP says that Steven Rogers, that’s Captain America to all y’all, just quit working for the government the hard way— he jumped out a twenty-story window and drove off on a motorcycle. Captain America, here’s one for you: Brantley Gilbert with ‘Bottom’s up.’”

When Yolanda came out, Clint already had Manuel revved and was parked right outside the doors. The radio was on, the subwoofer was thumping, and he growled as a family of five teetered across their path just as he was about to pull out.

“What the hell crawled up your ass?” Yolanda asked him, and seemed to reconsider handing him the energy drink she’d been holding out.

“Nothing,” Clint said, grabbing the bottle, “We’re just losing time, is all.”

“Hey, you’re the one who said he got some kind of spook show on his ass.”

“I did not either.”

Or at least, Clint was pretty sure he hadn’t. “No questions asked, none answered” had been part of their bargain.

“Yeah all right,” Yolanda shrugged, “so that’s what Antonio said Luis said that Kurt said anyway. You sure you okay to drive like this? ‘Cause I’m thinkin’ 20 over the speed limit ain’t exactly low-profile.”

“I’m fine,” Clint lied.

“As your ass be it if the state patrol don’t agree,” Yolanda said, and shrugged.

As it turned out, it wasn’t the state patrol that was the problem. It was the chicken truck. And as Clint and Yolanda looked despairingly over the smoking ruins of Manuel, watching little white hens flutter frantically atop his broad, air-brushed pectorals, it hit Clint that he didn’t even know what on time would look like if he made it.

It didn’t stop him from feeling the seconds slipping through his fingers as they waited for the tow truck.

“Now what?” Yolanda asked, and Clint blinked at her.

“You’re staying?” he said. “I mean, you’re coming with?”

“Yeah Jets,” she rolled her eyes, “I’m coming with. You seen yourself? You just took a chicken truck broadside. You’d make it to DC and fall right over. Anyway… I don’t wanna face Manuel right now, okay?”

“I said I’d pay-”

“Not the point. Man’s gonna weep. Weep. I don’t got time for that. So. What’s the plan?”

“Um… I’ll tell you that once I know where the fuck we even are?”
They were, as it turned out, still in Tennessee, as the tow truck driver told them when he eventually turned up. Once Manuel’s remains were hooked up to the back and Clint and Yolanda crammed into the cab of the truck, the driver--”call me Darrell”--passed the time by regaling them with the stories of every bizarre auto accident he’d ever witnessed and/or towed away the aftermath of.

It was pretty thematically appropriate to the way Clint’s life had been going lately, to be honest.

“...and Route 11 was covered in Skittles for weeks,” Darrell said, winding up his last story as he pulled into the auto shop. “Every raccoon in five miles was shitting rainbows.”

“That must’ve been something to see,” Yolanda said, flicking her cigarette ash out the window.

“So where are y’all headed?” Darrell said. “I hope you weren’t on a deadline; I don’t think that thing’s a quick fix.”

“Actually,” Clint said. “Do you know anyone who could get us to Pigeon Forge? Like, today? I need to see a guy at Dollywood.”

Darrell, as it happened, had a cousin Becky whose boyfriend Ricky had a job in Sevierville that night, and was willing to take them on to Pigeon Forge for the price of a tank of gas and a Big Mac combo meal.

When they got to the city limits, Clint pulled up an address from the Palm. “We’re going to the Bear Cove RV Park,” he told Ricky, leaning forward out of the back of the extended-cab pickup. “Off Veteran’s Boulevard.”

“Got it,” Ricky said.

The sun was starting to dip below the treeline when they pulled up to the front entrance of the park and climbed out of Ricky’s truck.

“Thanks, man,” Clint told him.

“No problem,” Ricky said. “Happy to help. Real shame about y’all’s car.”

“Tell me about it,” Clint said. He pulled the promised cash out of his pocket, making sure to fold an extra fifty inside. “Safe drive home.”

“Safe travels,” Ricky said, waving to them out the window as he pulled away.

“So,” Yolanda said, waving the dust away from her face. “What are we doing here?”

“Transport no one will look for us in. A guy I used to know gave it to me.” Clint told her.

“He gave you a car? He musta liked you a lot.”

“He did. And it’s not a car. It’s something better.”

“Oh yeah, what?”

“You’ll see.” He led the way toward the rickety trailer that seemed to serve as a rental office. “Come on, this way.”

----

“You’re kidding,” Yolanda said about twenty minutes after they’d finally woken up the kid who
was staffing the rental office. “You’re fucking kidding.”

“Nope,” Clint said, with relish.

The kid had blinked a couple times when Clint had pulled out the Palm and reeled off Phil’s old account number. He’d gone from blinking to scratching when Clint’d made him go remove a set of keys from a battered old lockbox. Gone from scratching to grumbling when Clint had made him take them out past the end of Bear Cove Village’s neat rows of cabins and carefully-maintained empty parking spaces just waiting for RVs full of retirees to nestle into them.

By the time he’d taken them to the far end of the park and the large tin-roofed garage, the kid had been practically snivelling, and Clint’d let him make his escape. He didn’t need another witness for this.

Yolanda, speechless for the first time since he’d met her, was enough for him.

“How’d you know--” she said after a moment. Then, “god I hope that works.”

“Should,” Clint said, basing it more on his faith in Phil than on any actual knowledge. “C’mon, what’re you waiting for? An invitation?”

He started forward and applied his key to the lock. After a moment’s stickiness, the door gave, and he stepped inside.

“Fuckin’ A,” Yolanda was saying, somewhere about the side-view mirror, as she circled. “You have any idea what this is?”

“A camper,” Clint told her, rolling down the massive driver’s side window and leaning out.

“Fuck that shit, this is a Minnie-Winnie. What, like, a ’73? ’74?”

“From the decor?” Clint asked, “probably. Only reupholstered in the 80s by a big Dolly fan.”

The Winnebago’s interior still had the rust-colored linoleum and faux wood panelling it must have been driven off the lot with, but someone had gone alarmingly country kitsch on the bench seats and sleeper sofas. They were in a kind of taupe shaved chenille with tacked-on arm covers in a pinkish plaid spotted with roses and butterflies.

Yolanda poked her head in the door, gagged, and staggered backwards.

Clint didn’t blame her.

“Why the hell,” she said, coming back in at last, “why the hell would this guy of yours want to buy this for you? I thought you said he liked you. You show me this and I wonder if he didn’t harbor some kinda deep-seated resentment. You kill his cat or something?”

“Hah,” Clint said, already settling into the driver’s seat with its sheepskin slipcover and beginning to poke at the dash, “no I bet you Phil won this in a… a… bingo game. Or off a Holly Hobby smuggler. Stuffed it away figuring whenever we actually wanted it-- if we did-- I could help with the refit. Or else he just ran out of time before having it done over in purple, I dunno. Point is --”

“Point is no one in their right mind is gonna look for you in this damn thing, are they, Jets?” Yolanda asked, with some satisfaction.

“We can only hope,” Clint said, and turned around in his seat to look at her. She was already
settling into the little booth behind him, fidgeting around until she could get her feet up on the
table. “Last chance to stay behind.”

“I mean I like Dollywood,” Yolanda told him, “been there five times with my sister and her kids.
But no, no I think I’ll come with. Gotta keep you out of trouble or I won’t get paid.”

“Mm,” Clint said, and turned the key. The engine coughed resentfully to life. He felt weirdly at
home in it, could see himself and Phil curled up in the overhead bed at night listening to frogs or
crickets or waves or whatever fucking night noises surrounded them, and he wasn’t sure if this just
felt more right because for the first time in over two years Phil was back in the realm of the
possible. Well-- the first time Clint’d known it was possible, but really, one existential crisis at a
time.

The trouble with SHIELD was enough.

As he pulled out of Bear Cove and back onto the road, the Winnebago grumbling and bumping all
the way, for the first time since the texts from Hill and Fury, he felt a little of the urgency unwind
from his shoulders. Not a lot-- Steve and Natasha were still out there off the grid and fugitives,
Nick Fury was dead, and he hadn’t been able to raise Hill.

When Clint turned on the radio, the newscaster was talking about some shoot-out on a bridge in
DC. Guy with a mask and a lot of guns. Captain America in custody, along with a guy with wings.

Just about the time his heart started to sink, Yolanda stirred in the back.

“You know what?” she said, sounding thoughtful, “Manuel’s always wanted a bigger canvas.”

“Hrmph,” Clint said, and checked his rearview mirror. Was that trooper on the motorcycle pacing
him?

“Yeah,” she said, “an RV oughta just about do it.”

Of course, it hadn’t been as easy as Clint had hoped even once they had the Winnebago. He’d been
stopped by a state trooper wondering why his license tabs were two years out of date. He’d realized
halfway through the Great Smokies that the Winnebago’s brakes were not up to Appalachian roads
and he’d had to wake up a mechanic at eleven at night. He’d lost another two hours trying to find a
public phone in a little mountain town of fifty people-- no cell phones to be begged, borrowed, or
stolen-- so he could try Natasha’s line.

Which was, of course, busy. He’d debated leaving a message so long he’d gotten the beep, and
hung up without saying a thing. He still had to pay the 80 year old proprietor of the inn five bucks
for the long distance call. Yolanda’d called it price gouging and taking advantage of their
desperation and tried to fight it; Clint’d had to pull her away.

They crossed the border into Virginia as the sun came up. Yolanda’d napped for a few hours in the
back, then made Clint do the same. She’d unearthed a case of power bars in the kitchen and they’d
had them for breakfast. A growing mound of wrappers now lived in the sink.

During the drive, Yolanda’d started poking around all the cupboards, cleaning out mouse
droppings and exclaiming over the 80s upholstery. Occasionally, she’d yell at Clint to share her
findings. “Hey, the table folds up!” or “Hey, your guy left, like, a case of MREs-- fuck, the whole
case is Jalapeno Pepper Jack Beef Patty. Who the fuck wants--”
“Oh I liked those, kickass,” Clint had said, perking up. She’d refused to heat one up for him. Apparently, she was inventorying the vehicle so she’d know what to tell Manuel to convince him to take it in exchange for his totalled car, and she didn’t want to break up the box.

Clint hadn’t actually offered it to her yet, but figured it was pretty much academic. Yolanda was the one thing about this damned trip that had gone right; a Winnebago seemed a small price to pay for her company. About fifteen minutes ago, she’d gone real quiet, and he’d heard clunking from the back.

“Hey Jets,” she said suddenly, “what’s this?” An extremely pointy object poked through the curtain at him and waved around.

Clint ducked, swerving instinctively and nearly taking out a Prius.

“A fucking harpoon, are you trying to kill me? Where did--”

“Under the bench seat,” Yolanda said, withdrawing the weapon, “there’s hidey holes all over. Found this with the Kalashnikovs.”

“Well,” Clint said, sighing as he passed a big orange road work sign and saw the tail lights ahead of him start to go red, “at least if we ever make it to DC I’ll have the firepower to back me up.”

He briefly imagined ramming the Winnebago right through the front doors of SHIELD. They were reinforced, of course, and Yolanda would never forgive him. But hey-- it was a good mental image. The radio hadn’t said anyone had captured Cap (again), nor that anything new had exploded or come down or gone up in flames.

He still had time.

He had to have time.

He’d been way too late to help Director Fury, too caught up in the IOU game, in the revelation that Phil was alive. Clint couldn’t afford to be late again, couldn’t afford to fail anyone else. If he thought about Phil at all, he was going to be too distracted to be any use. He was already, tired, ragged, frustrated, any more distraction--

“Hey,” Yolanda said, coming through the curtain and half-shoving a Kalashnikov in his face, “show me how you take the safety off this baby.”

---

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Clint said, and instantly missed Phil with an intensity like a physical pain; Phil was always there for a Star Wars reference, no matter how overdone.

Yolanda snorted, leaning over his shoulder to peer out the windshield at the twisted mass of metal and chunks of concrete that had once been I-395. “Ya think?”

Clint wished he’d picked up another smartphone instead of the cheapest burner at Wal-Mart to replace the one he’d thrown out the window in Oklahoma. At least then he’d have been able to download an app or something to figure out if there were any roads going toward the Potomac that hadn’t been crashed into, fallen off of, or hit with (apparently) a rocket launcher.

“It might be quicker to get out and walk to the Triskelion,” he muttered.
“Maybe,” Yolanda said. “But I don’t think the police would let us bring the Kalashnikovs through the roadblocks.”

“That… is an excellent point,” Clint allowed. “Fine. Okay. Damn, I wish this thing had four-wheel drive.”

They picked their way down toward the river, excruciatingly slow; they finally exhausted all the possible routes for the Winnebago at a Starbucks about a half a mile away from the Triskelion.

“Fuck, okay,” Clint said, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I’m going in there to piss and caffeinate - can you see how many of those Kalashnikovs we can fit in my duffel bag?”

“Sure,” Yolanda said. “Get me a caramel macchiato.”

Clint waved an acknowledgement and went inside. He had coffee-ordering refined to a fine art by this point in his life, and was in and out in less than ten minutes, including a bathroom break and some subtle information-gathering from the barista.

“Hey Yolanda,” he said, approaching the Winnebago with a drink in each hand. “I think if we--” he was cut off by a rush of sound, like a… waterfall? What?

“What the shit,” he started, then the water noises were replaced by mechanical noises, and he saw three huge shapes lumber up out of the river.

Since when had they had three helicarriers?

Yolanda took the macchiato out of his hand. “I think we might need more assault rifles,” she said thoughtfully.

Just then, something on the ground exploded. And then more somethings--fuck, fuck, that was the airfield, the somethings were quinjets and they were blowing up on the runway.

Something was very, very wrong.

He gulped down his coffee--he was going to need it--and exchanged looks with Yolanda. She held out a duffel bag without a word, and he slung it over his shoulder. It clanked reassuringly.

“You don’t have to come with me,” he told Yolanda.

She rolled her eyes, hoisting a duffel of her own over one shoulder while still keeping hold of her macchiato. “Whatever, Jets. You just worry about yourself and let me worry about me.”

“I--okay,” Clint said. “Thanks, Yolanda.”

She nodded, and they started making their way toward the Triskelion.

It look a lot longer to make progress than Clint had been hoping. The air was thick with smoke and ash and the streets were crowded with people, government workers and consultants and tourists; some of them were trying to get away from the increasingly exploded area around SHIELD, but others were rubbernecking. Clint was no longer surprised at the sheer lack of self-preservation of the average human; if there was one thing he had learned over two years of Avengerising, it was that the appeal of not going on fire would never win out over the appeal of taking a selfie with a Doombot or whatever.

As the two of them finally got to the bridge, Clint could hear the alert sirens wailing, a sequence
he’d only heard in drills: infiltration, priority alpha. Underneath the alarms, he could hear occasional bursts of gunfire, punctuated by explosions.

“Okay,” Yolanda said, fishing a Kalashnikov and the harpoon gun out of her duffle and handing them to him. “This looks bad.”

Clint slung the rifle over his shoulder and held the harpoon gun ready. You could do a lot of damage with a well-placed harpoon. “Yeah,” he said grimly. “Let’s go.”

Before he could go more than a few feet out onto the bridge, they heard a new sound: guns. Big guns. Lots of really big guns.

“Holy shit,” Yolanda said. “Are they supposed to do that?” She pointed skyward with the muzzle of her assault rifle.

The helicarriers were shooting each other.

Clint stood frozen for a moment, his brain refusing to make sense of what he was seeing, when one of the helicarriers cracked right down the middle, spewing flame, and started to fall, nose-down, into the river.

“Fuck--get back!” he yelled, grabbing Yolanda’s arm and pulling her along as he turned to run back toward the shore. In his peripheral vision, he could see people starting to pour out of the Triskelion like ants from a kicked-in hill, and the looming shapes of the crashing helicarriers swayed and lurched across the sky.

They ran flat out, not looking back, even at the sounds of destruction that filled the air, and they didn’t stop until they were back on the bank, several hundred yards away. When they finally turned back to look at SHIELD, Clint couldn’t help the horrified noise that came out of his mouth; it was all right, though. They were surrounded by people doing pretty much the same thing.

The Triskelion was… well. Clint had personally seen what happened to a building that had been in the way of the Hulk fighting a flying alien whale. This was worse. It looked like one of the crashing helicarriers had cut straight through it; there was a gash cut into the building several stories high, and portions of the floors above had started listing into the gap. Flaming bits of paper and chunks of rubble were falling from the hole, and people were still scrambling to try to get out, choking the flooded and unstable walkways as they tried to make it back to the mainland.

Clint had no idea what the fuck had happened, or why, or how, but he was still a SHIELD agent and he still had a duty. He shoved the Kalashnikov back in the duffle and hoisted the harpoon gun onto his shoulder. It might be a good grapple arrow substitute, in a pinch.

“I’m gonna go try to help evacuate,” he told Yolanda.

“I’ve got some rope and a first aid kit in the bag,” Yolanda said. “Let’s go.”

And they started back against the crowd, toward the smoking ruins of SHIELD.
Chapter Summary

Amazing illustration by the amazing Snow of Chapter 18, Flight.

Chapter Notes

As always, this art was done by the ever-incredible Snow - make sure to give her some love!
Behold the glory that is Clint and Yolanda rocking up to the Triskelion in the Winnebago, with assault rifles, Starbucks, and a harpoon gun. ALL THANKS AND PRAISE to the amazing Snow (zappedbysnow here and snowzapped on Tumblr) for this beautiful piece of art!!!
Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

Clint salvages what he can.

Chapter Notes

Hi guys. Life sucks lately. Have slash.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“... still cleaning up after a helicarrier crashed into the Triskelion. Witnesses report seeing Captain America in the fighting. He is still missing. The Black Widow was reportedly involved, and Hawkeye was seen helping survivors in the aftermath. No word on Iron Man or Thor or the Hulk--Brian, this doesn’t seem to have been an Avengers mission, it sounds like everyone was affiliated with SHIELD. Do you think that was intentional, or did they just forget to invite Tony Stark along, and if so--”

“Turn that off,” Clint growled.

“But it was just getting interesting. C’mon, Jets. Don’t you wanna know what Tony Stark would think?”

“He thinks Steve should have come to him for help and he’s pissed off that all the flights from New York are grounded and the Pentagon threatened to shoot him out of the air if he entered DC airspace. After that I stopped reading the texts,” Clint sighed.

“Oh.” Yolanda said, and after a long silence, “I need more coffee or I can’t keep driving. And I don’t want your face up here, Hawkeye.”

“Yeah,” Clint said, and grabbed the thermos.

For a while, Clint hadn’t been sure they were going to get past the Beltway; every direction was blocked and the entire city was shut down. He and Yolanda had spent hours in the ruins of the Triskelion rescuing survivors, helping the medics (who’d mostly fled without their gear) triage the worst injured, and taking down anyone who seemed vaguely HYDRA.

Which.

No-- Clint still wasn’t capable of processing that.

His first clue what had been going on had come when the battered, half-broken kid he’d been carrying out of the rubble had squirmed in his arms when someone had come to help, screaming he’s a traitor! He’s HYDRA! He’s HYDRA! Despite his helper’s clearly-visible SHIELD ID badge. The helper had turned white, looked at Clint with a mixture of fear and hatred, and fled. After that,
Clint had pieced it together as he’d worked.

Alexander Pierce had been HYDRA.-- which apparently still existed and had all along. He’d had Nick Fury killed when he got suspicious. Moreover, he was planning to use the Helicarriers to… to… do something bad, Clint was still not sure what. Steve had gone all Captain America Voice on the Triskelion and half of SHIELD had stood and half of SHIELD had fallen and then it had all come down-- and okay seriously now did anyone expect Clint to believe a word of this?

What the fuck did life think it was doing, pulling this bullshit?

He and Yolanda had left the scene when the Proper Authorities had finally arrived to start putting things in order. They’d brought with them a small cadre of survivors, leaning on each other and limping, and stuffed them in the Winnebago. After dropping them off to go home to families or into hiding, Clint and Yolanda’d made their way to the Treasury Department Federal Credit Union.

Ms Engelwood had taken him down to the vaults without a word, and showed him a back way up, ending in an underground parking garage. Between them, he and Yolanda had filled the RV with the most portable of Phil’s treasures-- boxes of bearer bonds, packets of unset diamonds, deeds, and a tiny figurine of a llama dressed as Captain America that Clint had bought Phil one time in Cuzco and had found tucked carefully away in the desk drawer. They’d left after the bank was cold and closed for the night, and Ms. Engelwood herself had maneuvered the garage doors for them, giving him a last salute.

That had been near dusk-- it was now full dark, nearly end of the evening, and Yolanda had only just managed to get them out to Centreville, not really the direction Clint had wanted to go. But they’d had to stop by Clint’s place to get his bug-out bag and Phil’s chest, and besides, as Yolanda’d pointed out, Clint couldn’t show his face in public just then. Behind him, probably whichever Authorities were deciding what to do with SHIELD agents were already talking about freezing everyone’s assets, and sorting SHIELD from HYDRA later.

He couldn’t help Nat-- he hadn’t even tried to call her, lest he compromise her or himself. Couldn’t call Hill or Steve. Tony was far too visible, though he’d offered asylum in Stark Tower. Clint’d declined politely, saying he could do better.

And he could. Of the many missed calls he’d found when he came out of the vault-- some to his number, some to Phil’s old number-- Edna had left three. He’d called her back and asked if the springs in her hide-a-bed still stabbed you in the right kidney. She’d kind of sobbed her yes, and he’d ignored it politely.

In his letter to Clint, Phil had said he’d tried to set Clint up with everything he’d need should he leave SHIELD. Of course, SHIELD had left Clint instead, and Phil was alive: but he’d still provided. Here Clint was, in the back of a Minnie-Winnie upholstered in blush and bashful and stuffed with bonds and assault weapons, fleeing north to New Jersey and all of Phil’s friends who’d become his own.

If only he’d known where Phil was, if Phil had any network left for himself, life would have been complete.

Well, Clint had no way to contact Phil. On the other hand, Phil knew how to get hold of him if he needed to.

All Clint could do was sit in the back of the Winnebago, pour coffee for Yolanda-- who was rapidly attaining sainthood status, Our Lady of the Kalashnikov-- and pray that the police cordons lifted after they hit the Maryland border.
As it turned out, the police cordons hadn’t lifted until the north side of Delaware, and Yolanda’d been so exhausted that they’d found a campground and pulled in to sleep away what was left of the night. When he’d woken up in the morning he’d found five more missed calls on his phone— all in a cluster, all from a blocked number. There was only one message, Maria Hill’s stay missing growled down the line.

Clint had heartily agreed with that, heated up some Jalapeno Pepper Jack Beef Patty MREs for himself and Yolanda, mixed up the last of the powdered coffee, and called Waarzegster. Because Clint might not be the sharpest tool in the shed sometimes, but he’d figured out who “MJ” was all right, and if anyone knew how to get hold of him, it’d be Zeg.

After that, they’d made semi-decent time up the Garden State Parkway, except for the occasional traffic stop on anything with DC plates (not them, thankfully, but it slowed them down), another stop for the same damn expired tabs, and a little black chicken that had skittered across the road in front of them along about Manahawkin Bay.

After a long day of pretending to be an innocent recreational vehicle, the battered Minnie-Winnie had pulled into Passaic just after dark. Yolanda and Clint had stumbled out; Yolanda to be embraced by Edna, and Clint to be enfolded into Basil’s enormous arms and kissed on both cheeks by damp bristly whiskers.

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In the time between Clint returning Edna’s call and pulling into her driveway, Basil—who had apparently come over to give and/or receive moral support while they watched four news broadcasts at once—had calmed his nerves by baking a small mountain of sweets.

“Have a snack, bro,” he told Clint, steering him inside with a beefy arm slung round his shoulders. “You too, lady bro,” he told Yolanda.

“I think I have caffeine poisoning,” Yolanda groaned, grabbing a couple of snickerdoodles off the top of the pile as she passed. “I’m going to shower until I stop finding pieces of federal building in my hair, then I’m going to brush my teeth until I stop tasting old coffee and jalapenos, and then I’m going to sleep. Do not wake me up and do not eat all the cookies.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clint said, taking one of the butterscotch-cornflake-crack cookies for himself. Now that he was somewhere safe, he could feel his own imminent collapse coming on. It was nice of Basil to have come down to New Jersey, he thought muzzily. Basil was nice. Edna was nice. Phil had always had such a gift for finding nice people, but that was probably because Phil had been so nice too. But Phil was alive, so he was probably still nice. Natasha wasn’t really nice—awesome and amazing and breathtaking and good weren’t the same as nice—but then it was Clint who had found Natasha, so that worked out. Phil had nice eyes, too, especially when he smiled. Phil…

“You asleep, bro?”

Clint started awake, drawing a streak of melted butterscotch across his face, cornflakes dropping everywhere; he had apparently dozed off mid-bite.

“Shit,” he said, licking butterscotch off his lips.

Basil tore a paper towel off the roll hanging above Edna’s kitchen sink and grabbed the remnants of the cookie from Clint’s hand, then swiped at his butterscotchy chin.
“Go to bed, bro,” he told him. “Figure things out later.”

“I… yeah, Basil,” Clint said. “Good idea.”

He stumbled over to the hide-a-bed and collapsed into it face-first, and fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

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At some point, Yolanda joined Clint in the hide-a-bed. He found this out by rolling over and waking up with his nose buried in hair. Blearily, he reached out, found an arm, and brushed it.

“If you start spoonin’ Imma hit you, Jets,” Yolanda slurred. “We do not have that kind of relationship.”

“No,” Clint agreed, and rolled over, “no we don’t.” He curled himself more tightly around his pillow and went back to sleep.

He was safe, and hidden, and everything else would just have to wait.

The next time he woke up it was daytime again, and Kate was at Edna’s kitchen table, talking quietly and munching toast. Clint managed to eat a little, clean up, and then rouse Yolanda to do the same, before sleep snuck up on him again and sandbagged him from behind. He and Yolanda repeated this at least twice more before he finally emerged from under the covers feeling somewhat alive again and wandered into the kitchen looking for something other than a quick bite.

“Day is it?” he asked Kate, who was still sitting at the table munching toast, but wearing a completely different outfit. He thought.

“Friday,” she said between bites.

“Fri--” Clint stopped midway to the coffee pot, and blinked at her.

“April 7, to be exact,” she continued. “You’n your new friend have been asleep for like, two days, Clint.”

“Jesus,” he sighed, and sat down to pillow his head on the table. “That’s too long. I need to… we need to…” he trailed off as he realized his brain, while finally working on all cylinders again, was still in the process of warming up.

“You said that once before,” Kate told him as she set coffee and a plate of cookies in front of him. “And then you tried to plan what I think was an assault on the Triskelion with a Winnebago, a small plane, two speedboats, and a squadron of clowns carrying assault rifles. So we let you sleep more.”

“I remember none of that,” Clint said.

“Figured. You sound at least 50% less incoherent now. I’ll make eggs while you shower.”

“Do I need to--” Clint broke off as Kate’s face told him eloquently how badly he needed to. “Okay, okay. I’ll… okay.”

He took his phone to the bathroom with him, after promising Kate he wasn’t going to start looking for headlines. He was, she assured him, still safe, still hidden, and the whole world was a mess that he couldn’t fix at least until he’d stopped smelling like armpit and had a good meal in him.
As Clint slumped under the hot water, he had to agree with her. There had been dozens of messages on his phone, and more missed calls. Some of the messages were from Tony, some were from a Colonel Talbot telling him to turn himself in (as if), one was from Maria Hill ostensibly telling him to turn himself in but not in any convincing fashion, and a distractingly large portion of the rest were from blocked numbers.

Also, at some point over the course of the last two days, Clint had texted Waarzegster asking to talk.

It wasn’t a bad idea; if anyone could put Clint back into the picture, it was them. He gave his Sleep-Texting self a mental thumbs-up.

Clint was just finishing shaving the week’s worth of built-up stubble into a semi-respectable goatee when his phone rang again.

Another blocked number, calling through to Phil’s old line.

Waarzegster, then.

Hopefully.

At least it was 90% unlikely to be Glenn Talbot, and so worth the risk.

“‘Yello,” Clint said, picking up with one hand while shaving his jowl with the other.

“Clint?” said the voice on the other end of the line, sounding uncertain and tired.

Clint’s razor-holding hand jerked.

“Ow!” he yelled, dropping the razor and scrambling for toilet paper to slap against the bloody gouge on his face. “Ow! Yow! Erk!”

“Clint, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Clint managed, through tears brought on more by the pain in his heart than the pain on his cheek, “yeah I’m fine. Phil?”

“Yeah,” Phil said, still sounding worried. “Sorry.”

---

“Phil,” Clint said again. He was still a little stuck on that part. “You’re alive.” The “alive” caught in his throat, breaking into a harsh, hurt noise. Clint stuffed his fist into his mouth, letting the sting of teeth against his abraded knuckles-- there had been a lot of Hydra agents at the Triskelion--distract him from the burning in his eyes, the ache in his throat.

“Clint, I--” Phil’s voice wobbled. Phil had a voice. Phil was really alive. “I thought you already knew. I mean, I’ve been trying to get in touch with you and-- didn’t you talk to Kurt?”

Clint sniffled deeply, trying to to regain enough control over his voice that he could talk- could talk to Phil, shit, because Phil was really alive.

If he repeated that often enough, he might start believing it.
"I did," he said, and his voice sounded like he’d taken a power sander to his throat. “I mean, I thought so? It seemed like that was the only answer that made sense. But I guess I didn't really believe it."

“I don't believe it myself, sometimes,” Phil said, and he sounded thick, too. A bolt of panic shot through Clint.

“Phil,” he said urgently. “where are you? Wait, don't tell me. Are you somewhere safe? I don't know how much you’ve heard-- I'm so sorry, Phil, but Hydra--”

"I know about Hydra," Phil cut him off. “Believe me. I was at the Hub, after the-- after. It was bad. But I’m secure for now. What about you? I saw you at the Triskelion, were you with Captain Rogers? You have to stay off the grid, Clint, there’s no telling how far the infiltration went.” He sped up as he talked, like he was worried they’d get cut off before he said everything he had to say.

“I'm safe.” Clint said. “I’m fine. I went to visit an old friend. She owed me--you-- us some cookies.”

“Oh,” Phil’s voice went shaky again, but this time with relief. “Oh, thank God. Yes, you’ll be fine there.”

"I didn't get to the Triskelion until right before the carriers crashed,” Clint said. “I haven't had much chance to catch up with anyone yet, I’ve been pretty much either on the lam or sleeping for about a week, but once I make it through my messages I...” he trailed off, helplessly; what did his voicemail matter, what did anything else matter, when everything solid and true had been turned upside-down? Phil was alive, and all Clint had to say to him was a fucking status report?

“Clint.” Phil said. “What's wrong?”

“I missed you so much,” Clint blurted, and he’d started crying again but he didn't give a damn. He’d spent two years regretting the things he’d never had a chance to tell Phil, and even Hydra wasn't a good enough reason not to say at least a few of them. “I loved you so much, Phil, and we fucked around with it because of work. Who the hell does that? What was wrong with us? We could have had a life-- that fucking life you had stored up in your vault-- we could have been living it together, Phil, but we wasted our time and lost our chance and I ended up a widower who never even got to have a husband and I can't even be mad at you because it was my decision too.”

“I'm sorry.” Phil's voice was rough with emotion. “I’m so sorry. Christ, Clint, I never wanted to hurt you like that, never. If you n-need,” his voice broke, “if you need me to leave you alone-- to stay dead-- I can--”

“Fuck you, no,” Clint exclaimed, chest seizing with panic. “Don't you dare, don't you ever fucking die on me again, don't make me live through--”

“I won't!” Phil broke through Clint’s rising hysteria. “I don't want to! If you want me in your life, Clint, I won't leave, I promise.”

Clint forced himself to calm down, taking a deep, unsteady breath. “I have always,” he said, “always wanted you in my life, Phil. None of the decisions I’ve made were about what I wanted.”

Phil chuckled bitterly. “The life of a SHIELD agent,” he said. “It… it was never about wanting with me, either. I hope you know that.”

It was surprisingly good to hear; Clint’s eyes burned again. “I… I hoped so,” he managed.
“Clint,” Phil said again. “I always wanted to be with you. I always thought that there’d be time, before, and now that I-- after what… happened--”

“After you let us think you were dead,” Clint couldn’t stop himself from saying.

“After I died,” Phil insisted. “Clint, I can’t tell you much over the phone but I was really dead, for more than just the normal time. The way they brought me back was…” he trailed off, as though searching for the right words. “The procedure was… traumatic,” he said at last, and Clint winced at how raw he sounded. “I’ve been having memory problems. I think I’ve gotten most of it back, but there are still some holes.”

"Phil,” Clint said, horrified. “I-- shit.”

“There’s more I need to tell you,” Phil said. “But most of it should probably wait until we can talk in person, or at least over a secure line. But--” He broke off with an angry huff, and then Clint heard it: the shrill ring of SHIELD’s priority comms line.

" Damn it,” Phil swore. “That’s Maria. I’m so sorry, Clint, but I have to--”

“No, I know, of course you do,” Clint said. “Take it. Just... stay safe, okay? And keep in touch; don’t disappear on me again.”

The line rang again. “I’ll do the best I can,” Phil said, words tripping over each other in his hurry. “Hydra’s still fighting but I have some good people with me. But Clint-- please, I need you to know, I never forgot you. I made mistakes-- I’ve been so goddamn scared-- but I never--”

The line rang again, piercing and Insistent, in a different sequence now: Priority One.

"I'm sorry,” Phil said, "I'll contact you as soon as I--”

A click, a moment of silence, and then nothing.

“Phil?” Clint said. He pulled the phone away from his ear to look at the display, but it had gone back to the home screen. “Dammit, Hill,” he muttered.

It wasn't much-- it had raised more questions than it had answered-- but somehow it was possibly the best conversation that Clint had ever had.

Phil was alive .

Chapter End Notes

A new chapter will start posting Monday on the tumblr tag.
“Clint?” Kate knocked on the door, nearly startling Clint into cutting himself again. “Clint, are you gonna be presentable soon?”

“I…” Clint paused for a moment, wondering where weepy, stunned, and grinning like an idiot fell on the scale of fitness for public consumption. “Define ‘presentable’” he said at last.

“Wearing pants and without shaving cream on your face,” Kate said.

“Oh, well in that case,” Clint said, opening the bathroom door and staring out, “what’s up?”

“Basil called. He’d like you out at the Bed-Stuy place pronto, bro.”

Kate was holding out a jacket to Clint as she talked, and he dutifully let her put it on him, even though it looked like an old, very oversized, coat of Edna’s. Well, not like he was going to look like a fugitive field agent in a lavender trench.

---

Basil had gone ahead to get his place ready to receive Clint for a bit, getting him and Phil’s chest out of Edna’s place. The last thing he needed was to get her house raided by the Army because he was there. Or by Hydra. On second thought, he was pretty sure Edna, Basil, Kate and Yolanda could take on Hydra. Or the Army…. Either way, though, it would be a lot of mess to clean up.

As Clint thundered up the steps to the fourth floor, keys dangling in his hand, his mind kept bouncing between mental images of Edna taking out Hydra agents and a replay of his conversation with Phil. There had been holes in it-- understandable holes when one of you has been dead or presumed-dead for two years and you barely get five minutes to connect-- that bothered Clint.

What the hell did Phil mean about missing memories? Why was he so concerned that Clint realize that he hadn’t forgotten him? And why the fuck--

“Bro!” Basil said, opening the door before Clint could get the key in the lock or check for any indications it’d been tampered with. Clint found himself scooped up and deposited inside before he could squeak.
The apartment was much as he’d left it just a week before, except for two notable additions: one lanky, black-clad Dutch assassin sitting primly on the couch, and the dead Director of SHIELD glowering at him from the kitchenette, where he was currently making hot chocolate in a saucepan.

“Uh,” Clint said.

“You did indicate you wished to see us,” Waarzegster said, folding their hands and smiling enigmatically.

“Yeah,” Clint said, a little distracted by his not-so-dead-boss. “Uh, hi sir. I got a little delayed in transit.”

“That happens,” Nick Fury told him, putting down the chocolate spoon and crossing his arms. Or rather, crossing his good arm over the arm that was still in a sling. “Glad you made it here alive.”

“Glad you did, sir,” Clint told him. “After talking with Nat and Maria I didn’t think that’d be the case. That makes you the second not-really-dead person I’ve talked to today.”

Fury’s eyebrows shot up, as Clint’d known they would.

“Phil?” he asked, and Clint would have sworn there was a catch in his voice except that this was Nick Fury, so clearly he was hallucinating. “You talked to Phil?”

“He’s fine,” Clint told him hurriedly, “free, secure, with his… whoever they are… and talking with Maria when we hung up.”

“Where?” Fury growled.

“Dunno. Didn’t seem safe to say, and wasn’t tops on our agenda. That was mostly, uh, other stuff.”

“Hrmph. Well I guess I can’t fault either of you. God. Safe. Thank heavens.” Fury slumped down a little on himself, infinitely tired, and Clint had the sick realization that Fury had made it back from death by the skin of his teeth and little else. He looked so old.

“Sir?” Clint said, already moving.

Fury looked up just in time for Clint to grab onto him and hug him, hard. Hard and a little more lingering than he’d expected. Fury just stood in the embrace, tense, his good hand patting Clint’s shoulder awkwardly, while Waarzegster laughed behind them.

“So,” Clint said when he finally stepped back, fighting the urge to blush, “um, glad you’re alive.”

“Clearly,” Fury said, but his voice sounded less brittle so Clint figured it’d been worth the risk to life and limb.

“And, uh, did you and ‘Zeg here come together, or just happy coincidence?”

“A happy not-so-coincidence, perhaps,” Waarzegster said, “seeing as the Director had need of my services as well.”

“Is that what you’re calling that these days?” Clint grumbled, and got another laugh for his trouble. “Okay, so, glad you guys are alive, and we totally need to talk… but I have a question first.”

“Shoot,” Waarzegster said.

“But not really,” Fury added, coming out of the kitchenette with two mugs and handing one to
‘Zeg.

“Yeah, so. Uh, Phil mentioned he’d set up an, um, exchange with you, Zeg, and an MJ. A, uh… you know what I’m not going to categorize the nature of the exchange. And then Phil called you ‘Marcus,’ in his will, sir… so am I right in guessing that you’re also a ‘Marcus Johnson’?”

“On occasion,” Fury said, sitting.

“Oh god, no,” Fury said, at the same time as Zeg said

“Okay, then,” Clint said, hoping that his nerves weren’t showing, “‘cause I’ve got an IOU in this little thing,” he waved the Palm, “for one Marcus Johnson. You want me to do the code, or--”

“Oh my, yes.”

Clint looked at Fury, who shook his head again, and took mercy.

“Okay, so. I’ve just finished checking in with Phil, which was… well a head trip, really, given the actual-not-deadness of him and everything. And something kinda struck me about that check-in, and what struck me was that he said that whatever’d brought him back was traumatic and he was missing memories, and he hadn’t wanted-- this is between the lines-- to stay away from me. So,” Clint paused to lean over the breakfast counter and point straight at Fury, “What did you do to Phil, huh?”

“Barton,” Fury sighed, and oh that wasn’t a great start, “I don’t--”

“I have an IOU, remember,” Clint interrupted him. “An IOU from Marcus Johnson to Phil Coulson, transferred to me on Phil’s death, which I am assured was a real one so I don’t think backsies apply. And I’m calling it in now. One straight answer, Marcus Johnson. Pay up.”

---

“Goddamnit, Coulson, you and your damn IOUs,” Fury grumbled, rubbing his good eye with his fingers. “Come back to bite everyone on the behind. Man was-- is-- an obsessive.”

“Don’t I know it. I haven’t even told you about the rings.” Clint said, startling a little as Basil came up and shoved a stool under his own behind. On reflection, Clint decided that yes, he probably wanted to be sitting down for whatever this was going to be.

“Rings,” Fury said flatly, looking straight at him now. For some reason, that seemed to have made his decision for him, and he let out a resigned sigh. “Yeah… yeah, that sounds like Phil, on reflection. Okay… first things to keep in mind: outside the people actually in it, no one knows about Project TAHITI. Not even Phil, and he directed it. In fact-- Zeg, could you and Mr. Malarenko… find somewhere else to be?”

“I’m sure we could,” Zeg said, mouth forming into a practiced moue, “although we are familiar enough with TAHITI by now, Nicholas.”

“This isn’t about TAHITI,” Fury said. “Or security levels. This is about Coulson’s privacy, and I won’t bargain with that.”

“Ah. Yes. That is fair.” Zeg stood with a flourish, patted down their palazzo pants, and held out their arm to Basil. “If you would accompany us, Mr. Malarenko, we have some errands where you might be of use.”
On their way out the door, they passed close to Clint, and paused to lay a hand on his shoulder.

“None of this was how he wanted it; please attempt to keep that in mind.”

“Life of a SHIELD agent,” Clint told them, feeling the echoes of Phil’s words in his mind.

“Now that,” Fury sighed when the door was closed, “is true.”

“Thank you for thinking about Phil’s privacy, anyway,” Clint said.

“Oh I’m a damned hypocrite, Barton, you should know that by now. I’ve had Melinda May watching him since I put him back on active duty and reporting back to me.”

“What?!” Clint yelped, and Fury winced. “Why did-- why-- fuck, sorry, you’re trying to tell me. I’ll just… I’ll just….” He gestured a kind of weak “go ahead,” even while wondering what was so awful about Phil’s realivening that Fury would drag May out of desk work to watch over him.

Fury told him.

He described Project TAHITI, designed to use alien... juice... to bring agents back from the dead. Phil, Fury explained, had been the director of the project, had seen firsthand all the losses and indignities, agents dying in agony and agents coming out of it less than sane. Which explained, in retrospect, why Phil’d been less and less present from 2010 on, and also probably why he’d gotten so weirdly stand-offish with Clint. Hard to live with something like that and not be able to talk about it.

Clint thought briefly of their kiss in New Mexico, wondered what would have happened if he’d followed it up. If Phil would have felt able to reciprocate at all, with this shadow between them. But Fury was still talking, and he needed to listen.

“Finally,” Fury said, “Phil sent in his resignation. Ordered me to shut it down. And that was that-- at least, until he died.” He paused for a sip of chocolate-- for courage, probably. Clint took a sip of his own, only to find that Fury’d doctored it heavily. Okay, so, dutch courage, then.

“So,” he said, swallowing, “when the will was read. Was… were you already shipping Phil off to TAHITI? Was that all a… a…” a game? An act?

“I was, yes,” Fury admitted, “but I hadn’t really decided yet. Phil would kill me if I ever told him this, but-- you remember what he said to me, in his will?”

“Yeah,” Clint whispered. For the sake of the fatherless punk you gave a chance to save the world.

“Well, when it came right down to it, Barton, I realized… maybe I could give him another chance.”

Clint closed his eyes, fingers tightening around the mug until the warmth leaching through turned unbearable.

“I can see that,” he said finally. “But… if everything Phil had said was true....”

“Oh it was,” Fury sighed. “They’d finally gotten good results doing a complete memory wipe, new life, new home, whole nine yards. But I couldn’t do that with Phil, or at least-- not until we’d tried it every other way, first.”

Every other way. 
“How… how many other ways did you try it?” Clint asked, going cold.

“Too many,” Fury said, looking down into his mug. “Too fucking many.”

“Phil said… on the phone. He said the process was… traumatic.”

“He doesn’t remember the half of it. Or at least, I sincerely hope he doesn’t.” Fury shook his head. “The physical side is bad enough, but effective. Once it’s done it’s done. The memory wipes, though, they… Barton, you don’t want to know what they have to do.”

“But do I need to know?” Clint asked, because if he was going to make himself and Fury both live through this, to get the information Phil might want, or he might need, he was going to make sure he got it all. It was the only way he could justify hearing it.

There was a long pause, before Fury finally heaved a deep breath, sounding far too defeated for Clint’s comfort. “Maybe.”

“Okay,” Clint said, “then tell me?”

And Fury did. He told Clint about Phil having to be awake while they rewrote his memories with needles. About waiting, each time, to see if it had taken, if the hypergraphia and the insanity would stay gone.

“He wrote… no.” Fury grimaced. “Damnit. I’d say he could tell you himself but he doesn’t remember. Fuck it, both of you, I don’t know how to call these shots. World security, that’s easy. But this? How do I decide what you deserve to know that he did, what’s better to stay buried?”

“He wrote me things?” Clint whispered, and put his chin down in his hands, hiding his mouth behind trembling fingers so his words didn’t tumble out before they were fledged. “You… in between the memory wipes. He wrote me?”

Fury nodded.

“Hell,” Clint said. And then he sobbed, just once.

For some reason, he thought of the alpacas.

Of himself, standing in the middle of a herd, on a sunny day, calling himself Phil’s fiance.

While Phil was in TAHITI, writing notes to him in between bouts of insanity.

“I couldn’t turn back,” Fury said, sounding vaguely appalled by himself. “We’d gone on too far. Once we’d healed him physically, his body was fine--better than he’d been before, even. It was the brain we kept getting wrong. Wasn’t sure if I’d have to have him wiped completely. Give him a new life as a-- hell, I don’t know. Phil couldn’t think of anything, either, when I asked. Maybe that’s why I didn’t stop. Anyway, it… eventually it worked. We had to take all of Project TAHITI from him to make it work, but it did.”

“Would you have even brought him back to life, if you’d known it would be like this?” Clint asked, even though he knew it was unfair.

“I honestly don’t know, Agent Barton,” Fury said, looking up at him. “Would you have wanted me to?”

Clint froze in the middle of a no. Because the last two years had been hell, and even once he’d
gotten used to Phil being gone, it’d never stopped seeming unfair to him that Phil wasn’t in the world any more. To find out he’d been off, saving the world, for most of the time, like an extended vacation, well--

Clint had no words for the feeling, nothing to compare it to. This didn’t happen to people. (It probably did; Phil probably could have given him a list. Phil still could give him a list if he asked.)

“Fuck,” he sighed, an admission enough in itself. “I have no idea. Um. So. Let me guess-- it finally seemed like it took, you gave him some kind of nice memories about the intervening time, sent him off under the watchful eye of Melinda May just in case he wasn’t that well after all, and… what? Didn’t let him contact me or Nat because we might ask him where he’d been for however long?”

“Yeah,” Fury said. “Level 7 only, plus no Avengers. I couldn’t risk either of you-- or Stark or someone else-- asking questions that triggered a memory cascade.”

No, Clint thought, he could see that. How would it have been, having Phil again, released from grieving, only to see him descend slowly into insanity through something Clint might have asked on a goddamn whim? And for neither him nor Phil to understand why?

All the same… he’d have had Phil back again.

“I suppose by then it’d been so long, you figured why get us pissed off at you over something that might not take?” Clint asked, not waiting for confirmation before going on. “Were you ever gonna tell us, once you knew it was okay?”

“Define ‘okay,’” Fury said, rubbing both his hands over his face this time, or trying to-- he winced as he remembered the sling. “Because Phil found out something a few months back. He told you he remembered it being traumatic-- that’s not a feature of the memory wipe. That’s a feature of some enemy stuffing him in a damned machine that started breaking up the implanted memories. May tells me he doesn’t know everything, and he’s got a redacted file from me. Tells him he was dead eight days. Had to do a memory wipe because of the trauma of bringing him back. I don’t know if it’s enough to trigger the meltdown or not. If maybe he’s safe after all this time without and his system has stabilized. He was looking for me, I know. To get more answers.”

“Oh,” Clint said, revelations starting to pile up on each other. “That’s why he got the IOU from Kurt.”

“The-- what?” Fury asked, and at least confusion was an improvement over the expression he’d been wearing for the rest of the conversation.

“That’s why I was in San Francisco. A new IOU came to Basil, from this Kurt guy. Dated March 27.”

“Goddamnit Coulson,” Fury sighed again. “Hell of a sense of timing. But that was his grand plan for letting you know he was alive, huh? And then you were supposed to come searching? And I couldn’t blame him if you found him-- he hadn’t reached out to you at all.”

“Right,” Clint said, “I think that’s how it must be. And once he’d found me… he’d have Marcus Johnson’s IOU.”

The thought made him depressed, though that wasn’t fair to Phil. But of course he’d waited until he had a use for Clint to think about defying Fury’s edict. Trust the system, after all.

“He’d have you, too, don’t forget that,” Fury told him sharply. “And don’t think I don’t see that pout on your face. Barton, Phil was quietly desperate. May told me. IOU or not, I bet he was
reaching out to you just because you could… because he thought… even though he probably….

Damnit, maybe Z is right. I’ve been SHIELD too damn long. I don’t think he did it for ulterior motives, okay? I mean, not primarily.”

“You mean he did it just because he wanted to,” Clint finished for him, and Fury nodded. Phil had been scared, and lost, and Phil never did well when he didn’t have context-- and so okay, yeah, maybe he mostly did just want to talk to Clint…. “Oh. Shit.”

Fury was right. He’d been SHIELD too long-- and maybe so had Clint and Phil. It was weird how hard it was for him to believe that Phil would have called him looking for comfort. Sure, Clint had an entire safe deposit vault’s worth of evidence that Phil loved him. Love was one thing-- letting SHIELD protocol go to hell because you missed someone was a whole other level of desire.

“So… what would you have done if Phil did get the IOU from me?” Clint asked. “Do you think it would be safe for him to find out about TAHITI now? Or does that stay our secret?”

“Again, Barton, I don’t know,” Fury said. “What will you do? Now that you know?”

---

Clint sighed, feeling his entire body slump. “Fuck if I know,” he said. “To tell the truth, sir, I’ve been mostly worried about keeping myself from getting disappeared somewhere; I haven’t thought much farther ahead. I, ah, I want to see Phil, though,” he added, in what he was fairly sure was the most egregious understatement he’d ever made. “That should be safe, right? Now that I know not to, to push too hard on the memory thing?”

“Honestly, Barton, at this point it’s probably worse if you avoid him,” Fury said. “He knows you too well to believe you’d just stay away for no reason, and it’s not like there are a lot of missions running right now that don’t involve Congressional testimony.”

Clint shuddered. “Ugh, no, I’ll leave that to Nat and Tony. But, sir, it’s not like I can go right away. I mean--unless you can tell me where he is, but I got the impression…”

“No, we’ve been out of contact,” Fury said. “I’ve got a scheduled check-in with Hill tomorrow, if she’s been in touch with him like you said I can find out then. He was at the Hub during the battle, but he’s not there now and neither are his team. If they’re together, I hope they’ll be all right.”

“So what are you going to do, sir?”

“Zeg’s been helping me round up some of my… emergency resources,” Fury continued. “There were a lot of loyal agents who got left in the wind when Romanoff leaked those files; we’re trying to get them to safety. I could use another pair of hands, especially one with as many off-the-record contacts as you’ve made in the last two years.”

Clint thought about it. He still felt guilty that he hadn’t been able to make it to SHIELD in time to make a difference, hadn’t been able to join Cap and Nat in their fight, hadn’t been able to stand up to Hydra in the heart of SHIELD. It would be good to try to help out, now.

“I’m not pretending to be dead,” he clarified. “And I need to stay relatively accessible, in case I’m needed here.”

Fury nodded. “This isn’t Avengers business, quite, but I wouldn’t be surprised if someone tries to fill the power vacuum in a bad way,” he said.

“Well then,” Clint said, forcing himself to stop thinking about Phil and memory wipes, to stop
imagining Phil waking up over and over and trying to write him letters. Later, Barton. “Where do we start?”

“Finish your cocoa,” Fury said. “I’ll call the others back. We’re going to need them, too.”

--

Waarzegster and Basil were back nearly before Clint finished his now-lukewarm chocolate. As Waarzegster swept in, they eyed both Clint and Fury closely. Clint got a long press of his hand followed by a pat, before Waarzegster strode over to drape themselves against Fury and press in forehead to forehead. Clint turned away, equally uncomfortable with seeing his ex-boss in intimate contact with, well, anyone, and with the knowledge that Fury was as badly in need of comfort as he was.

He could understand it, and he could understand Fury, but just at the moment he didn’t know that he could watch it. He wasn’t sure whether it was on Phil’s behalf that he was bitter, or whether it was because he didn’t have Phil here to hold himself.

Luckily, when he turned around, Basil was standing behind him holding out a banh mi as big as his head.

Right, Clint thought. The show must go on. And he couldn’t do Phil or the remnants of SHIELD any good while fainting of hunger.

He accepted the sandwich and took a bite.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 20, a much happier chapter, begins posting on tumblr tonight.
The Playground

Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

Phil comes home for the first time.

Chapter Notes

For those in the US, happy Thanksgiving. For the rest of you, enjoy a slightly early chapter because those of us who write this will be somewhat busy tomorrow.

After they’d dropped Fury off, in a random field that bore no obvious evidence of being unlike any other random field, Phil had sat down at his desk, ignoring the unsettling carvings that Garrett had left all over its surface, and opened the Toolbox. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected to find inside; obviously it had to be mostly if not entirely information, given the size, but… well, at this point, Phil wouldn’t have been surprised by anything.

The set of coordinates made sense, honestly. Phil just hoped that, whatever else they’d find there, there would be food and beds and hot showers. Anything else could wait a while. They were all run ragged, irritable from too much caffeine and too little food and sleep. Phil thought wistfully of the mandatory downtime that SHIELD would have ordered for his team after a mission this intense. He had a feeling that downtime was going to be in short supply for a while.

Probably by design, the coordinates were less than an hour’s flight time away from Fury’s field. Phil spent most of the time wrestling with himself over whether he should call Clint immediately upon landing or wait until he’d had a chance to sleep. He had a vague feeling he might not be making the best decisions just then. When they finally landed and the hatch lowered to reveal Jemma’s battered, tear-streaked face, Phil pushed aside all thoughts of anything but looking after his team.

While Agent Koenig--Billy--was seeing about lanyards for Tripp, Skye, and Melinda, Phil followed Jemma to the infirmary to look in on Fitz, which basically meant spending a few minutes staring at the monitors so he wouldn’t have to look at his face, pale and slack against the pillow, looking heartbreakingly young and vulnerable beneath the oxygen mask. Phil had always believed in trusting his agents to know their own capabilities, but he still wondered if he’d done the right thing in taking his two scientists into the field. They’d done well, so well, but the price…

Enough. If he’d left them in the labs, they might well have been killed by Hydra. It wouldn’t do any good to second-guess his past decisions.

He left with a gentle pat to Fitz’s thin arm.

He already had an office here, apparently; Billy had taken pains to let him know. As much as Phil
wanted to just find a bunk and collapse into it, it was only the middle of the afternoon and he felt like it wouldn’t set the appropriate tone for his first act of Director of SHIELD to be crawling into bed and putting his head under the covers. He followed the signs in the hall to the office section, and fetched up in front of a rather handsome door whose nameplate already had his name engraved on it.

He wondered whether this was a sign of Billy’s efficiency, or if Fury had been planning this for longer than he’d let on. Phil laid his hand on the doorknob, feeling oddly reluctant to go in, as though entering the office and sitting behind that desk would lay a weight over his shoulders that he wasn’t entirely sure he could carry.

But. If not Phil, who?

He shook off his thoughts and opened the door.

“I thought I was gonna have to come drag you up here.”

The voice was roughened, but unmistakeable, and Phil whirled around, his jaw dropping. For one horrible moment he thought that the side effects of TAHITI had finally kicked in, that he was hallucinating, but then he found himself wrapped in strong, warm arms, his head being tucked into a sweet, familiar curve of neck that smelled like oranges and Irish Spring.

“Clint,” he managed to say, and then had to swallow back any other words as his throat closed and his eyes burned. He wrapped his arms around Clint’s body—solid, real, perfect—and fisted both hands into the back of his t-shirt. He pressed his face into Clint’s neck as his breath hitched.

“Hey,” Clint said, soft and sweet, almost crooning. “Hey. I’ve got you. I--fuck. Phil.” His arms tightened, and Phil wished that he’d hold on like that forever, that Phil could rest himself on those broad shoulders and let the world look after itself for once. “Fuck,” Clint said again. “I can’t believe you’re finally here. I didn’t… I couldn’t let myself believe it all the way, not until I saw you.” His voice broke. “Not until I got to t-touch you. Phil .”

“I can’t believe you’re here,” Phil managed. “How…”

“Fury,” Clint said, and Phil huffed a little almost-laugh.

“I might forgive him sooner than I thought,” he said.

“I don’t want to talk about him yet,” Clint said. Phil could feel his lips moving against the skin of Phil’s temple, his breath ruffling his hair. “I--please can I--I’d like to kiss you. Would that be okay? I won’t if you don’t want--”

“Yes,” Phil interrupted him, and he made himself pull back far enough to see Clint’s dear face, his lovely eyes reddened, shiny with tears. “Yes, please, Cl--” He didn’t know exactly what he wanted to say, which was just as well, because Clint was kissing him and oh, it was the same, his lips were just as soft and tender and his tongue was just as strong, this was one memory that was true.

He shuddered with a wave of complicated emotion, desire and joy and relief and love, the strange ripples of a fear he hadn’t let himself acknowledge fizzling away. There was one thing, at least, that he could trust to his tattered brain.

Maybe , he thought, as he tasted salt between their lips. Maybe things were going to work out after all.
Chapter 21 will start posting on tumblr on Thursday night, once we all wake up from the postprandial nap.
In the Moment

Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

Clint makes a few things clear(er).

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Text Log, Clint Barton’s new burner phone

4/9/2014 4:04 pm EST
Marcus: found your man
Marcus: made him Director
Marcus: … don’t think I don’t know what you just called me
Marcus: he didn’t punch me
Marcus: didn’t hug me either, unlike some people I could mention
Marcus: sending him your way
Marcus: hes looking well
Marcus: but you’re the expert, you tell me when you get a chance
Clint: will do

6:19 EST
Marcus: well? He make it?

6: 30 EST
Marcus: I swear to god if you’re not answering because you’ve already got your hands down his pants…
Marcus: Z says they want pictures
Marcus: I really don’t
Marcus: also Z says think about what they said
Clint’s pocket had been buzzing for the last minute and a half, but he’d been way too invested in convincing his tongue and hands that Phil was alive again to pay much attention.

It was Phil who finally pulled away, reluctantly, and looked down at Clint’s pants pocket.

“All things considered, you should probably check that,” he said, looking conflicted. “You never know who it might be.”

“Well I know it’s not you,” Clint told him, holding on to his hips and digging in a little, partly to keep him from retreating further and partly because his palms weren’t entirely convinced of the continued reality of Phil’s pelvis yet, “so how important can it be?”

“This is how you missed approximately a half dozen calls from me,” Phil said, reaching up to smooth a lock of Clint’s hair back from his face. Clint leaned into the touch and sighed.

“Those were all you?” he asked, then shook his head. “With everything else going on you still kept hitting redial? Phil, I-- well I’d say I never knew you cared, but I was in your Winnebago heading north at the time so, ya know, it’d fall flat. My point remains: can’t think of anyone important enough to be concerned about right now.”

“Oh, god, I’d nearly forgotten about the Winnebago,” Phil said. “The tabs must be so out of date. Just check your phone, Clint. It could be Fury.”

“He knows what I’m doing here,” Clint said. “Or he ought to, since he dropped me off.”

“It could be Natasha.”

Which proved that whatever else had happened to his memories, Phil still knew exactly how Clint worked.

Clint checked his phone-- and choked.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, fine, just-- Fury. Not urgent. he’s just being a…” Clint broke off, stabbing savagely at the phone with his thumb.

6: 33 EST

Clint: well I wouldve had my hands down his pants if someone wasnt a fucking cockblock

“Ah,” Phil said, moving off as if he wasn’t sure whether Clint needed privacy. It was the last thing he needed, so he shoved his phone back in his pocket. His hands ached for Phil already, and his lips were lonely. And yet, he felt stuck in place as he watched Phil wander across the room to run a hand over the broad old wood desk.

He hadn’t been exaggerating earlier; ever since the SHIELD agents he and Fury had rescued from the middle of the ocean had turned out to belong to Phil, it was like he’d been living in suspended animation. Fury’d insisted Clint take care of Phil’s scientists while Fury went after Phil himself, that he’d send Phil after. Clint had sat for hours with Jemma in front of her friend’s bed, after everything was done, reluctant to let them out of his sight. They were literally salvaged from the wreck of SHIELD, two people he could give back to Phil, some small return for everything Phil’d left him. And also, two people he knew Phil would come for, as deep in his bones as he’d always
known Phil would come for him.

So either Phil would come, or Phil had never been alive again in the first place, not really.

Clint had gotten restless after Fury texted him, and left Jemma to her vigil without his jitters to distract her. He’d watched from a video feed as the Bus landed, disgorging her crew. As Phil-- PHIL HIMSELF-- stepped into the Playground and looked around. Hearing, sight-- Clint drew in a deep breath and tried to calm himself and wait for Billy to send Phil up.

He’d texted Kate to soothe himself, until his hands shook too much.

Then Phil had opened the door, and time started up again, richer than before. And Clint hadn’t been able to help himself; he needed all senses on Phil, smell and touch and taste adding their validation of Phil’s existence to the tally.

“Christ,” Clint said, as Phil went over to look out the window, “I never thought I’d have a right moment again.”

Phil turned, looking quizzical.

Before he could say anything, the intercom crackled to life.

“Director, we have a situation that requires your attention,” Billy Koenig said, sounding apologetic.

“What is it?” Phil asked, suddenly stiffening in a kind of extra-deluxe version of his agent stance.

“Two agents just showed up at the door? One has a note from Maria Hill pinned to his chest?”

“Okay,” Phil said, glancing over with twinkling eyes at Clint’s snort. And oh, oh Clint had forgotten how much of a thrill Amused Phil was. How had his concept of Phil gotten so fuzzy at the edges so quickly?

“The other one brought pizza,” Billy continued. “To sweeten the deal, I think. I’ll have it scanned.”

“Does it have pineapples?” Phil asked, just like Clint had known he would, because some things were immutable.

“I… didn’t think to check, I’m sorry sir, I’ll--”

“No need, I’ll be right down,” Phil told Koenig, and turned back to Clint. “I, ah-- I should probably go see whether we have new recruits or a new problem. Are you… did Fury need you? Urgently?”

“Did he what? Why?”

“I mean,” Phil looked diffident suddenly, which was something Clint didn’t think he’d seen Phil look before, even when they were dating. “How long can you stay?”

He wasn’t coming any closer to Clint, even though Clint was between him and the door, and he was swaying, slightly.

“I’m… not expected anywhere but here,” Clint told him. Phil seemed to take a moment to digest this, nodding once, then twice.

“Okay,” he said. “No problem.”

And Clint got it, suddenly.
“Phiiiiiil,” he said, and began drifting back over, “are you… thinking this is New Mexico?”

“What?” Phil asked, faintly, but watching Clint, watching him just as closely as Clint could have wanted, just as closely as he always had in the past. Clint felt his heart pick back up. Yes; the two years of Dead Phil had done him some good after all. Somewhere or other in that vault must have been the Phil Rosetta Stone, because Clint realized he knew exactly what the fuck Phil was thinking. And he didn’t like it.

“New Mexico,” Clint said, carefully. “Are you thinking that kiss was a one-off? Just relief at seeing you?”

“I’m not—” Phil bit his lip, probably to keep from reminding Clint that there was precedent. “I wouldn’t presume.”

He meant it, too. He’d apparently been ready-- maybe even been expecting-- Clint to send him back to the relationship waiting room. Even after dying, after Clint had gotten his vault, driven his Winnebago, redeemed his IOUs-- Phil still had no expectations for himself.

“I would like you to presume,” Clint said, as patiently as he could, and finally put himself close enough to Phil to grab both his hands and hold on. He was nearly immediately distracted by how actual Phil’s fingers were, and took a moment to just squeeze before continuing. “In fact, I would strongly encourage you to presume. If you want to. I thought I said so on the phone?”

“I--” Phil looked wiped blank for a moment, and Clint sympathised. He’d been feeling like that himself lately. “I didn’t know-- you said you wanted me around but… not how.”

Every way I can get you, Clint nearly said, and thought of the rings he’d found. The want was there, but those rings were a promise, not just a wish. It felt like too much way too fast-- he’d barely gotten hold of Phil again. But Clint had plenty of wishes stored up over the course of two years along with the regrets, and if Fury was right about Phil’s letter-writing, Clint bet Phil had some wishes of his own.

Today seemed like a good day to grant wishes.

“Phil.” Clint tried to infuse the name with as much reassurance as he could. “Go downstairs, do your new Director thing, then confiscate a pizza and bring it up here, and I will tell you how I want you. In detail, if you need. And you see if you like it.”

When Phil walked out the door, Clint tried to remind himself of object permanence, and not go find a video feed.

It hadn’t been enough, not nearly enough-- Clint wasn’t sure days or weeks or at least two more years or a lifetime would be quite enough to fully reconcile him to his luck. But it was a start. Phil was alive in the world, sharing the same moment Clint was in, and if Clint had anything to say about it, he could share them from up close and personal for a good long while. Clint had no idea yet what that would look like, possibly because none of this new post-Hydra, re-Philled world had a map yet. But he and Phil could figure it out together this time.

Also, he needed to distract himself immediately, and Phil had brought up a good point about Natasha; the Playground was definitely a safe enough place he could contact her. Anyway, he could think of no better anchor for himself than the sound of her voice. Clint got out his phone and began dialing, his heart lighter than it had been in a long time.

Voicemail log, Natasha Romanov’s new burner phone
Hey, Talia, guess who. Seen you on the tv lately; looks like you’ve been busy. Wanted to tell you I… fuck. I miss you. I… I’m proud of you. I’m so glad you’re alive. And, um… you know how to reach me, okay? Just, leave a message or something if I don’t pick up so I know it’s you. I’ve had real weird luck with blocked numbers recently. Okay? Um… oh. Um… love you. Bye.

Chapter 22 will begin posting on tumblr on Monday.
Chapter Summary

Clint and Phil continue to reconnect, and take stock of their future.

Chapter Notes

Please note the rating change from G to T, for foreplay and fade-away.

Phil sat behind his new desk eating pizza and contemplating Clint. He was perched on a corner of the desk, head bowed, dabbing at a spot of sauce on his t-shirt, and looking like heaven.

Drawn, red-eyed, weary heaven, heaven that had finally started looking his age in the two years since Phil had seen him, but definitely with a celestial aura still. They’d talked enough over dinner for Phil to know that Clint had taken full advantage of everything Phil’d left him, starting with that first redeemed butterscotch cookie and not looking back. It ought to have eased the ache in Phil’s heart, since that had been the point of the bequest-- but then, Phil had expected to be dead. Or, still dead-- at any rate, to never know what he was missing.

He wished he’d gotten to see Clint and Kate escaping in the speedboat, clown pants flying. Walked in the orange groves with Clint. Taken Clint and Ben and Ray out for dinner to regale them with the Creston Valley story. Wandered through fields of fluffy alpaca with Clint while CIA agents flailed about in the distance.

Phil even wished he’d been at CapCon with Clint and Captain Rogers, although he was fairly certain he wouldn’t have survived the experience.

Phil’s own story, when he told it to Clint, seemed sad and frantic and full of holes. Some of the latter were more or less a feature of the memory loss-- Phil couldn’t account for about a year of his time post-death. Other holes in his narrative were deliberate; since Fury had given Clint enough details on TAHITI to excuse at least most of Phil’s radio silence and his later panicked IOU, Phil didn’t have to go into all the gory details himself. It came as a relief. Phil didn’t know how he could begin to tell Clint about all of the nightmares that eventually bled into the edges of his waking life, the subtle underlying sense that his world was wrong. He concentrated, instead, on telling Clint about life on the Bus, about recruiting Skye, about Melinda May-- though not how she’d spied on him for Fury. There’d be time for exploring that fresh pain, as well as the old one, later.

Assuming Clint stayed, anyway. That had seemed to be Clint’s plan, earlier, but Phil still couldn’t fully believe it. Not because he didn’t believe Clint meant it-- but he’d wiped that possible future off his mental roadmap after he’d died. How was he supposed to go about finding it again?
“Swear to god, I do this every time. Pretty sure I hit the same damn spot every time, too,” Clint was muttering, as he ground the sauce deeper into the fibers of his shirt.

“World’s Greatest Marksman,” Phil teased him, and Clint looked up, smile blinding.

“God I love you,” he said.

Phil froze, and waited for the world to stop shifting beneath his feet. He hadn’t heard Clint actually say those words since just after Budapest. Even on the phone a few days ago, it had been I loved you, because love is a verb that needs an object, and death takes that away. Phil had told himself that, over and over, when he’d called Clint. Just to make sure he was prepared for anything.

Except, of course, for Clint, love had always been like that—given long before the object of his affection had earned it. Phil took a deep breath, trying to gather his thoughts. It was a mistake.

“Please stay,” came out of his mouth, before he could stop himself.

Damnit, he hadn’t wanted to ask just yet. He’d wanted to bide his time, get a better sense of Clint, a better sense of his own desires—well, no. Death had changed a lot about him, but it hadn’t changed his desire for Clint, just his belief they could ever have a future together. Hard to marry post-mortem, after all. But now that he’d asked Clint to stay, Phil was immediately certain both that Clint was going to shut him down and that he wanted nothing more in the world.

So he did the only thing he could think of—he started babbling:

“There’s so much you can do. We can figure out the, if you, we don’t have to figure it out immediately. But I can think of ten things I need a SHIELD agent of your caliber for just off-hand, and—”

“We’ll have to get you one then,” Clint broke in, frowning at Phil, “because I’m not re-joining SHIELD.”

“Oh,” Phil said faintly, trying to remind himself he’d just told himself so. “Why?”

“‘Cause I don’t think the Director of SHIELD should date one of his agents,” Clint said, looking at Phil like he was perhaps a little bit slow. “I mean, think about it. ‘S just bad any way you look at it.”

“Oh,” Phil said again.

“Uh… that’s if you want to?” Clint added. “I had a long time to think, Phil, and I remember what Charlie said about being in the moment and you not in moments with me anymore. And I think for a long time you and me weren’t in quite the same moments as much as we thought and I regret that. So look, we already know that waiting till we retire is a losing proposition, and… and fuck it, you’re back now, and I want to be in your moment as often as I can, and I think, I really do think, this is the moment, okay?”

The surge of affection nearly knocked Phil backwards. There was his old Clint, whose brain-mouth filter was never that fine, whose babble had always been endearing, even when he’d been babbling at Phil about how it wouldn’t work, it couldn’t work, Clint was going to screw something up trying to save the world and be worthy of Phil at the same time and could they just-- but there was no reason to remember that now, except for contrast.

Clint was looking nervous now, and Phil tried to find his words. It was no good; there was too damn much to say. At last, he settled for a fervent “I love you so much” before scooping Clint up
and trying to make his lips explain what his brain couldn’t.

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Clint flailed a little, just for an instant, body going tense with surprise before he made a small, happy sound and practically melted into Phil’s arms, letting his body lean on him, heavy and soft and trusting as his plush mouth opened beneath Phil’s kiss.

Clint’s body was so amazing against his, warm and supple and strong as Clint pressed against him from neck to knee. Phil felt himself start to tremble even as his pulse sped up, his skin prickling with awareness and desire. He hadn’t let himself realize how skin-hungry he’d gotten since his resurrection, his sole sources of human contact—medical examination, training, and handshakes—and that one sweet, impulsive hug from Skye, that had left him startled and awkward and achingly grateful, though he’d never burden her with the knowledge of how much it had meant to him. But this—being touched like a man, being cherished, being known—it had been so long, so long since anyone had touched him like this. Not since Clint, that last time. Since New Mexico. It was overwhelming and amazing, too much and not enough; he never wanted it to end.

Clint fisted both hands in the back of Phil’s shirt, pulling away from the kiss just enough to suck in a lungful of air. “I keep thinking I’m gonna wake up,” he muttered, punctuating his sentence with more kisses. “Close my hands on air, open my eyes and you’re gone again.”

Phil tightened his grip, taking greedy, desperate joy in the flex of Clint’s muscles under his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said, tucking his words into the corner of Clint’s mouth. “Clint, I’m so sorry. I wish there had been a way to spare you this grief.”

Clint pulled Phil’s bottom lip between his teeth, just a whisper of pressure, not even enough to call a nip, then soothed over the non-existent mark with a swipe of his tongue. “I think I needed it,” he said. “I mean—it hurt, fuck did it hurt, but the people I’ve met, the things I’ve done, the things I’ve learned—I needed it, Phil. I needed all of it. It was… you gave me these amazing gifts, and the only thing wrong was that you weren’t there. But now you are.”

This close, Clint’s face was a blur, but Phil could still see the shine of tears swimming in his reddened eyes. “I won’t go again,” he said, a promise that he knew he couldn’t make, not really. “As long as I’m able to choose,” he amended, trying to put all his sincerity in his voice, all the years of dreams and plans, opening the aching space he’d always kept inside himself, ready to welcome Clint home.

“Me neither,” Clint whispered. “We’ll make it work, Phil, one way or another, I promise you.” He kissed Phil again, the bridge of his nose, the corner of his eye, his hands still clutching restlessly. “We’ll go visit Edna and train with Kate and have tea with Basil, we’ll go ride in the fucking houseboat, we’ll pick a set of purple dishes and we’ll eat off them, we’ll save the world and then we’ll come ho—” his voice cracked. “We’ll come home to each other. Can we do that? Can we have that? Please?”

“I’m the Director of SHIELD now,” Phil said, his own voice wobbling and thick. “I’ll figure out a way.”

---
Later—far later than either Phil or Clint had really planned, but people and things and logistics kept getting in the way—they ended up in Phil’s new bedroom, exploring the various drawers and shelves in tandem, Clint’s hands slipped idly down the front of Phil’s pants.

Which was necessary, Clint had explained, because his hands hadn’t re-learned Phil yet, and they had a tendency to forget if they got too far away from him. His breath had been warm against Phil’s neck as he talked, and he laid little kisses along it, and his front was broad against Phil’s back and his thumbs stroked idle circles at Phil’s bellybutton and all these things thawed Phil in places he hadn’t known were frozen. It ought to have been overwhelming; it might get overwhelming at some point, but even in this half-haze of exhaustion and emotion, Phil knew they had very little time to idle together. So he let Clint cling, let arousal spiral upwards slowly through his belly.

“D’you think these used to be Fury’s quarters?” Clint asked, as one of his fingers slipped further down, tangling in hair, twisting, and sending an electric spark through certain areas that hadn’t had a visitor in far too long.

“Mmm,” Phil responded, and paused with his hand on the knob to the bedside table drawer. “Likely. Um.”

“Oh, open it,” Clint said, and Phil could feel his smile. “Billy probably cleaned it out.”

“Along with restocking the kitchen, getting Fitz and Jemma set up, getting you settled—”

“I settled myself. C’mon, it’s probably empty.”

“And what if it’s not?” Phil asked.

“Then I’ll text Fury and ask if he wants whatever’s in it back. Or Zeg, situation depending. C’mon. C’mon. You’ve been poking around for ages; I’m beginning to think you’re stalling.”

“I am not,” Phil said, yanking open the drawer.

The inside had nothing but a little blue book, stamped in gold with the words New Testament, Psalms, Proverbs.

“Oh my god,” Clint breathed, “the Gideons really do get everywhere.”

Phil flipped the book over, then started to leaf through it, on the half-hearted assumption that Fury might have meant something by it.

“Phil,” Clint said, pulling away and sitting on the bed, “we really can slow down. I know it’s been a long time. And I—”

He broke off, sounding a little forlorn. Phil tossed the book back in the drawer and turned to see him looking down at his own hands, like he was ashamed, like all this stopping and starting was something he was doing wrong somehow.

“-- I just want to be with you, however you want it. Or if you need-- it’s been a long day. Days. Weeks-- if you need to just… I dunno… I won’t push.”

Phil found himself dropping to his knees in front of Clint like he’d been kicked from behind.

“No, honey,” he said, grabbing Clint’s hands and holding on tight, “please push. Please-- I don’t believe it either, yet. I don’t… this time ten days ago I was still on the Bus with my team, my whole healthy trustworthy team, and SHIELD was standing and my world was solid. And I’d just
sent that IOU to you because I was so lonesome and so scared of my own brain and of whether you’d understand or whether you’d care if you did.”

While he’d been talking, Phil had felt his throat start to tighten, his voice to rise. He knew he was holding onto Clint’s fingers too hard, but he couldn’t make himself stop. So Clint did it for him, freeing his hands so he could slide off the bed and wrap himself back around Phil, murmuring his name.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” Phil continued. “I want… my dear you don’t know how badly I want you. It… after I came back, after Nick explained you couldn’t know yet because-- oh nevermind why, it was a pack of bull anyway-- but I started to… to put you away, even further than I had while I was waiting for you and I nearly didn’t even arrange that IOU I was so, I had arranged everything, my mind, my email, my phone, so that I wouldn’t contact you and I don’t… how do I… you’re going to have to tell me how to…."

Clint put him out of his misery by kissing him gently, which was something that had happened several times already this evening. Phil didn’t remember it featuring in their old relationship at all; the idea that this might get to be their habit burst through the fog of the future like a beacon.

“Can you take the lead?” Phil asked when Clint pulled back to rest their foreheads together. Clint opened his eyes and looked into Phil’s for a long questioning moment.

“You want that?” Clint asked, his voice roughening. “You want me to do what I want, or you want me to tell you what I want you to do?”

“Both?” Phil asked, “please? If that’s not…”

“Oh, it’s not a problem,” Clint said, and raised one hand to Phil’s cheek, caressing it briefly then trailing it down Phil’s jaw. “Not a problem at all.”

Phil tried to say something more, but it got caught in his throat behind an unexpected little sound that was half moan and half sigh.

“Oh, Phil,” Clint said, caught between desperation and fondness, “that. There. Haven’t heard that from you in so long I thought I’d made it up. You don’t know how often I thought about it, after Budapest. What I’d do on the day I finally got to hold you again. After… it got worse, after. I’d lay awake some nights, cataloguing all the parts of you I missed, wondering if I’d even remembered them correctly. The hollow under your jaw…” he broke off to kiss it, “the little ticklish spot behind your knee…” his other hand began to slide down Phil’s thigh. He felt his heart rate pick up.

“It’s still ticklish,” he managed.

“Mmm… good. I’ll have to get reacquainted. God, Phil, you know how much it hurt when I realized I was never gonna get to feel your chest hair again?”

“Clint--” Phil said, or rather sobbed. “That’s… there’s… when I had the surgery….”

“Phil, don’t tell me they waxed you,” Clint said, sounding scandalized.

For some reason, this broke the bubble of hysteria working its way up Phil’s throat, and he half-collapsed, laughing, onto Clint’s shoulder.

“Seriously babe,” Clint continued, holding tightly to Phil as he sniggered, “I want you to tell me if it gets too fast. Okay?”
“Okay,” Phil promised.

“Okay,” Clint said, and kissed him on the nose. “God, I missed doing that. Missed these, too,” he moved on to Phil’s eyelids, his breath warm, “and even your forehead,” he reached up to kiss that too, “mostly ’cause you always nuzzled right into my neck when I-- yesssss, like that.”

Phil, who’d taken the hint, pulled back from Clint’s neck long enough to smile into it.

“You don’t taste so different,” he said, trying to sound confident about it. “I remember I always liked the way sweat left salt along your collarbone.”

“Hrmph, so sexy,” Clint laughed. “Well maybe you should see if you still like it.”

“Your shirt is in the way,” Phil grumped.

“Take it off, then,” Clint told him, and sat back. Phil swallowed hard, staring down at the black jersey. “Or, if it’s easier--”

“No,” Phil cut him off, and reached out to fist it with both hands. “I will.”

And he did, peeling it over Clint’s head as he raised each glorious arm in turn to let it come free. Then he sat back staring, because the passage of time had left Clint slightly more scarred, slightly less lean, and-- unexpectedly-- a very little bit freckled. Somehow, it made everything very, very real.

“You see what you wanted?” Clint asked softly, and Phil nodded.

“And some other things,” he said, as Clint’s nipples, beginning to perk up in the subterranean air, caught his eye.

“Have at it, then,” Clint said.

After a little, when Phil pulled back from his collarbone to trail off down his chest, Clint stroked his hair and asked

“Was it like you remembered?”

“So much better,” Phil admitted, before applying himself to Clint’s left nipple. Clint’s reaction, arcing against him with a cut-off sob, went straight to his heart. When he was finished, he pulled back, and raised a shaking hand to the collar of his own shirt. “Fair’s fair?”

“Yeah,” Clint said, watching his fingers closely. “Fair’s fair.”

“There’s a nasty scar,” Phil warned him, beginning to undo the buttons. “I’ll be okay if you… if it’s a problem. For me, sometimes, I--”

This time, Clint cut him off with a finger to his lips.

“It might be. Only one way to find out. If it is, best way I can think of to get used to it is just to get to know it. I’ll probably want to stroke it, if that doesn’t hurt,” Clint mused, watching Phil’s fingers move down the placket of his shirt, “get my fingers up in your chest hair, get up close enough to bury my nose in it, then maybe I’ll kiss down it, if that’s all right with you.”

Phil opened his shirt, wordlessly, by way of answer, and pulled it off, still watching Clint closely. He could see the moment Clint caught sight of the scar’s course, underneath the thin fabric of his undershirt, and he froze.
Clint’s hands went to his hips, dug back into his waistband, and started sliding the undershirt up his chest. He bent down, nearly double, in order to start kissing Phil’s belly, every inch the shirt revealed. When he got to the bottom edge of the scar he paused, just momentarily, then leaned in firmly to lay his lips on it.

Phil realized he hadn’t been breathing for several seconds, and wasn’t sure how to start again. When Clint pulled back, he was frowning.

“Clint?” Phil asked, afraid to think about what that face meant.

“I really shouldn’t have done that to my back,” Clint said, looking up at him ruefully. “Not as young as I was. Here, can we take this somewhere other than the floor?”

“How about the bed?” Phil said, feeling his heart start to beat again. “There’s one around here somewhere.”

“Fuck you, Coulson,” Clint grumbled, straightening up.

“Is that a statement of intent, Barton? Because you shouldn’t say that if you don’t mean it.”

“Show you how much I mean it,” Clint muttered. Then he pulled Phil upright and flung them both down on the bed. “Smartass.”

“Ah, there’s the Clint Barton I know and love,” Phil said, wriggling around until he was able to remove his undershirt the rest of the way; it didn’t seem like such a big deal all of a sudden.

“Yeah, here I am,” Clint told him, running a hand lightly up his chest, right over the scar, and tangling it into his chest hair. “And here I’ll stay.”

---

The first time Phil woke up, everything was still, even his dreams. They had been full of clear water and soft pale sand— not black, not like Tahiti— and Clint had been there, all around, beaming like the sun. As he drifted into consciousness he realized Clint still enveloped him, one arm and one leg flung over his torso. Even in sleep, Clint had kept him as close as he had while they made love, always touching him somewhere or another.

Phil nestled down contentedly for the first time in so very long, tucking his nose beneath the comforter so that he was all warm, all cocooned, and raised a hand to stroke Clint’s hair. Bit by bit over the course of the evening, Clint had re-lined a map for Phil, tracing the longitude with his tongue up Phil’s spine, the latitude by the way his thighs circled Phil’s equator. Phil knew it was dangerously mushy of him to think of it that way, but decided that no one except himself needed to know what metaphors his brain was working in. No harm, no foul.

Maybe he’d tell Clint, sometime later. Maybe after he’d retrieved their purple sheets from whatever vault Talbot had stuffed them in after confiscating them and the rest of the vault. Maybe years from now— if they lived that long— as they sat by the shores of a distant lake, brought there by the float plane Phil was fairly sure Talbot had never discovered. Clint deserved to know; he was the one who’d brought Phil a future back that seemed worth having.

Sure, SHIELD was gone, or gone to seed, scattered across the world, sure Hydra was even now on the rise in the dark corners, but that just meant Phil could build it up again, build it right. He had Skye and Melinda and Triplett and Jemma and so many others to help him. And Clint wanted to be right there, holding him up, letting himself be held while he went off to be a superhero.
Phil’s bladder cut through his drifting, and he slid himself carefully out from under Clint. When he was free, everything seemed colder, and he looked back to see Clint’s hand twitching in his sleep, reaching out.

“I won’t be long,” Phil whispered to him, kissing his forehead before wandering out.

The second time Phil woke up, everything was still, even his hands. They ached, as if he’d been typing for hours or caught outside in January. His dreams released him slowly, arcs and worls and caverns under pale sand, and left him high and dry, and standing in a lonely room.

In front of him was a wall filled with carvings, circles and lines, intersecting at sharp angles, all freshly carved by the knife that was lying by his toes. Phil reached out, tracing one, while remembering his own words in a video report to Director Fury. Hypergraphia, eventual insanity. Garrett had, Phil recalled, called them the Words of Creation.

It was a damned lie; all he saw in front of him was the destruction of the future he’d just started to believe in.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, we know, we hurt too.

The next chapter will start posting Monday on tumblr.
The Morning After
Chapter by faeleverte, Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

Clint wakes up alone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clint woke up to an empty bed, a full bladder, and his phone buzzing frantically on the bedside table that had once been Nick Fury’s.

He dealt with the most urgent matter first, by throwing back the covers to feel the divot left by Phil’s body, then burying his nose in Phil’s pillow. The sheets were cold, but the pillow still smelled of sex and Phil’s cologne. Between that and the clothing strewn about the floor, he decided that he hadn’t accidentally spent the night with either a hallucination or a randy poltergeist, and his panic dissipated.

“Not like there isn’t plenty of reason for the new Director of SHIELD to be up early,” he told himself firmly, and dealt with the phone next.

“Hi,” he said as he answered it, “can I piss first?”

“Could I stop you?” Natasha asked, and Clint did stop, midway to the door with his hand on the knob.

“Nat!” he said, chuckling at how high and happy his own voice came out. “Keep talking.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, before Natasha sighed.

“Clint Barton, are you just going to take me into the bathroom with you?”

“I’ll put the phone on mute, I promise,” Clint said, and kept walking. “What’s up?”

“Someone, I’ll name no names, left me a rather concerning voicemail yesterday,” Natasha said. “Concerning enough that I have to ask you if you fed the parakeet today?”

“Not yet, I’m waiting for it to ask politely; no seriously, Nat, I’m fine. Fine and safe. I just… missed you.” Clint stopped inside the bathroom door and leaned against it, sighing. “And I was finally someplace safe to let you know.”

Natasha grumbled that he was taking years off her life, but didn’t ask for details. Which was all to the good, as Clint realized with a start that he couldn’t tell her where he was, who he was with, or why the world suddenly seemed to have dialed up the brightness for him. Not yet, at any rate. So he got down to business and listened.

---
He was back in bed, still talking with Natasha, when Phil walked in with two coffee mugs in his hands and a soft look on his face.

“I had to fight Trip for these,” he whispered, setting one down on the table and then turning to sit on the bed himself, his back to Clint as he sipped.

“Hey Nat,” Clint said, “I gotta go. Something urgent just came up.”

He thumbed the phone off, dropped it on the bed, and completely ignored his coffee in favor of plastering himself to Phil’s back, knees bracketing his ass.

“Mmm,” Clint said when he finished huffing the hollow behind Phil’s ear, “you still smell like me.”

“Do I?” Phil asked, not turning. Clint sniffed again.

“And dust. Me and dust… you have to go poking in the secret passage to find the coffee?”

Phil’s back tensed against Clint’s front, but his voice was light when he replied.

“We have a secret passage? No one told me. How was Natasha doing?”

“Mmmm” Clint said, continuing his exploration of the nape of Phil’s neck, since he was already there and all and his lips were still intermittently unsure Phil wasn’t just a very good dream. “She’s fine. She and Maria talked. And Tony, who wants to, like, get the Avengers back together all in his big tower and I don’t know, hover over us to keep Congress off our backs.”

“I’ve heard worse plans,” Phil said, and his hands tightened around his coffee. Clint felt a little unease begin to creep in around his edges, and semi-idly nibbled at Phil’s shoulder. It brought him a satisfactory shudder.

“I guess,” Clint said, running his palms down Phil’s thighs, “means I gotta be out in public and deal with that Talbot dude. But. Nat says Tony says Maria says she thinks she can get me a kind of friend-of-the-court style interview with him, I come clean with… with the whole lot of nothing I know about everything, and receive the official Talbot seal of approval, and off we go. I hope his seal of approval is a fake moustache. I look dead sexy in one. Oh! Man. I need to find Wendy; you never got to see me. Let me tell you, it’s a sight.”

He was babbling, he knew he was babbling, but something was off about Phil and he wasn’t sure yet what to do with it. Or even if it was a very normal part of Phil’s… Philness… post-death.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Phil said.

“I’ll see if I can dig Wendy up, then--” Clint started.

“No, I-- table that. I mean Tony’s idea. Bringing the Avengers back together. I think you should hear him out. Maybe-- I think you could do more there than…” he broke off with a sigh, and Clint felt cold.

“No,” he said, before he thought it out.

“You shouldn’t just dismiss it,” Phil told him, half-turning, and oh yes, his face was set in that blank, reasonable, agent-face that Clint was just now deciding he hated. “We’re going to need--”

“I’m not discounting that,” Clint told him, “that’s not a bad idea. I’m saying ‘no,’ we’re not starting
up this… this stupid thing, this noble sacrifice thing again, Phil. It was a bad idea when I did it to you, and it’d be an even worse idea now and if the next words out of your mouth are anything even remotely resembling ‘this was a mistake’ or ‘we just don’t have time for ourselves’ I am going to kick your fuzzy ass.” His voice was trembling, he knew it was, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Of all the damn nightmares, this one at least he thought they’d laid to rest.

“But it’s going to be-- I might not-- Clint,” Phil ran down, sighed, and started over. “Sometimes life just doesn’t work out the way we want. I’ve already been stopped twice in the hall this morning, while I was shirtless and carrying two cups of coffee. This, for me, to do it right, is going to be so absorbing I don’t… I can’t promise… I don’t know if I can give you what you asked for, last night.”

“What I asked for last night,” Clint said, clinging tighter to him, “was for you to come home to me. It wasn’t for you to spend all your waking hours with me, or even-- no, hear me out Phil-- or even most of them. I know too goddamn fucking well how little time we might actually have together, since it’s not like I don’t have work I should be doing. I knew that even before Nat called. But I know what’ll happen if we don’t try, Phil, because I’ve been there and I don’t want you to be the one at my funeral or… or standing in a field of alpacas wishing you hadn’t been a fucking idiot back when you had a chance. Which is now, Phil.”

“But Clint,” Phil said, and goddamn the man it sounded like he was about to cry, and his hands were shaking so hard his coffee was starting to splash, “I don’t… I can’t…. You don’t know….”

“I know you’re Phil Coulson,” Clint pleaded with him, “and you can do damn near anything. I’m not asking for a miracle, just you by my side. Please. That’s all I want, and we can figure out Avengers and SHIELD and Talbot and the rest as we go. Just please don’t shake me off, babe, unless you can tell me honestly you don’t want that too. Not that you don’t think we can do it, that you don’t want it. Me.”

Clint felt Phil shudder against him again, saw his jaw grow set-- and then all the tension slump out of him.

“I’d be lying if I said it,” he said, and threw his head back against Clint’s shoulder. “The thought of you even walking out of this room scares me right now.”

“Then stop being an asshole,” Clint told him, “and come back to bed.”

“Melinda needs me to look over--”

“Melinda can have you in twenty minutes. You scared me shitless, love, and I get dibs on you right now. Okay?”

Phil turned to look at him finally, his face pale and drawn and startled still and probably an exact match to Clint’s.

“Okay,” he said, and his smile was shaky but genuine. “For as long as I can.”

Chapter End Notes
Okay, due to large amounts of other writing, Chapter 24 won't start on tumblr until this coming Monday. But then-- back to daily Passepartout!
Chapter Summary

“I devise, bequeath, and give my unopened bottle of The Macallan 25 Year Old Sherry Oak Whisky and the black four-inch three ring binder located in my bottom-left desk drawer to Trinh Nguyen, Joseph Rollette, Erisa Magambo, and Sarah Reade. You are a credit to the agency and I was proud to work with you. The binder contains my compiled notes on best practices for handling active field agents. The bottle contains a damn fine whisky. I have found very few situations arising in my career that could not be addressed by one or the other.”

Chapter Notes

And now for something completely different... pay attention to the date stamps!

Casting Notes: My mental casting for these characters is as follows (although imagine them age-normalized so that they range from early 20s (Trinh) to mid-30s (Erisa):

Erisa Magambo (“Cap”) - Noma Dumezweni
Trinh Nguyen - Lana Condor
Sarah Reade - Gwendoline Christie
Joseph Rolette - Adam Beach

See the end of the chapter for more notes

17. Mentorship And You (You Don’t Have To Be Crazy To Work Here: We Offer On-The-Job Training)

Being a handler is rewarding, but it can also tax your emotional reserves. There will be times when you can recharge with nothing more than a couple of hours of cheap television and expensive liquor—or vice versa, whatever works for you—but the best thing to do is cultivate lasting relationships with other agents, from as many different clearance levels and organizational roles as you can.

May 8, 2012

Director Fury, to nobody’s surprise, turned out to be a very efficient will executor. They’d been summoned to his office and presented with Agent Coulson’s whisky and binder the very next work day after the funeral, even though Sarah was still technically on medical leave. It was only the fifth time Erisa had even met Director Fury; other than speeches at the Academy and the occasional SHIELD all-hands briefing, you usually didn’t interact much with agents more than a level or two above you.

At least, most people didn’t. Agent Coulson believed the organization had gotten too siloed (what
he’d said was “we’re all too much up our own asses” but that was what he meant), so he’d made it a point to introduce them around to everyone from the weapons devs in R&D to the Level 8-cleared cleaners who worked for Agent Services.

They used the knowledge to go straight from the Director’s office to one of the least-used break rooms, the one on sub-basement four that still smelled faintly of marinara sauce ever since the Great Exploding Sandwich Incident of 2011. They settled in around the chipped table and looked at each other in silence over the whisky bottle and the binder.

“So,” Trinh said, her soft voice almost unrecognizable through the rasp of smoke inhalation and tears. “What do we do now?”

“We should read it,” Sarah said. She sounded harsh, almost angry, but behind the bruising on her face—she’d gotten hit with a falling girder when the helicarrier was attacked—her eyes were blurry with tears. She’d been crying every time Erisa had seen her since the funeral, just steady, silent tears that she didn’t even bother wiping away.

“We could scan it,” Joe suggested.

“Later,” Sarah said. “The first time, we ought to read it together. It’s what he would have wanted.”

Trinh scooted her chair a little closer to Sarah’s. “I don’t have anything else on my schedule today,” she said. “Does anyone else?”

Nobody did.

“You start, Cap.” Joe said. It wasn’t her title anymore—she’d given up being a Captain when she’d transferred out of the SRR—but the nickname had stuck.

Erisa pulled the binder closer and opened the front cover.

“So,” she read. “‘Dummies’ is crossed out and ‘busy people who don’t have time for bullshit’ is written in Sharpie.”

Trinh chuckled a little.

“By Ph—” Erisa had to stop and clear her throat. “Phillip J. Coulson. Introduction: The Most Important Thing.” She glanced around the table; the others were watching her with complete attention.

“The most important thing to remember is that one person can change the world…”

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43. Proper Preparation Prevents Poor Performance

The only thing you can be sure of in SHIELD is that there’s nothing else you can be absolutely sure of, so a large part of a handler’s job is figuring out the most effective ways to plan for contingencies. Contrary to popular belief, this doesn’t mean having a plan for every single eventuality; nobody can remember that many details and you’re far more likely to screw it up by mixing up plan H and plan A. The best way I’ve found is to build a flexible and adaptable system of contingency plans that can be combined and recombined on the fly; a big bag of metaphorical “oh shit” Legos, if you will. Of course, the baseline is this: you, and every member of your team, should at all times possess a clean identity and funds, immediately to hand, as well as a means of secure communication…”
“Okay okay okay,” Trinh giggled, raising her glass high. The slushy remnants of her Captain Ameririta, red and blue layers rapidly mixing to purple, tipped alarmingly close to the sugared rim. “I got us all presents for Cap’s birthday. Not you, Cap.” she added, looking at Erisa. “Other Cap.”

“I know which Cap’s birthday is July 4, Trinh,” Erisa told her. “We’ve only done this every year since I got here, since A--” she cut herself off, but it was too late; they were all slumping a little, celebration taking on a sadder edge.

“Yeah,” Joe said. “Since Agent Coulson found out we all had the day off and no plans.”

“Anyway,” Trinh said. “That’s why presents.” She dug into her bag--today’s version was a red-white-and-blue patchwork leather tote--and pulled out four little cardboard boxes, passing them around the room.

“Go on,” she said. “Open them!”

The boxes weren’t wrapped, just held closed with sellotape; inside was a bracelet made of knotted paracord, standard navy blue SHIELD-issue. Woven into the center was a small metal plate, like a dogtag in miniature, that read “WWACD?”

“Trinh,” Joe said.

“Yes?”

“Did you make us ‘What Would Agent Coulson Do?’ survival bracelets?”

“Yup!” she said, taking another swig of her drink. “Ew, this tastes like cough syrup when it melts. I think I’m getting a Captain Ameritini next.”

“Why did you make us ‘What Would Agent Coulson Do?’ survival bracelets?” Joe persisted.

“They’re very special survival bracelets,” Trinh shrugged. “Plus, you guys are my friends. And I was bored on my last flight back from New Zealand.”

“Trinh,” Sarah said, startled. “You’re the pilot.”

“Bah, like I need both hands to fly a quin across the Pacific,” she scoffed.

“So what’s so special about these, Trinh?” Erisa cut in. “How are they different from the ones we get from Supply?”

“Well, in addition to the normal stuff--firestarter, fishing line, handcuff key, yada yada,” Trinh said, scooping some salsa and sour cream on a blue corn tortilla chip, “there’s a waterproof compartment behind the plate that’s got a SIM card. Clean, encrypted, untraceable, and only usable with one of the four cypher keys that are embedded on the back side of the plate. With this, you can turn any burner phone into a secure, untraceable line to any of the other three of us.” She crunched her chip enthusiastically. “I thought we could do a group chat!”

“That’s… a really good idea, Trinh,” Joe said.

“Right?” she agreed happily.

“I’m not usually much of a jewelry person,” Sarah said, cinching the bracelet onto her wrist. “But I think I’m feeling the urge to evolve my personal style.”
Trinh beamed. “Awesome,” she said. “Anyone want the rest of this? I think it’s time for that Captain Ameritini.”

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72: Know Thyself (and Everyone Else): Otherwise How Will You Detect A Brainwashed Colleague?

*By this point in your career you’ve probably spent weeks if not months in counterintelligence training, but a disappointing number of agents still forget that the most potent defense against internal threats is simply to get to know your colleagues and keep in touch with them. After all, you can’t identify abnormal behavior patterns if you don’t know what the normal ones are…*

Transcript of the WWACD Group Chat Thread

3/3/2014

**EMagambo:** I got some good news today

**JRolette:** oh yeah? Spill, Cap!

**TNguyen:** tell us tell ussss

**SReade:** I may have heard a rumor

**JRolette:** damn S how do you always know everything??

**SReade:** people just talk around me for some reason. It’s like they think my ears are too far away to hear anything. Ha. ha. *rolls eyes*

**TNguyen:** Somebody tell it!

**EMagambo:** I’m getting promoted next month. Level 5.

**TNguyen:** \o/

**JRolette:** congrats!!! So well deserved!

**SReade:** it’s about time…

**TNguyen:** so we all know what this means, right?

**TNguyen:** PROMOTION PARTY!!! Can we all get back to DC around the first?

**TNguyen:** I mean obviously Cap will be there but what about the rest of us? I can probably swing it

**JRolette:** I’m actually starting a rotation at the Triskelion on the 15th, so I’m in

**SReade:** as long as STRIKE isn’t deployed. Sigh.

**JRolette:** You ok, Sarah? You sound kind of down since you started that detail.
SReade: STRIKE are fucking assholes. Rodriguez is the only one I don’t want to drop-kick off a carrier.

TNguyen: oh ugh

EMagambo: Sarah, if they’re harassing you, there are procedures in place

SReade: I took the same classes you did, Erisa

SReade: It’s all… plausibly deniable, so far. “Ha ha friendly joking around! All agents here” kind of thing

SReade: but… I don’t know.

SReade: I wish I could talk to Agent Coulson

JRolette: he probably would’ve drop-kicked them off the carrier, he had zero tolerance for that kind of bullshit

TNguyen: he’d have done better than that

TNguyen: did I ever tell you about the time he overheard someone calling me--well I’d rather not say. It was super offensive. And also inaccurate, like, christ, if you’re going to use racial slurs you could at least use one that’s about my actual race

TNguyen: but anyway

TNguyen: Agent Coulson came around the corner and said “don’t let me interrupt, Agents”

TNguyen: that asshole turned GREEN, it was beautiful

TNguyen: he made some excuse and ran off

TNguyen: Coulson just looked at me in that way he had and said, “I apologize on behalf of SHIELD, Agent Nguyen. That sort of language is completely unacceptable. I will be taking steps.”

JRolette: ohhhhhh shit

JRolette: was he ever heard from again

JRolette: i have HEARD SOME SHIT

TNguyen: I got cc’d “accidentally” on some paperwork

TNguyen: he got reassigned indefinitely

TNguyen: to that listening post in Alaska where you have to fly in and out and there’s only like 20 people?

TNguyen: and he sent an order to stock the rec room with all Vietnamese television and movies and music and books about Vietnam and our culture
TNguyen: Coulson listed the reason as “training assignment: development of cultural competency”

SReade: do you think that base has room for about 18 more people

TNguyen: I dunno but I bet my new CompSec kid could make it happen for you

TNguyen : just say the word Sarah

SReade: heh. No. It’ll be fine. It’s just another few weeks and then I’m rotating out again.

EMagambo: There’s no shame in escalating things, Sarah. You know Fury and Hill don’t want that kind of thing at SHIELD.

SReade: I

SReade: I’ll think about it. It’s probably just hot air. Once we start the exercises they’ll probably be too tired to be assholes.

JRolette: here’s hoping.

3/27/2014

TNguyen: bad news guys, the party’s looking like a no for me :( 

JRolette: oh no why??

TNguyen: op’s heating up. I mean it’s good, I’m sick of this place, but they could have waited long enough for me to get my rest rotation, geez

TNguyen: criminals are so inconsiderate

SReade: I’m sorry not to see you

EMagambo: Of course we’re sorry, but please don’t worry. We understand. It’s the job.

TNguyen: As soon as I’m done, though!

3/31/2014

[3:19 am PST]

SReade: sorry, I know you’re all asleep, but I can’t wait

SReade: they’re sending us out somewhere

SReade: location is need to know, apparently I don’t
SReade: schedule unknown

SReade: we’ll be on comms blackout so you won’t hear from me until we’re done

SReade: sorry I’ll have to miss your party, Cap

[8:24 am PST]

TNguyen: Sarah are you blacked out already?

TNguyen: Sarah?

TNguyen: we’re about to go hot too, I’ll be off for the duration guys

TNguyen: crazy day, is it a full moon or something?

TNguyen: catch you on the flip side

63: The Toolkit In Your Mind

It’s important to establish standard and emergency passcodes with your agents. While certain missions will have their own, having established codes with various people will help you maintain your options in the event of an emergency. These codes may range from simple verification codes that indicate whether you are speaking under duress to private reflections of the various S.H.I.E.L.D.-wide status codes (such as the infamous Code Dark Star, which would indicate that the agency is so completely compromised that all agents must break contact immediately, or Code Green, which denotes a sighting of the Hulk.) However, codes are useful for more than just dire situations like these...

Transcript of the WWACD Group Chat Thread

4/1/2014

[3:24 pm EST]

JRolette: heading out for par-tay, sorry you losers had to work!! We’ll have some drinks in your honor

[7:51 pm EST]

EMagambo: someone attacked the Director

EMagambo: Captain America is in the wind

EMagambo: I don’t know what’s happening but I don’t like it
EMagambo: Joe and I are going to implement Lego Protocol

EMagambo: Stay safe and get in touch as soon as you can

4/2/2014

[4:17 pm EST]

JRolette: Trinh, Sarah, please check in when you can, things are really getting nuts here and we’re worried about you

4/3/2014

[2:30 pm EST]

JRolette: CODE DARK STAR

JRolette: CODE DARK STAR

JRolette: CODE DARK STAR

JRolette: SHIELD HAS BEEN INFITRATED BY HYDRA SLEEPER AGENTS

JRolette: WATCH FOR BETRAYAL AND BE PREPARED TO ACT

JRolette: GET SOMEWHERE SAFE AS SOON AS YOU CAN AND CALL US

JRolette: CODE DARK STAR

JRolette: CODE DARK STAR

JRolette: CODE DARK STAR

JRolette: DO NOT TRUST SHIELD FACILITIES, FREQUENCIES OR RESOURCES

JRolette: TURN ON THE NEWS, WE ARE FUCKED

JRolette: CODE DARK STAR

[10:46 pm EST]

EMagambo: Joe’s been shot. Through and through, upper arm.

EMagambo: It was Agent Thurmond

EMagambo: Joe played tennis with him every Thursday

EMagambo: It was
EMagambo: I’ve never seen anything

EMagambo: I’m trying to get reports on you both but

EMagambo: They attacked everywhere

EMagambo: The bases are still fighting.

EMagambo: Sarah, STRIKE was... they were almost entirely compromised, PLEASE be careful

EMagambo: Trinh, the field teams were scattered. Watch yourself. Please get in touch as soon as it is safe

[11:18 pm EST]

EMagambo: Trinh?

EMagambo: Sarah?

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84: I Could Use Any One Of Dozens Of Slogans Expressing The Idea That Planning Is Fruitless Without Implementation Here, Just Think Of Your Favorite

There comes a time in every field career when things go to complete and utter shit. Careful planning can help make it happen less, but nothing but sheer luck can hold it off forever. The mark of a truly great handler lies in the ability to realize when things are FUBAR, accept it, and then adjust the mission parameters to allow the greatest possible possibility of success with the lowest possible rate of casualties...

April 2, 2014

11:39 pm PST

US Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center

Toiyabe National Forest, CA

“I’m starting to get the feeling they’re giving us all the shit work on purpose.”

Sarah snorted. “Starting to, Rodriguez? And here I thought you were the observant one.”

“Yeah, okay, point,” he said.

“I’m starting to question Agent Prangley’s judgment,” Sarah said, hitching her pack to settle it a bit
Rodriguez looked at her narrowly. “Is this some kind of loyalty test, Agent Reade?” he said. “Like, you say that, and I agree with you, and somehow I end up a Level Two until I retire?”

“I’m here with you on Unnecessary Firewood Gathering Detail, aren’t I?” She rolled her eyes. “Do I look like some kind of, I don’t even know. Promotion Assessment Board spy?”

“Actually, I’m not sure what that would even look like.”

“Not this.”

“In that case,” Rodriguez said, “I have to say that I question Agent Prangley’s judgment pretty much all the time, but this assignment is especially bad.”

“Yeah?” Interesting. Sarah wondered if he’d been thinking the same things she had.

“This team is tight. Textbook closed group, with established social norms and a group culture that’s…”


“I was leaning toward something about toxic masculinity, but yes, essentially,” Rodriguez said. “If the culture is a problem, you break up the team, right? Seed them in with other teams, try to break the bad habits. If you like the culture and want to propagate it, you mix in newbies who aren’t well-integrated to SHIELD, one at a time so they’ll adapt. What you don’t do is give them a skinny queer psychologist and a six-foot-three lesbian explosives expert with a chip on her shoulder. No offense.”

“None taken,” she told him, amused. “It’s all true, anyway.”

“You do have quite the reputation, Agent Reade.”

“Keeps assholes from bothering me,” Sarah said. “Well, at least it used to. Fuck, I hate snow.”

“*You* hate snow?” Rodriguez shot her a look. “Well, at least it used to. Fuck, I hate snow.”

“*You* hate snow?” Rodriguez shot her a look. “It’s not like my people hail from a snowy land. Either of my peoples.”

“Hence the extreme terrain training?”

“Ostensibly.”

“And actually? No, wait, I can guess. Undercover. And you’re breaking cover because… no. Shit, seriously?” She groaned. “I’m your backup, aren’t I.”

He shrugged apologetically, his steps crunching in the snow.

“And something’s going to shit,” Sarah continued, “otherwise you wouldn’t even have told me, because that’s the way IA runs their ops. Motherfuck. Is Yitzak Rodriguez even actually your name?”

“I mean, I usually go by Zak, but yeah,” he said. “Look, I’m taking a risk telling you this, but something is wrong. I was supposed to be getting coded transmissions twice a day, and they’ve missed two windows in a row now.”

“It could just be the mountains,” Sarah said, even as she was cinching her pack tighter and moving
her weapons to be more accessible. “No signal here, even the satphone barely works.”

“It’s not the mountains,” Rodriguez said. “Something’s wrong.”

“All right,” Sarah said. “So what are you proposing?”

“They think we’re out of the way for now,” he said. “Let’s circle back, see if we can catch some chatter. Maybe we can figure out what’s happening.”

“Good a plan as any,” Sarah said. “Let’s go.”

They made their way silently back towards camp, keeping the bulk of the tents between themselves and the campfire in the middle. Sarah could see two figures at the far end of camp, keeping a lookout over the path she and Rodriguez had followed into the forest; the rest of the men were gathered around the fire.

“We’ll have to get closer to hear anything,” she murmured.

He grinned “Fortunately not,” he said, and pulled something out of a cargo pocket that she recognized; one of the tiny, foldable parabolic mics that the specialists used in the field. She raised an eyebrow, impressed. “Level Two forever, Agent Rodriguez?”

“I didn’t say I was Level Two now,” Rodriguez smirked, unfolding the mic and offering her one of the earbuds.

“--right out of the truck,” they heard. It was STRIKE Team Five’s leader, Agent Barnard.

“Shit.” That was Agent Stevens. “How’d they get him out?”

“Who knows? It’s Captain America, maybe he managed to flip one of the guards. People still buy his bullshit more than you’d think.” Barnard shrugged. “Anyway, he, Romanoff, and the other guy are all in the wind.”

“So does that mean they’re pushing back the launch?” One of the younger ones; Allen.

“Hell no,” Barnard said. “Launch is still going forward tomorrow as planned. Once Secretary Pierce has those helicarriers in the sky, even Captain America won’t be able to stop us. We’ll be able to take our rightful place at last: in charge.”

“Out of the shadows,” Allen said, his voice awed. “Into the light.”

“Hail Hydra,” Barnard said, and the others all raised their arms in a hauntingly familiar salute.

“Hail Hydra!”

Sarah felt her stomach flip over, a sick cold creeping through her that had nothing to do with the snow. She knew that name. She knew that gesture. She knew who used it.

(“I know this probably seems a little unnecessary,” a memory whispered, rising up from the back of her mind. A stack of paper files and microfiche, a musty-smelling back corner of the archives, Agent Coulson’s hands in cotton gloves as he carefully opened a file. “But, well. Know thine enemy, as they say.”)

“Zak,” she breathed. “We have got to get off this mountain.”
Sarah and Zak had made a plan. It was a good plan, as these things go: simple, flexible, and effective. It went something like this:

1. Steal as many supplies as they could carry
2. Sabotage the rest as much as they could without being noticed
3. Get the hell off Hydra Mountain to somewhere with cell service so Sarah could get hold of the others and get a warning out/arrange for rescue
4. Profit! (i.e., don’t die of Hydra or exposure or falling in a ravine, and possibly take a long vacation somewhere sunny).

They’d briefly considered just making a run for it right then, but there was a better strategy at hand; in a further show of dickishness, Barnard had assigned them the watch shift that started at 3 am. Seriously, Barnard was an idiot. You don’t put the only two people in your squad who aren’t part of your Nazi-cosplay conspiracy shit on the late-night watch shift together, because then they can fuck up your shit at their leisure and stroll out of camp while you sleep, taking all the good MREs and bullets and explosives with them.

Apparently, penny-ante harassment was more important to Barnard than his strategic objectives, whatever they were. Sarah was almost embarrassed for him, honestly.

She and Zak quickly gathered a few armloads of firewood and trudged back to camp, putting on a show of being disgruntled and snappish and just wanting to go to sleep. (It didn’t take much acting, at least on Sarah’s part.) They each wolfed down an MRE and went to grab what rest they could before the next stage of the plan.

What rest they could grab was an entirely insufficient amount of rest. Sarah felt utterly murderous when she crawled back out of her sleeping bag and shoved her feet back into her boots. Probably just as well, honestly. She’d run for days on worse things than spite.

Once they’d given the camp a chance to settle and Agents Lee and Glenridge (who’d drank the last of the coffee and hadn’t made any more, because: assholes) a chance to fall asleep, they put their plan into action. Zak turned out to be excellent at sneaking around, and Sarah had spent a lot of time in training compensating for the awkwardness of shooting up fourteen inches in the last three years of her teens, so she did pretty well in the stealth department these days herself. The team had hiked in, so there weren’t any vehicles to sabotage, but you could go a long way with a good level of equipment knowledge, a twisty mind, and a history of having gotten hazed most of the way through Ops Academy. They didn’t dare go into the tents, but by the time they were finished, all the extra supplies of food, water, and ammo were either ruined or packed up to come with them. It was too much weight to carry all the way back down the mountain, but they could at least toss it off a cliff or something so it couldn’t be used against them.

“You ready?” Zak murmured, finishing his loop around the camp and coming up to where Sarah was slitting open all the packets of MREs in flavors she didn’t like, dumping the food into a pile, and covering the pile with a very thin layer of snow.

“Just about,” she replied. “I hope they get eaten by a fucking bear. Fucking Hydra, Jesus fuck. Agent Coulson must be rolling in his grave.”

“Oh, yeah, you trained with him, didn’t you? Cool,” Zak said. “I heard one time he broke out of a prison in Turkmenistan with a bottle of Gatorade and a pair of shoelaces.”

“It was Uzbekistan,” Sarah told him. “And he also had a pair of reading glasses. If he was here,
he… well.” She brushed the snow smooth, stepping back into the trampled borders of the camp. Her stomach was sour at the thought of how Agent Coulson would have felt to know Hydra, of all people, were trying to stage a comeback in his agency. “If he was still here, we wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with. Let’s get out of here.”

They concentrated on silence and obscuring their traces for the first mile or so, until they reached a nice icy ravine that made a perfect place to toss a bunch of weapon parts, explosives detonators, ammo, and other similar detritus. They hadn’t been able to take all the spare weapons--there were only the two of them--but it was easy enough to take key bits out of everything. Sarah felt a twinge of environmental guilt, but, well, death by Hydra. She’d shoot an extra donation to the Sierra Club or something, once she got out of this alive.

Once divested of the extra weight, they redistributed their packs, ate and hydrated, and prepared to hike down the mountain as fast as they could. There was no chance they’d make it out by morning, but hopefully they’d be able to stay ahead of pursuit long enough to find a cell signal, get in touch with SHIELD, and then figure out a way to get out the fucking woods.

Sarah touched her bracelet, rubbing her thumb over the plate. She felt a little silly--the bracelets were a memorial thing, and a bonding thing, she didn’t actually think Agent Coulson was some kind of patron saint of SHIELD now, but… Hydra.

“Wherever you are, sir,” she whispered, “could you send us a little luck? I think we’re gonna need it.”

April 3, 2014

12:57 pm PST

Westbound on Interstate 8, 50 miles outside of San Diego, CA

Trinh looked around the transport in satisfaction. After nearly six weeks of slow preparation and undercover work, the end of the op had come suddenly; it worked out that way, more often than not. There had been a few close calls, but they’d met all their mission objectives with no more casualties than a few bruises.

It had been hard to get people to take her seriously when she first started cross-training into the handler track; she’d been younger than most of her peers, physically smaller, and unwilling to change her personality to fit in.

She remembered her first mentor program luncheon, the kickoff event when the senior agents introduced themselves to their mentees and they all ate awkward catering together while they listened to Agent Winston read a PowerPoint presentation about teamwork. She’d only arrived at the Triskelion from California that morning, and she was running short on patience for the overly-formal attitude at HQ. Her hair had gotten no fewer than six dirty looks on the way to the morning session, but fuck those assholes anyway; she’d carefully coordinated the shade of blue in her highlights to coordinate with the stupid jumpsuits they were supposed to wear for training.

She’d sighed, looking around the sea of jumpsuited trainees and suit-suited instructors. Maybe she should have stayed in the pilot track after all.
“Excuse me, Agent Nguyen?”

She’d turned. White guy, suit, receding hairline, looked kind of like a high school principal who was really into Crossfit. Senior agent.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m Agent Phil Coulson,” he’d said. “I’m really glad to meet you; I was impressed with your work in Baja last month.”

“I got two reprimands after Baja,” she’d blurted. Shit, this was her mentor, and he’d already heard about that clusterfuck of a mission. Way to make a good impression, Trinh.

“And three commendations,” he’d countered. “On the whole, I’d say you came out ahead.”

She’d blinked at him. “Well, that’s one way to think of it.”

He’d smiled. “I think you’ll find a flexible perspective is an asset in our line of work,” he’d said. His eyes had flicked to the nearby table and he’d wrinkled his nose at the limp salads that were already plated. “You know, the food’s always terrible at these,” he’d said. “You wanna go get burgers or something instead?”

“Um… yes?” she’d said. “Is that okay? I mean, I won’t get… marked off or anything?”

“No, I’ll record it as training hours,” he said. “I’ve got three other active mentees from different cohorts of the program; I’d like you to get to know one another.”

“In that case, lead on, sir;” she’d said, and she’d been following his lead ever since.

“Agent Nguyen?”

She shook herself out of her musing and gave Agent Day her attention. “Yes, Agent?”

“I know we’re still on comms blackout until we get back to base,” he said.

“We are.” She shot him a narrow look. The op had been running completely dark; nobody had even been allowed to bring a phone with them, nothing but the tightbeam comms between the mobile control center and the team’s earpieces. “Why do you ask?”

He held out a clipboard. “I was having some issues with the tightbeams toward the end of the op,” he said, pointing to a graph on the top sheet. “See, look at these interference numbers.” He flipped the top sheet over and pointed with his pen.

Written in the middle of a blank sheet of paper, in tight capital letters, he had written:

SOMEONE IS TRANSMITTING

“Hmm,” she said. “I think I see the pattern you mean.” She looked around the transport with her peripheral vision. Was it her imagination, or was there a strange tension toward the back, where her normal team was sitting interspersed with the reinforcements they’d had for the raid? “Have you tried filtering at--here, let me--” she took the pen.

R U SURE

COULD BE CANDY CRUSH/SEXTING??
“I tried that frequency,” Day said. “Although, I wondered if we tried an alternating--” he grabbed the pen back.

**ENCRIPTION++**

**FEELS SHADY**

“Well,” she said. “I’ll bring it up with R&D, maybe they can tweak our algorithm. Here, I’m gonna do a little math.” She took the clipboard and wedged herself into the tiny command desk in one corner of the unit. “Hang tight in case I need to run some numbers by you.”

He nodded, standing at her shoulder. Good man. He’d block them from being seen. Trinh slipped her burner phone out of the hidden pocket on her thigh and flipped it on. She scribbled equations on the clipboard as the phone silently booted, inputting her cypher key at the prompt to connect to their private network.

As soon as the handshake completed, the screen began flashing, messages scrolling too fast to read. She casually turned the screen against her body to hide the light. After a few seconds, she tilted it away and snuck a peek at the screen. She froze, only repeated practice keeping her from sucking in her breath in an audible gasp at the words she never seriously thought she’d see:

**CODE DARK STAR**

After some time--ten seconds maybe, but it felt like an hour--she forced herself to start writing again. Stupid, brainless equations, the sorts of things she’d spent hours doing for homework in the Academy, something she could do on autopilot to keep up the front while her brain whirled.

Dark Star.

Dark Star meant that she couldn’t trust SHIELD, neither people nor tech, without some kind of higher-level confirmation. Which was a problem, seeing as how she was riding in a SHIELD transport full of SHIELD personnel, surrounded by SHIELD tech, on the way to a SHIELD base.

She scrolled up through her messages, looking for more information. There was some, but it only made things worse. Fucking *Hydra*?? What was this, some kind of Indiana Jones movie? Although… Captain America had come back from the dead. Maybe it wasn’t so strange to think his enemies had, too.

She turned the phone off and slipped it back into its pocket. As she moved, her bracelet shifted a little around her wrist, the brushed-metal plate catching the light, and she had to bite back a hysterical laugh.

*What Would Agent Coulson Do?*

She knew what Agent Coulson would have done, was the thing. She knew because they’d gone over it, they’d run exercises, he’d pressed her to draft her own planning framework and contingencies and quizzed her over them.

The knowledge settled over her mind like a blanket, and she felt the trembling in her hands ease as she realized. *She knew what to do.*

**DON’T FREAK OUT**, she wrote on the clipboard. “Agent Day, how do these numbers look?”

He leaned over, propping himself on one hand in a way that coincidentally shielded them further from any stray looks. He saw the message and nodded slightly.
CODE DARK STAR, she wrote, and he stiffened.

“I don’t know, ma’am,” he said, and she had to give him credit; if she hadn’t been working with him for most of a year, she wouldn’t have heard the tension in his voice. “That use case seems a little out there.”

“I’m aware,” she said. “But I think we need to consider it if we’re going to get this issue with the comms pinned down.”

“Okay,” he said, and took a deep, shaky breath. “So show me how the numbers work out.”

1:17 pm PST

US Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center

Toiyabe National Forest, CA

“Fuck Hydra,” Sarah hissed, tightening the straps holding her to the tree. “Fuck them and fuck their mothers.”

“That’s a little sexist, isn’t it?” Zak said from the other side of the trunk. “I mean, why their mothers specifically?”

“Fuck their fathers too,” Sarah snapped. “And their grandparents, and all the way back until the whateverth generation that decided following a guy with a skull for a face was a good idea. I mean, a skull for a face. How do you look at that and go, ‘yeah, seems legit’?”

“I mean, are you looking for a serious discussion of the psychological factors that lead ordinary people to support horrific abuses of power, or are you just venting right now?” Zak said. “Because I can do either, but they’re really different conversations.”

Sarah sighed. “I’m venting,” she said. “I mean, I did take Psychology of Authoritarian Regimes at the Academy, I’m familiar with that other stuff.”

“In that case, fuck Hydra sideways with a snowplow,” Zak agreed. “Shh, here they come.”

Barnard had apparently split the team, the better to fan out and attempt to catch up with them. They’d managed to avoid them all morning--two people made a lot less noise than eighteen--but their luck had finally run out, and a group of six had picked up their trail. Fortunately, the terrain was in their favor.

The STRIKE--well, Hydra--guys were walking two abreast down the narrow path, slowing down as they entered the little valley, sticking the barrels of their guns into the trees as they looked for ambushes. Fortunately, the lessons Sarah had learned from Agent Barton (courtesy of one of Agent Coulson’s periodic in-service training sessions) held true; none of them looked up.

“Wait for it,” Zak breathed, barely audible over the creak of the wind in the branches. “Let them get all the way in.”

“I know what I’m doing,” she muttered, eyes fixed on the lead agent. She couldn’t let him get too close to the other side of the valley.

Sarah hit the detonator.

It was almost anti-climactic at first, a sharp crack! sound like an air rifle going off, echoing back and forth between the rocks. The agents on the ground looked back toward the noise, shouting at each other--bad idea, chums--but the noise was quickly drowned out by the eerie groaning rumble of shifting snow.

Avalanches looked slow on TV, but that was just an optical illusion. It only took seconds for the snow to reach the valley floor. Sarah clung to the tree, ducking her head in case of flying debris, and waited until the noise stopped.

The agents were gone, lost beneath a field of tumbled snow and rocks and broken trees.

“Shit,” Zak said, craning his neck around the tree trunk. “Remind me never to piss you off, Sarah.”

“They’ve got beacons,” Sarah said. “We’ll note the coordinates. Some of them might survive; better odds than they’d have given us.” If she kept telling herself that, maybe she’d be able to forget the sight of the SHIELD eagles on their parkas being swallowed up by snow.

“Yeah,” Zak said. “And if we’d had a firefight, it might have brought the snow down anyway, with us in the middle.”

“Come on,” Sarah said. She didn’t want to think about that anymore. Keep your mind on the mission, Reade. “There’s still a lot of mountain left to go.”

6:57 pm PST

The Harbor

SHIELD base, San Diego, CA

“Day?”

“You know, we’ve worked together for a year and an hour ago you shot a guy over my shoulder,” Day said, typing furiously. “I think at this point you can call me Darrell.”

Trinh sighed. “I was trying to maintain a professional distance,” she said. When you were short and young and female and had hot pink streaks in your hair, it generally didn’t help people respond to your command if you started everything on a first name basis.

“The guy you shot was my Secret Santa last year,” Day said, “and he’d just shot Bethany in the leg while screaming ‘Hail Hydra.’ I think we’re pretty far past professional at this point.”

“Yeah, that’s probably true,” she said with a shrug. “So. Darrell. Have you managed to get the comms back up?”

“I mean, he was a terrible Secret Santa,” Day--Darrell--said. “He gave me a plastic reindeer that shits out candy. Not even good candy, either. Black jellybeans. There’s no way that thing cost twenty bucks. But still, I didn’t expect him to be a Nazi.” He hit the enter key so hard that Trinh winced. “Aaaaaand we’re up!”
The screens on the wall in the briefing room flickered to life and started scrolling, almost too fast to follow. Darrell was paging through comms channels, trying to make contact with other bases and gather news footage.

“I mean, how hard is it to just get a Starbucks gift card?” Darrell continued. “I don’t know anyone at SHIELD that couldn’t use a Starbucks gift card. It’s not like--oh, shit.” He hit a few keys, and all the screens were suddenly showing one giant image: a helicarrier, crashing into the Triskelion.

“THE ENEMY WITHIN,” the headline screamed. Beneath the image, a crawl read “Captain America exposes Hydra sleeper agents within SHIELD.”

“Hang on,” Darrell said. “I’m trying for internal surveillance.”

Trinh pressed her hand to her lips. Her fingers were cold, and trembling a little. They smelled like blood. “Oh, fuck,” she whispered. “Darrell. Is it--”

“Everywhere,” he said. “I--the Sandbox is down. The Fridge is secure for now. The Hub is still fighting--looks like Agent Hand is in charge, there. I’m not getting any signal from the Apple or the Casino, the US is making noises about arresting any SHIELD agent on sight as a terror suspect…” He looked over helplessly. “What do we do? Ma’am?”

She took three long, deep breaths, a meditation trick that was supposed to short-circuit anxiety. She wasn’t sure how effective it was, but at least she hadn’t, like, burst into tears or anything. So far.

“Until I hear otherwise from a commanding officer who isn’t a secret Nazi,” she said, putting as much steel into her voice as she could, “we do our jobs. I want you to scan all the SHIELD channels for chatter, find any other pockets nearby where agents are still fighting. This base just became West Coast Rescue Ops.”

He looked at her, hope dawning in his eyes. “Yes, ma’am!”

“I’m going to Medical, then the armory,” she told him. “Get me on comms as soon as you find anything.”

She strode around the corner with her best Deputy Director Hill Don’t Fuck With Me walk. As soon as she was out of earshot, she let herself sag against the wall, just for a minute.

There were still no new messages on her burner phone, and she was trying not to think too hard about what that might mean.

Why the fuck had she wanted to be in charge, again?

Well. It didn’t matter, did it? She was the highest-ranking agent there, for the time being, so it was time to put on her adulting pants and do something useful.

She straightened, and clicked over to a different frequency on the comms. “Agent Meltzer?”

“Ma’am?”

“I want you to gather up all the mechanics who are well enough to move and go down to the hangar. Get me an inventory of all the aircraft and their condition. I need something that’ll fly.”

11:28 pm PST
“Do you realize,” Zak said, his voice thin, “that you’ve been cursing nonstop for about the last five miles?”

“Um,” Sarah said. “No? Sorry.” Her throat was sore, but that was probably the cold air. Honestly, it was just kind of blending in with the chorus of sore that her entire body was singing. Her feet felt like they weighed a hundred pounds each, and not just because of the snow packed onto her boots.

She turned to say something to Zak--she didn’t even know what--and tripped on a branch, falling to her hands and knees in the snow. She wanted to shout obscenities to the sky, but that would be counter to operational security, so she just gritted her teeth on a hiss of fury.

“Sarah?” A scuffle, and then Zak was crashing to his knees beside her, snowy gloves reaching out to pat awkwardly at her shoulders. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

She pushed him back, straightening up. “Stop, stop, I’m fine, I just tripped. It's so fucking dark.”

“Yeah, that’s a good news/bad news kind of thing,” Zak agreed. “Good for avoiding Hydra, not so great for seeing where you’re going.”

She sighed. She needed to get up and keep walking; even her SHIELD-issued snow pants weren’t meant to be literally immersed in snow, and they were still out of cell signal range and being pursued by Hydra. She grabbed onto the tree whose root had so cruelly betrayed her and hauled herself upright, then had to lean against the trunk when her legs wobbled and threatened to give out.

“Fuck,” she said.

“We need to stop for a minute, Sarah,” Zak said, getting up with the help of the next tree over. “To eat something, if nothing else. Do you know how many calories you burn in high-altitude cold weather work?”

“I sat through the same briefing you did,” she reminded him.

“I mean, I’m pretty sure neither of us has eaten 60 calories per kilogram of body weight today,” he said. “And glucose gels only go so far. We need food, Sarah.”

“We need to not get killed by our former teammates, Zak,” she fired back.

“Well they won’t need to kill us if we fall into a ravine or collapse from hunger and freeze to death! I--” he cut himself off, bracing his hands on his knees as he leaned against his tree. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I just--I’m sorry.”

She sighed. She didn’t really feel hungry, but she knew that wasn’t actually a good sign. Zak was right, they hadn’t eaten nearly the recommended amount that day, and what they had was mostly protein bars and glucose gels, wolfed down while moving.

“Fine,” she said. “We’ll stop for MREs. But we can’t afford more time than that.”

“No, I know,” Zak said. “Thanks.”
It took ten minutes for the chemical heaters to finish heating up their meals. Sarah knew that she should probably keep moving—every muscle in her body hurt, and she could feel them stiffening up the longer she was still—but she just… couldn’t. Instead, she pulled out the tarp that went under her sleeping bag and spread it out over the snow.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s sit for a minute.”

They sat back-to-back, each with their own MRE in front of them, and devoted themselves to their food. Sarah had eaten a lot of things in her life—her mother and stepfather had dragged her along to some of the finest restaurants on the east coast—but she’d never had a meal taste better than the shelf-stable beef stew in her meal packet. At the first mouthful, salty and savory and blessedly hot, she had to bite back a nearly-pornographic moan. Never had mushy carrots been so ambrosial.

She devoured her food, eating everything in the kit and practically licking the wrapper when she was done. Behind her, she could hear Zak doing the same.

“We should get moving again,” she murmured, letting her back slump against his with a sigh. She couldn’t feel his body heat, of course, not through all their insulated gear, but it was nice to feel him breathing; something normal and homely and human in the middle of the madness.

“In a minute,” Zak said.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Just a minute.” He was shorter than her, even seated; if she tilted her head back, she could feel the top of his head.

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled, letting himself slump back into her further. “I know; I’m short. I’ve heard it before.”

“Well, I’ve been told I’m an unnatural giant, so whatever,” Sarah said. “We are what we are.”

“That’s very philosophical of you.”

“I’m too tired for bullshit,” Sarah admitted. “Just. This fucking day.”

He sighed. “Yeah.”

“Did you know it was Hydra?” she asked. “I mean. Was that why you came?”

He snorted. “Fuck no,” he said. “We thought… I dunno what we thought. Cult of personality, maybe, or someone in STRIKE taking bribes. Maybe someone on the Council trying to siphon off their own private army… we just knew something was wrong. We had no idea it was this wrong.”

“How…” she had to stop and clear her throat. “How big do you think this is? I mean, they were talking about Secretary Pierce. If he’s involved…”

“He might not know?” Zak said.

“I wish I could believe that. But… the nuke. During the Battle of New York.”

“It makes sense. Horrifying sense, but. Yeah.” Zak sighed, his back heaving against hers. “I just hope that when we make it out… there’s someone there to report all this to.”

She bit her lip, pressing her hand against the pocket where her burner phone rested, its solid outline a comfort and a promise. “Yeah,” she whispered. “Me too.”

They fell silent. The moon was a thin crescent, high in the sky, but even that small amount of moon
joined with the starlight to reflect off the snow, keeping the mountain in a perpetual twilight gloom until you got deeper into the trees. It was quiet, the unsettling quiet of an environment you don’t know, when you haven’t yet learned to distinguish a branch creaking in the wind or the shift of snow from a hunting bird from the sound of a shooter taking aim.

Sarah had always disliked the country.

She wondered, briefly, what Hydra had been planning to do with her and Zak. Stage a training accident? Just shoot them and toss them over a cliff and leave them for the Marines to deal with, when the snow melt finally washed their corpses down the mountain?

(Or what if it had been a mistake, what if, if the Hydra talk was some kind of tremendously stupid stunt and they weren’t really traitors, what if she’d killed--)

“Sarah,” Zak whispered, and something in his voice sent a bolt of ice down her spine. “Did you hear that?”

She stopped breathing, and listened.

Something was moving in the forest.

Sarah’s mind raced as she strained to hear, but the rocks and the trees all around them confused things, bouncing the noise around until she couldn’t tell how far away it was, or in what direction. It was a shuffling, crunching sort of noise, like someone--or something--plowing through the snow, but she couldn’t tell how many feet, couldn’t tell if it was a bear or a rabbit or a Hydra squad, if they should try to run or hide or climb or fight. They got to their feet as quickly and quietly as they could, moving to put a solid tree at their backs and pulling their weapons, communicating in hand signals as they tried to hide themselves in the shadows while the noise got closer.

Heart pounding, gun clutched tight in her gloved hand, she tensed and released her muscles, trying to work out some of the aching stiffness that had stolen over her body while she sat. Suddenly a resonant sound rang out over the forest, an eerie sort of bellow, and they both startled.

“Is that--” Zak started.

“That sounds like a--” Sarah said at the same moment, and then with a spray of snow and a fusilade of deep baying cries, something big and dark came gallumphing through the trees, running straight up to Sarah and lifting its head to the stars to howl in triumph.

“--bloodhound,” Sarah finished, staring.

“Is that a good sign?” Zak asked. “I mean, STRIKE--Hydra--didn’t have any way to get dogs, did they?”

Sarah reached out and patted the dog’s head uneasily. It wagged its tail, tongue lolling happily. “I don’t think so?” she said. “I mean, I don’t know where--”

“Hullooo!” A voice she didn’t know, ringing through the forest. “I’m looking for a scruffy-looking nerf herder!”

Sarah’s legs wobbled, and she fell back against the tree in relief.

“Sarah?” Zak’s voice was sharp, scared, and the dog woofed.

She tucked her gun away, her hands shaking and stomach churning with the aftermath of
adrenaline. “It’s fine,” she said, “it’s friends.” She cleared her throat and called back, “We’re all fine here, thank you! How are you?”

“Is that seriously your countersign,” Zak muttered, but Sarah didn’t pay any attention, because people were coming into view through the forest, a tall lanky man and a broad stocky man and a tiny figure in a giant parka that--

“Sarah!”

That was running over to and flinging herself at Sarah, leaping into the air to throw her arms around her neck and hitting with a solid impact that knocked her back against the tree.

“Oh God,” Trinh said, her breath coming in great sobbing gasps. “Sarah, oh God, I was so worried!”

Sarah held on to her in return, bending down so that Trinh’s feet could touch the ground without breaking the hug, burying her face in the pink-streaked hair that was poking out around Trinh’s hat. “They were Hydra,” she said. “Trinh, fuck, everyone but me and Rodriguez were fucking Hydra--”

“I know!” Trinh moaned. “Sarah, they’re everywhere, all throughout SHIELD, when we got back to The Harbor everyone was fighting each other, they tried to kill Captain America--”

“Forget Captain America, are you okay?” Sarah demanded.

“I’m fine, I’m not the one who’s been trapped on a mountain--oh God, have you eaten? Do you need food? I brought food--” Trinh let go and started rummaging in her pockets, and Sarah forced herself not to grab her parka and pull her right back to where she’d been.

“I’m fine too, by the way,” Zak said dryly from right next to her, and Sarah flinched; she’d actually forgotten he was there for a minute in her relief and joy.

“That’s good to hear, man,” one of the strangers who’d come with Trinh said. “Do you need a hug, too?”

“Very funny, Darrell,” Trinh said, rolling her eyes.

“Naw, I’m good,” Zak said. “But I wouldn’t say no to a ride off this godforsaken mountain.”

“That’s… probably for the best,” Trinh said. “Given, you know, Hydra.” She looked around and straightened up, pulling authority on like a coat. “Send the extraction signal. Let’s get out of here before our luck runs out.”

“Ma’am,” Darrell said, pulling out some kind of gadget that looked like the unholy offspring of a tablet and a satellite phone. Zak drifted over to chat with the other agents and pet the dog while Sarah stowed the tarp. Or, rather, tried to; her hands had started shaking, and she couldn’t get it to fold properly.

Trinh crouched down beside her. “Hey,” she murmured, laying one gloved hand over Sarah’s. “Let me give you a hand, okay?”

“These fucking things,” Sarah said. “They never--you can’t ever get them to go back in the pouch.” She sniffed. The wind was making her nose run.

“Yeah,” Trinh said softly, folding the tarp with quick, deft motions. “Especially when you’ve had Nazis chasing you down a mountain for the last who-knows-how long.” She looked down at the
trampled snow. “I’m sorry it took me so long to find you.”

Sarah’s mouth dropped open, but before she could figure out which of the twelve things she wanted
to say in response was the right one, Darrell was back. “Extraction en route to epsilon coordinates,
ma’am,” he said, and Trinh nodded crisply.

“Good work,” she said, then raised her voice a little. “All right, people, let’s move.”

The agent with the dog took point, leading them quickly through the forest. They marched fast and
quiet, and Sarah braced herself the entire time for something to go horribly wrong. After
everything, she was finding it hard to believe that they might actually be rescued, that they might
be going to get away clean. She didn’t believe it until they finally reached a clearing and, at Trinh’s
signal, a quinjet decloaked.

“We’re the last team back,” the agent with the dog said, as they climbed aboard. “Orders, ma’am?”

“I don’t want to play Hydra-go-seek in the dark,” Trinh said. “Get us out of here, quiet as you can.”

Sarah grabbed a strut just in time to keep her feet as the jet took off.

“Strap in,” Trinh told her, giving her a little shove towards an empty seat. “Flying low in the
mountains like this, it gets bumpy. Do you need medical?”

“No, I--no,” Sarah said, sinking into the seat and pulling off her gloves so she could fasten the
harness. Trinh unzipped her parka and pulled off her hat.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ve gotta check in with The Harbor. We’ve still got two teams out.” She bit her
lip, her eyes darting back and forth between the cockpit and Sarah. “Will you be okay here for a
minute?”

“Trinh,” Sarah forced a little steel back into her spine. “I’m cold and sore and tired and pissed off,
but I’m fine. Go, do what you have to do. I’ll be here.”

Trinh nodded, her dimples flashing in a quick smile. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll be back in a jiff.”

While she went, Sarah pulled out her burner phone. This time, it connected. Sarah keyed in her
cipher—it took two tries, her stupid fingers were still stiff with cold—and watched as the messages
started to load, but she paused before reading them.

Whatever had happened, she thought, it would be a bright line between life before and after. Better
or worse, it was impossible to tell, yet, but after today, nothing would ever be the same.

She opened the window and started to read.

April 4, 2014

3:57 am EST

InCommInc Call Center #27, near Reston, VA

Joe shifted his weight in the desk chair, trying to find a position that didn’t pull on the bullet
wound in his left arm as he kept watch over the bank of monitors showing their security feeds. In
the security office next door, the handful of loyal agents who had fled DC with them were sleeping on the floor, resting on makeshift pillows made of rolled-up jackets. Erisa had just finished her shift on watch and was in the break room, drinking a vending machine cup of noodles before trying to grab a few hours of sleep. In the front of the building, he could hear the sounds of the call center operators, a buzz of conversation like a hive of distant bees.

It was a great location for a bolthole, he had to admit; it ran 24/7, so there were always people coming and going, always cars in the parking lot. The sheer amount of computer and telecomm traffic flowing in and out made it easy to hide any communications. And apparently, Erisa had found a way to build a false wall into the janitor’s closet, behind which to hide a stockpile of equipment and supplies.

They wouldn’t be able to stay indefinitely--there weren’t any showers, plus they’d run out of change for the vending machines--but it would keep them safe long enough to regroup. He hoped.

He was dying to try to access some SHIELD channels, see if he could figure out what the hell was going on, but he couldn’t be sure they’d be safe. He was no hacker, and if the scrolling reports on CNN were true, Hydra had infiltrated the agency from top to bottom, and probably others besides. At this point, there were very few people that Joe would trust without having personally witnessed them be attacked by Hydra, and one of them was dead, one of them was in the next room eating noodles, two of them were in the wind, and the rest were Avengers and therefore not likely to get involved.

He picked up his burner phone, wondering whether it would do any good to try to send another message out to Sarah and Trinh, when it buzzed in his hand, startling him so much he nearly dropped it.

TRINH NGUYEN, the caller ID read. He fumbled one-handed for the button to answer.

“Hello? Trinh? Are you okay?”

“Joe, thank God! I’ve got you on speaker,” Trinh said, her voice a little distant and tinny.

“Oh?” he asked, cautiously. “What’s your sign?”

“Live long and prosper, Gold Leader,” she said, and he relaxed at the all-clear.

“Good to hear,” he said. “So what’s your status?”

“Well, I’m currently in a cloaked quinjet somewhere over Colorado,” she said. “I’ve got Sarah with me, and a bunch of supplies, and agents, and dogs.”

“...did you say dogs?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Remember that K-9 training facility in Oregon? Half of them were evil. I rescued the good half. Also I have some agents from The Harbor and the Casino, a couple of field agents who were undercover on the west coast and got burned, and some kind of IA investigator who was undercover in STRIKE.”

“Wow,” Joe said, blinking.

“It’s been a busy day,” she said, and he could hear the weariness under her flippant words.

“There’s a lot of that going around,” he agreed. “Cap and I were at O’Thirsty’s when everything started. Hydra tried to shoot the place up; a couple other agents who were there helped us fight our
way out. We’re all in a safehouse right now.”

“Good. We were worried.” She took a deep breath, audible over the phone. “Can you get Cap? I think we need to make a plan.”

“Sure thing, hang on.”

He stuck his head into the break room and gestured Erisa to follow him. “Trinh called,” he said, and she stood immediately, taking her noodles with her. Once they were back in the monitor room, he put his own phone on speaker.

“Okay, to recap. I’m here with Cap and some agents in a safehouse in Virginia, Trinh and Sarah and assorted others are in a stealthed quin out west. Everyone’s basically okay except for how we’re all freaking out, and we need a plan for what to do next. Yeah?”

“Sounds right,” Sarah said.

“So here’s the thing,” Trinh said. “The Army is calling for loyal SHIELD agents to turn themselves in to them, but I’m not sure that’s the best idea.”

“Yeah,” Joe agreed. “I’ve had really terrible luck with any plan that includes turning myself in.”

“Plus, nobody’s talking about this on the news,” Trinh added, “but let’s be serious; do we really think Hydra didn’t infiltrate everywhere they could? I mean, we barely made it out of The Harbor ahead of the Army rolling in to take it over. It might just be jurisdictional dick-swinging, but I don’t wanna bet my life on that.”

“We’re safe for now,” Sarah said, “but we can’t stay in the air forever. We need to find somewhere to regroup. Somewhere off-grid and sustainable. Hopefully with room for a bunch of dogs and somewhere to park a quinjet, while I’m making a wish list.”

“And they say I’m the high-maintenance one,” Trinh said, but Joe could tell that her heart wasn’t really in the joke.

“Actually,” he said, an idea dawning. “I might be able to help you out with that.”

“Seriously?” Erisa said. “Do you own some kind of defunct military base you haven’t told us about?”

“Nope,” Joe said. “But my Uncle Bobby has a big farm in Iowa where the government pays him not to grow anything. Bet you anything we could make it work.”

“Won’t your uncle have a problem with housing a bunch of former secret agents who are now unemployed or possibly on the lam?” Sarah asked.

Joe chuckled. “Ask him about Vietnam some time,” he said. “If it involves getting one over on the Army, he’ll be in.”

“Well, our only other idea was Sarah’s stepfather’s house in the Hamptons, and there’s definitely not room for the dogs there,” Trinh said, “so I’m gonna vote yes on Uncle Bobby’s farm.”

“Agreed,” Sarah said. “Much though I’d love to see the look on his smug face when we landed a quin in his pool.”

“Then it sounds like we have a destination,” Erisa said. “I take it you’ve disabled the jet’s
transponder?"

“Yes, ma’am,” a strange man’s voice replied. “I had to get into the wiring by hand to disable the black box, but we’re a ghost.”

“That’s good, but it’s probably best you don’t bring it too close to DC, regardless,” Erisa said. “The van we’re in is stolen, but if we swap the plates around we’re probably safe in it for a day or so. We’ll head west; scout out somewhere to meet us and we can join up and fly to Iowa together.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Trinh agreed. “Sarah and I will keep our burners on; don’t use any other channels for communication, we aren’t comfortable using anything that SHIELD set up.”

“Yeah, there’s no telling what kind of back doors may be in those systems,” Joe agreed. He paused, trading looks with Erisa; he didn’t want to hang up, and he thought he saw the same reluctance in her eyes.

“Guys? Be careful, okay?” Trinh said. “I don’t want to have to break you out of a military prison.”

“We will,” Erisa promised. “And that goes for you lot as well. Don’t take any risks.”

“We’ll be in touch with a location for the meet,” Sarah said. “See you soon.”

“See you soon,” Joe echoed, and made himself hang up the call.

They left the safehouse at shift change, their group blending in with the bleary night-shift customer service representatives streaming out of the building to their cars. They finally met up with the others in the empty, weed-flecked parking lot of a dead mall somewhere in southern Ohio, wiping the van clean before crowding into the jet, which smelled quite pungently of cordite and wet dog. After that, it was only a matter of hours before they were touching down in a dilapidated-looking rocky field, just over the hill from the rambling farmhouse where Joe’s Uncle Bobby lived with a grumpy cat, a small collection of potted marijuana plants, and an exceptionally useful reputation as a hermit that meant none of the neighbors ever came around.

The sun was setting behind the hills, painting the sky orange and pink. The dogs, released from their long confinement, tussled and played in the long grass, barking and sniffing and peeing with abandon as their handlers looked on. Joe, Erisa, Sarah, and Trinh stood in a loose knot, the rest of the agents falling in nervously behind them as they started toward the house.

The front door banged behind Joe’s uncle as he came out to meet them, a shotgun over one shoulder. He looked them over, his dark eyes sharp as he noted the obvious signs of wear and narrowing when he saw the grubby bandage on Joe’s bicep.

“Well, then,” he said. “Guess you’d better come on in.”

“Guess so,” Joe replied, and he climbed the steps into the house, everyone else close behind.

They crowded into the kitchen, which smelled deliciously of a giant stock pot full of chilli that Uncle Bobby had simmering on the stove.

“So,” said one of the agents--Ishimura, one of the K-9 handlers. “What do we do now?”

“We eat,” Joe said simply. “We get clean--we’ll have to space out showers, the water heater’s tiny here--and then we sleep for as long as we can.”

“And then?”
“And then,” Erisa said, “we gather up our intel and our resources, and figure out how to keep saving the world.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, our deep and heartfelt thanks to all who are following along on this journey!
Frequent Fliers

Chapter by Kathar

Chapter Summary

Life goes on.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the longer pause in posting; all three of us have been sick simultaneously. Look for a couple fairly quick, short updates after this!

“Ladies and gentlemen, please buckle your seatbelts, return your trays and chairs to the upright and locked position, and prepare for landing.”

Clint flipped a few switches above him on the cockpit and smiled as he watched the low sheds and long runway of the Hagerstown Regional Airport come into focus below him.

“You’re very funny, Barton,” Bobbi Morse grumbled, and deliberately leaned forward in her seat, unbuckling her seatbelt, to watch as Clint started to make the turn for the landing. “You gonna tell me what we’re doing here anytime soon, seeing as you hijacked me?”

“Hold up, tower first,” Clint said, and spent a few moments confirming his landing with ground control, before turning back to her. “And I think by ‘hijack’ you mean ‘saved your ass from Hydra goons,’ and you’re welcome.”

“I had them right where I wanted them,” Morse said, “and you never told me how you knew where I was, either.”

“I’m just that good,” Clint said, and concentrated for a moment on his approach. He’d gotten good at the brush-off, after the last few times Nick Fury had pinged his burner and sent him off to recover former SHIELD agents. How Nick got his information, Clint wasn’t sure (although he had his suspicions, and they were tall, Dutch, and glam) but the requests usually came at inconvenient times.

At least this time, he and Phil hadn’t been in the middle of things when the phone had buzzed.

Which wasn’t to say the call had been convenient.

“To answer your question,” Clint said, ignoring it completely, “we’re here because I got interrupted in the middle of a favor and I gotta return the plane. And also-- there’s someone I want you to meet, and this was on his way home.”

“What if I wanted to be on my way home?” Morse sighed, and Clint shot a glance at her. She seemed mostly resigned now, or maybe that was just the exhaustion-- she’d admitted she’d been up and on the run a good twenty hours before he found her.
“If you’ve got a home right now, you’re doing better than most of us,” Clint told her. “And we can get you there.”

“Heard you’re in the Tower now being a superhero, Hawkeye,” Morse retorted.

“It’s an okay crash pad,” Clint said, “but it’s not SHIELD.”

“No.” And that was an awful lot of wistfulness packed into one word, Clint decided. “Not much is.”

“You miss it?” Clint asked, pretending it was a throwaway, something he only half cared about while he concentrated on his landing.

“I-- Oof! God, and you used to fly jets?-- it’s complicated, I guess. I miss what SHIELD stood for. Before Hydra ate us from the inside and Congress dragged us through the mud and we became terrorists. Knowing that, even if no one else knew it was you, you were out there making the world better. I would… I would do a lot, I think. To make that true again.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Clint told her. “Because that’s why I brought you here.”

Despite her threats, Clint didn’t tell Bobbi anything else until they had landed, and they were leaving the plane behind. Three people were waiting for them at the end of the tarmac nearest a low, glass-sided building. All of them were wearing aviator glasses, but Clint had eyes-- at that moment-- only for the one in the middle.

“Wait,” Bobbi said when they were nearly even with the trio, “is that-- Clint Barton, you SOB, how did you-- where did you dig him up? What is this?”

“This, Agent Morse, is a job offer,” Phil said, smiling at her. He was still the suavest motherfucker on the planet when he wanted to be, Clint thought, and fought to keep his knees steady. He didn’t think swooning was gonna be helpful at this juncture. “Assuming you’re still interested in making the world better-- and making SHIELD what it should have been.”

Bobbi glared at Clint, and he shrugged.

“Not my fault you didn’t ask about bugs on the plane,” he said. “I’m gonna leave you and Director Coulson here to talk; I’ve got a lot to do and a short turnaround.”

He gave Phil a pat on the back as he walked toward the building (and its associated restrooms and vending machines). As he did, one of Phil’s companions peeled off and followed him.

“So that’s the guy you told me was dead, huh? The one with the pepperjack beef patty obsession?” Yolanda asked him as soon as they were out of hearing range. “I gotta tell ya, Hawkeye, I’m impressed.”

“I feel like I am really going to regret you two getting acquainted,” Clint told her. “And what the hell was Skye doing there? I thought she was supposed to be… not here?”

“Ask her; she won’t tell me,” Yolanda said. “But maybe piss first and grab some lifesavers or something. I can smell stale coffee breath from here, and I don’t think you want that when you and your man are getting busy.”

“We--” Clint stopped still, and spun to face her. Yolanda was grinning at him, clearly unrepentant. “This is a very, very small airport. We are not going to get busy anywhere in it-- and I thought we were on a tight turnaround.”
“We are. So scoot. You got… fifteen. And I’ll put a housekeeping sign or somethin’ in front of that restroom for you, just in case.”

She sauntered off, leaving Clint with the distinct feeling that he’d been managed, a tightness in his bladder that needed attending to, and a tightness elsewhere that he was at least slightly indignant about and in no way intended to deal with in the grungy two-seater restroom of a regional airport. Even if it had been weeks since he and Phil’d had any privacy.

In the event, Clint had managed to deal with both his bladder and his breath by the time Phil breezed into the restroom, his aviators in his hand and a sharklike grin on his face, and backed Clint straight into the nearest wall.

“Hi,” he said, and that was the last thing he said for at least thirty seconds, until they both finally came up for air, when he pulled back with a final peck and nodded his head. “Minty. Nice.”

“Oh my god, I love you, but you are a jerk. And did you really just stick your tongue down my throat in an airport bathroom? What gives, Phil?”

Phil shrugged, still smiling in a kind of dazed way.

“I missed you,” he said, “and I always did love watching you come in for a landing.”

“Uh, did Morse sign on?” Clint asked, trying very hard not to process Phil’s insinuations, since, again-- grungy regional-airport bathroom. With assorted people expecting them hanging around somewhere in the small lobby outside.

“Provisionally,” Phil said, “and said she might have leads on a few other agents. I’ll take her back to the Playground; I’ve got ideas about what to do with her already….” His hands were starting to slide down Clint’s stomach as he spoke, and they were being wildly distracting. “I’ve got ideas about what to do with you, too. And I’ve decided something.”

Phil punctuated his last sentence with a quick tug at Clint’s waistband.

“What’s that?” Clint asked, rapidly re-evaluating his thoughts on regional restroom quickies.

“I don’t want to miss one goddamned minute of time I could be spending doing this with you,” Phil told him, leaning in to bite his earlobe as he did. “Never know… how often we’ll get this chance.” His lips drifted to the edge of Clint’s jaw. “Want to give you everything I can while I… whenever I can.”

“That,” Clint said, arching into the nibble and giving up on propriety, “is a very good point.”

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“I want you to know,” Skye said a while later, when they were seated in the airplane again and Yolanda was going through her preflights, “that I lost the coin toss.”

“Did you?” Clint asked, only half listening. He was busy looking out the window and marveling at the continued mystery that was Phil Coulson. Phil was still standing on the tarmac, now flanked by Bobbi Morse, and he was looking calm and unruffled behind his aviators. You’d never think, looking at him, that five minutes ago he’d been muffling his groans with Clint’s lips as they, uh, finished.

“Yeah,” Skye said. “It certainly wasn’t my idea to go find you guys.”
She shuddered feelingly, and Yolanda cackled.

“Well next time you’ll know better than to bet with Bobbi Morse. Or her for that matter,” Clint said, indicating Yolanda with his thumb. “They cheat. Okay, Yolanda, we’re getting the thumbs-up. Ready?”

“Yeah,” Yolanda said, “lemme tell the tower.”

While she did, Clint gave a thumbs-up back to Phil, and had it returned with a quick “I love you” flash in ASL. Clint pressed his own against the glass in return, while he tried to will his heart back out of his throat and into his chest.

“Aw, man, you’re killin’ me, Jets,” Yolanda grumbled, and stomped savagely on the pedal. The plane jerked forward, and Phil was rapidly lost behind them.

“I don’t know,” Skye said, “It’s a head trip, seeing AC all gooey whenever Clint’s around but… I mean, once you get used to coming around corners real loudly just in case they’re, like, standing around holding hands and looking dopily into each others’ eyes in the middle of the hall… it’s not so bad. I think it’s kinda… cute, really.”

“It is not cute,” Clint grumbled, “and we do not stare dopily or… or anything.”

“Fine.” Skye sat back in her seat, tightening her seatbelt and settling in for take-off, “have it your way. But I still think AC goes all gooey.”

“I’m not apologizing,” Clint said, then turned to Yolanda. “Ready yet?”

“Do it,” Yolanda said. Clint began rolling down the window.

“You don’t need to apologize; it’s good for AC to get to be human for once. He needs it. Life’s been shit for him lately.” Skye muttered in a lower voice, which picked up as Clint began rolling down his window. “What’re you doing?”

“He’s swinging a tow line,” Yolanda said, as Clint did just that.

“Yeah but-- why?”

“Because,” Clint grunted, tugging, as his line hit its target, the hook clicked, and it started to drag out of his hands, “Phil owed someone a favor, and I get to pay it back.”

“What the hell kind of favor involves-- wait, what’s that big red thing dragging along behind us?” Skye asked, half slewing around in her seat and trying to look behind her, where the tail of the plane quickly impeded her progress.

“Well,” Clint said, as Yolanda grunted and adjusted the plane, and it began to rise, “in this case? He owed a guy a banner ad.”

“A-- what?”

“A banner ad,” Clint said, “redeemed on 24 hours notice at the time and place of the guy’s choosing. He said he’d provide the banner. And he did.”

“What’s it say?” Skye asked, slewing the other direction.

“Fuckingruzzlegrumblegrrf,” Yolanda said.
“Ignore her,” Clint told Skye. “She’s just grumpy because she didn’t want to do this but I technically still own the plane.”

“Okay, but, what’s it say?” Skye repeated.

“It says ‘will you go to porm with me JoAnn,’” Clint said. In the next seat, Yolanda snorted.

“‘Porm’?”

“‘Porm.’ The intent was there, just… this is why you spellcheck the proofs before they go to print, I guess.”

“And in the middle of the summer?”

“Trying to lock her down early? I dunno, Skye, I just do the damn things, I don’t ask for the backstory. It’s safer that way. Maybe it really is ‘porm,’ not prom. Maybe it’s some Maryland thing. Ours is not to wonder why.”

“Okay, but… how did AC end up owing someone an airplane-delivered ‘porm’ invite?”

“You know, after the first twenty-five of these I did,” Clint said, “I realized that it’s sometimes better not to ask that either.”

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“How long’re we gonna be circling?” Skye asked, after the sixth time they passed over the little cul-de-sac far below.

“Awhile,” Yolanda said easily. “What, did you think this was the express? You fly HawkeyeAir, you get there when you get there.”

“But you will get there,” Clint added, grinning over the back of his seat at Skye. “Probably. Eventually.”

“This is why AC likes you, isn’t it? You’re as much of a big dork as he is.”

“Jeez, you sound like Katie-Kate. Trust me’n Phil to both randomly adopt the same damn kid, just… split between two bodies.”

“Oh please,” Yolanda said, rolling her eyes, “if anything, Kate adopted you.”

“Yeah,” Clint admitted, feeling fondness bubble up in him, “yeah she did.”

Maybe it was the afterglow from the, um, check-in with Phil, maybe it was being up in the co-pilot seat with Yolanda again, maybe it was the thought of his tough, snarky, co-Hawkeye, but Clint felt warm all over, kind of content, and overflowing with good will. It was an odd feeling to have, after everything that had happened in the spring-- and the two years preceding that.

But then, as long as you took the tiny, insignificant detail that was the fall of SHIELD out of the equation, Clint’s life was as full of good things as it’d ever been-- and fuller of Phil. (Phuller?) Clint decided not to spend too much time on that train of thought, or he was just going to end up feeling really guilty about not feeling worse.

“So who’s this Kate anyway?” Skye asked, cutting through his thoughts. “Someone I should meet?”
“Oh god no,” Clint said, at the same time as Yolanda said “that’d be fuckin’ rad.”

Clint shot Yolanda a dirty look.

“Kate’s… Kate’s… okay, it’s a long story,” Clint said.

“I got time,” Skye shrugged, “since we’re flying in circles here anyway. And I can’t exactly get off at the nearest corner. Tell me.”

Clint thought about it, decided that there were probably worse things to do with their time, and told her all about Kate Bishop, and the evil charity performance and the speedboats and the clown pants and the plastic fish. Skye appreciated the story properly: she’d have been rolling in the aisles if the plane had them. When he finished, she wiped her eyes, tried unsuccessfully to stop her giggling, and finally squeaked out:

“I don’t believe you. You made all that up.”

“Naw, believe it,” Yolanda told Skye. “I’ve met the girl, I think he’s downplaying it. And that’s not half as odd as what him’n me ended up doing with your boss’s Winnebago.”

“AC… had a Winnebago?” Skye asked, sitting back up and looking shocked-- as well she should.

“What for?”

“Courting gift,” Yolanda said succinctly, “for Jets here.” And then she crammed a protein bar into her mouth, cutting off further speech.

“You… you… you CANNOT leave me hanging like this,” Skye told Clint.

“I totally can,” Clint told her, and started digging around for a protein bar of his own; he was convinced Yolanda had stolen his from his pocket.

“Oh no you can’t. You’ve got me flying around in the sky in circles with you, when I just could have hacked my way on a flight to New York if AC weren’t being such a-- anyway. Flying in circles, the in-flight meals are non-existent, the least you owe me is deets. So… courting gift, or this IOU thing you keep mentioning. You pick, but you’re telling me about at least one of ‘em.”


Clint sighed, and gave in to inevitability.

“I guess they are kind of the same story,” he said, looking out the window at the tiny suburbs below. “See, me and Phil used to… I mean, we were… together. For a while. A long time ago.”

“And you broke up?” Skye asked. “You? Holding-hands-in-the-hall you? Getting busy in the bathroom you?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Clint protested. “It wasn’t, we didn’t, like, fight or anything. We still wanted to…” he made a vague gesture. “To be together. Eventually. But we decided that our work didn’t-- no.” He cut himself off, shaking his head. “I’ve been telling this story for years and it, it’s bullshit. I’m not doing that any more.” He sighed.

“Here’s the truth,” he said, and he didn’t know why it was coming out now, here, in the Porm Plane with Yolanda and Skye, but it was. “We were together, and he was the best damn thing that had ever happened to me, and then we had a mission go… bad. Real bad. And I fucked everything up.” His eyes stung, remembering. “We were supposed to be recovering information about a
weapons shipment from a contact,” he said. “But someone sold out the meet. I was supposed to be
up high, watching, and Nat was the on-the-ground backup, and Phil was making the exchange. But
then Phil reached out to take the briefcase, and h-he… he jerked and crumpled and just… just fell,
like, like he was--like they’d--” he drew a long, shaky breath, the memory never getting any better.

“I thought they’d killed him,” he said, his voice gone low and harsh. “I thought they’d fucking
killed him right there in front of me, and I lost my fuckin’ shit.”

“Of course you did,” Skye said, her own voice trembling a little. “How could you do anything
else?”

“I was a SHIELD agent,” Clint snapped. “I was supposed to be a goddamn professional. Stick to
the plan, get the intel, bring the guy in for interrogation, but I--all I could think was that they’d
killed him and I wanted them to suffer.”

The cockpit was quiet for a long moment, save for the grumble of the engine. “So… what
happened?” Skye said at last.

“I put an arrow through his neck,” Clint said, his voice dull. “Off-center, so he wouldn’t go quick.
We were supposed to be taking him in--he had intel we needed--but I didn’t care. I wanted him to
choke to death on his own blood for what he’d done. And then I left my post and I went down there
so I could watch it happen.”

He’d left Natasha with no backup, he’d exposed himself and the entire op, and he hadn’t cared, he
hadn’t even thought of anything except the loop running across his mind: Phil falling, over and
over.

Skye laid one of her little hands carefully on his arm. “But he was okay, right? You’re all still
around, so it turned out okay.”

“We lived,” Clint said. “We even managed to pull the mission out of the shit, eventually. But that
was all down to Nat and Phil, in spite of me. The thing was, it was just a taser, built into the handle
of the case. Phil came around like ten minutes later. But if Nat hadn’t been there, if she hadn’t had
her shit together, I could have gotten us all killed for real. It came damn close.”

“Was… was AC mad?”

“That was the worst of it,” Clint said. “He was so fucking understanding. I got reprimanded by our
boss, and rightly so, and Phil’d read the whole report, he knew how much I’d fucked it up. And
then after we got home he--he said we’d talk about the work shit at work, but it was personal time
and he wanted to make sure I was okay. Like I was the one who deserved to be taken care of.”

“He does that,” Skye said quietly.

“Yeah,” Clint said. “He does. And I just… I couldn’t do it. I went home with him and we--”

They’d made love, desperate and tender, and Phil had let Clint kiss every mark on his perfect skin,
had fallen asleep in his arms and let Clint hold him all night. Clint hadn’t slept, just watched him in
the faint light from the bathroom down the hall, aching inside at what he had to do.

“We spent the night together,” Clint said. “and in the morning I told him that I loved him but I
couldn’t be with him, not as long as we were doing the work.”

“Well that was stupid,” Skye said, then bit her lip. “Um. I mean, it wasn’t like breaking up meant
you’d be any less upset if he died, would you?”
Clint laughed, short and bitter. “No, as it turns out,” he said. “When he died, it was worse, because all I could think about was all the fucking time I’d wasted. And then I got a call to come listen to his will, and I found out he’d left me… a whole life. *Our* whole life.”

“Is, um, is this where the Winnebago comes into it?” Skye asked, and Yolanda snorted.

“Yes,” Clint said. “See, he’d told me--he’d told me that when I was ready, he’d be there. And he’d spent all that time… getting ready for when I was ready, I guess? He left me a vault full of stuff. I think every time he saw something he thought I’d like, he bought one and stuck it in there. But he also left me money, and property, and caches of weapons and supplies, and vehicles--”

“Like the Winnebago,” Yolanda said.

“--like the Winnebago. And he left me his entire contact list, and all the markers he had, favors he owed and favors people owed him. This whole life, that he’d just been keeping for me, for when I pulled my head out of my ass and realized he was still there, waiting to offer it.”

Skye sniffed. “That’s so sad.”

“It’s ridiculous, is what it is,” Yolanda said. “It’s like a Lifetime Original Movie.”

“That stings, Yolanda,” Clint told her.

“Because it’s true,” she said. “I mean, God forbid you two try something revolutionary like, say, talking about your feelings. I swear. *Men*.”

“I mean, I guess I could have hired a skywriter to ask him to *porm,*” Clint said. “But there wasn’t much time, what with all the aliens.”

“I think it’s romantic,” Skye said, her eyes huge and liquid. “And he came back from the dead and you were reunited! Shit, no wonder you stop to get lost in each other’s eyes and whisper sweet nothings in the halls.”

Clint groaned. “For the last time,” he said. “We had to discuss something classified.”

“Sure you did,” Skye agreed, and winked at him. “I *like* this one,” Yolanda said, chuckling. She dug deep into the side of her seat, extracted a protein bar, and tossed it to Skye. “You can fly anytime you like. Speaking of…” she said, “we can finally get going up to Jersey.”

“Oh good,” Clint said, “and maybe you can get off my love life.”

“Yeah yeah, plenty of time on the way to Teterboro to bring that back up. Skye, kiddo, you got someone picking you up, or what’re you doing when we get there?”

“What *are* you doing when we get there?” Clint asked. He had meant to ask Phil but gotten distracted, and so far Skye had been doing a damn good job of diverting the topic.

“Um, it’s classified,” Skye said, taking a bite of protein bar absentmindedly, then pulling back to stare at it. That more than anything reminded Clint how new she was to the world of spies; to his refined palate Yolanda’s stash was pretty outstanding. Heavy on the chocolate and peanut butter, no raisins or any of that carob nonsense.

“I am a Level Seven,” Clint pointed out. “I’m good for it.”

“You *were* a Level Seven,” Skye said, “but SHIELD wasn’t good enough for you anymore, Mr.
“Avenger.”

“Pretty sure Avengers rank even higher than Level Sevens,” Clint said, lying through his teeth, “and pretty sure also that Director’s boyfriend still counts.”

“Okay, I may have literally become an agent the day before SHIELD fell apart, but even I know security clearance isn’t like a class ring. And anyway, she’s not cleared,” Skye said, jerking a thumb Yolanda’s way.

“Mmmmmmmmm,” Yolanda said, temporizing, “Bet I am. I been background checked by at least a half dozen of the alphabets.”

“You what?” Clint asked, turning to stare at Yolanda. “Why?”

“Family,” Yolanda shrugged, pulling out a water bottle-- Clint assumed it was a water bottle-- and taking a swig. “You know how it is; for any security clearance worth the name they clear the family too. I got relatives in most of the armed forces, FBI, NSA…it’s like the family business. Well and then there’s Uncle Tito in the Park Service.”

“And you’re a flight instructor,” Skye said, leaning forward and resting her elbows on the back of Clint’s seat. “Really?”

“I’m the black sheep,” Yolanda affirmed.

“What, not CIA?” Clint asked, and got an indignant snort.

“Lord, my Abuela would take me out back herself. No, most I ever did was Basic. Decided it… wasn’t for me.” She grimaced in a way that convinced Clint he should never, ever, ever ask for details, or let Skye do so either. “Promised myself I’d stay out of the government’s way, keep my head down, and keep my plane clean. Kept to it for over a decade, too, till a friend showed up at my airport with a sorry-ass white guy with a sob story about needing to be back in DC. And there I was, two days later, in the back seat of a Winnebago with a Kalashnikov in one hand and bad feeling my Abuela’d never let me hear the end of it. I swear, you SHIELD agents are sticky bastards.”

“They really are,” Skye agreed, patting Yolanda on the shoulder. “So, what, you’re saying SHIELD cleared you?”

“Yeah, back when Cousin Zach got done with the Academy there,” Yolanda said, suddenly paying a whole lot of diligent attention to her console.

“ Heard from him since SHIELD fell?” Clint asked, even though he wasn’t sure, from Yolanda’s scowl, that he wanted to know the answer.

“No,” she said shortly, confirming it. “Abuela did, once. General family ‘I’m not dead’ code. That’s been it. I, ah, keep hoping.”

“Oh,” Skye said, “that’s why you’re here flying Clint all over the place.”

“It’s mostly her plane now,” Clint explained, “I didn’t need it. And I have no idea what happened to hers.”

“I know what happened to mine,” Yolanda grumbled. “By the time Manuel got back the damn thing was in flames. But that doesn’t mean I need an oversized yuppie-carrier like this thing. Why the hell did your guy pick it out? The name?”
“Probably,” Clint allowed. Almost certainly, in fact, since Phil had blushed and refused to say when asked point-blank about the Piper Archer he’d left in a hangar outside Gettysburg. “So, what, you think I’m likely to get a pick-up call for your cousin one of these days?”

They were coming fewer and further between, Clint didn’t say. Yolanda knew; she’d been with him on more than half of them. And he’d been so grateful-- and so distracted by Phil-- that he hadn’t asked why. Being newly reunited with your resurrected boyfriend shouldn’t make you blind to everything else; that was what had gotten them into trouble the first time around.

Yolanda sighed, looking bleaker than he’d ever seen her. He debated being sorry for bringing it up in the first place, but… well. She knew more than enough heavy shit about him. And it honestly made him feel a little better, that she hadn’t given up her entire life just to take him cross-country. If there was a reason she was sticking in Jersey these days-- beyond Kate and Edna and Basil, to whom she’d taken an alarming shine-- Clint didn’t feel quite so guilty.

“I have no idea, Jets,” Yolanda replied, “but it’s not like I know any other SHIELD agents-- ex SHIELD agents, whatever-- to tag along with and find out.”

“Yeah you do,” Skye said. They both turned to look at her.

“Huh,” Yolanda said. “Guess so.”

“And I am real good at finding people,” Skye told her, settling back and looking satisfied for a moment, before her face fell. “Least I’m good at finding something.”

“So, what does Phil have you looking for in New York?” Clint asked, idly. If he was going to start paying attention again, it seemed like a good place to start.

“Stuff,” Skye said, screwing up her nose at him. “I am not that easy to interrogate, mister.”

“So Phil tells me,” Clint agreed, just barely refraining from adding that defiance made her look adorable. She’d been training with May; he was pretty sure she’d make him pay for the comment. “And I came out without my truth serum today.”

The look of dawning horror on Skye’s face was more than satisfactory; Clint decided he was revenged for her earlier comments about goopy hand-holding.

“Oh god, I have to rethink this whole ‘you and AC are so cute’ thing,” Skye said. “You… you don’t get to talk about us. That’s not fair.”

“Pretty sure someone in this plane just said something about us needing to communicate better. And now you complain when we do,” Clint told her.

“I hate you.”

“You do not. And now you really do sound like Katie-Kate.”

“Okay, that does it,” Skye grumbled, “I have got to meet this girl.”

“That is a horrible idea,” Clint said, and pretended to ignore Yolanda’s snort of protest.

Skye narrowed her eyes, and looked between them. Yolanda pasted on an innocent look and concentrated on flying the plane. Clint just winked at her.

“Come on, Barton, I am not leaving your side until you lead me to her,” Skye said, “even if it
means I follow you home and watch you creepily from the doorway while you sleep.”

Clint blinked at her a minute, thrown, and watched in fascination as a blush started to creep up her neck.

“Let’s pretend I didn’t say it that way,” Skye said. “Or at all. My point is--”

“You don’t have to follow him all the way home,” Yolanda said. “It’s a Tuesday. We’re due at Edna’s for tacos, anyway.”

“Tuesday… what?” Clint asked, spinning around and staring at Yolanda.

“Taco Tuesdays. Dinner and drinks and that kind of shit. Me and Basil and Edna and Kate. It’s a thing.”

“Since when?” Clint felt his voice raise, and didn’t try to stop it. It wasn’t a bad thing, obviously; in fact he felt better knowing they were all still looking out for each other. There were way too many people who’d be interested in what Basil or Yolanda had been doing just after the fall of SHIELD, or what having Kate would do to Clint.

No, it wasn’t a bad thing. Just.

Why hadn’t they invited him?

Yolanda glanced over at him.

“Since a few weeks ago; cool your jets, Jets. You just haven’t been around yet when it was happening. You are now. So. Basil’s making dinner and Edna’s doing those crack cookies. Kate’s bringing something she can’t mess up. And I’m bringing you. And maybe a bottle of tequila. I was told either/or, but I figure both will work.”

“Or you can bring me, and I’ll bring the booze!” Skye piped up. “Problem solved, without sleep-creeping.”

“Crap,” Clint sighed, seeing his life flash before his eyes. “I’m doomed.”

“Yeah probably,” Skye said. “But I gotta meet the other side of the family sometime. Why not now?”

“Other side of the family?” Clint was diverted for a moment by the many thoughts that went crashing through his head at that-- Kate and Edna and Basil as his family-- Skye as Phil’s family-- Skye calling herself Phil’s family-- before one absolutely horrible thought rolled out of the pile and he froze.

“Crap,” he said. “Oh crap, crap, crap. No.”

“What?” Skye asked, picking up on his sudden swing from banter to bloodlessness.

“I’d have to explain who you are,” Clint whispered, letting it sink in.

“Why is that a problem?” Skye asked. “You don’t have to explain about SHIELD and all, just that I know your boyfriend?”

“That,” Yolanda said, with something akin to evil glee in her voice, “is his problem. Dumbass here hasn’t bothered to mention yet that his boyfriend’s back from the dead. I only found out when I met the dude this afternoon.”
“Basil knows,” Clint pointed out, despite his dawning horror. “I mean-- he hasn’t seen Phil, but he was there when I, when they… uh… he knows I was going to go look for Phil. Basil could have told you three any time.”

“Basil?” Yolanda asked, incredulous. “You gonna try to lay this one on poor old Basil’s doorstep? What’s he done to you? Bro’d keep your secrets to hell and back, Jets. You’re the one who’s not only seen your dead boyfriend in the flesh, you’ve been canoodling all this time.”

“We do not canoodle.”

“Protest noted. You’re the one who’s been not-canoodling with your dead boyfriend this time. And now, it’s time to talk. Because unlike Basil, I’m not prone to keeping my mouth shut.”

“Fuck,” Clint said faintly, “Kate’s gonna kill me.”

“Wait,” Skye said, making a rewind motion with her fingers, “go back to the part where you have these people that you met because AC left you these IOUs, that saved your ass when SHIELD fell, and they don’t know the love of your life is back from the dead?”

“Okay, it sounds bad when you put it that way,” Clint admitted. “But in my defense, I am not the one who spent close to two years totally avoiding letting me know I existed. I mean--”

“I know what you mean,” Skye said. “But you’re not avoiding each other now, are you?”

“No just--” Clint paused to order his thoughts, because he knew he had more rational reasons than if I told anyone else, I might lose it all again . Eventually, he found them. “Look, you’re all doing this whole underground secret agency thing, and you don’t just spring that on civilians. At first I wasn’t really sure if Phil had a preference on how that went, and then, you know, I haven’t been around much and this isn’t the kind of thing you just announce on the fly and I… I was kind of waiting for the right moment.”

“What would you consider the right moment?” Skye asked.

Clint slumped further into the copilot’s seat.

“It’s stupid,” he admitted. “I know it is. But I kinda… I kinda had this vision of Phil getting to tell them himself, you know? I wanted him to get to see the looks on their faces. Seemed easier than having to explain all about him without him there, and why isn’t he there and… he said he wants to go he just--”

“He’s barely around,” Skye sighed. “All this recruiting. Yeah, I get it. But you wait any longer and you run the risk of pulling an AC yourself. You don’t want to be the one hiding something like this for two years.”

“No,” Clint said firmly, “no I do not.”

“So I’m a good excuse, right?” Skye said, perking back up. “Natural time to let the cat out of the bag.”

“I suppose,” Clint grumbled. She was right, he knew she was. He hadn’t meant to let it get this far, anyway, and he knew he was in for more than a few glares. Basil, at least, would be relieved. And that almost hurt worst, the reminder that he’d let Basil deal with that all by himself all these weeks.

“Hey, if it helps,” Yolanda put in, “once Kate’s done being mad at you, all you have to do is give her your man’s number. Then she can guilt-trip him into coming to visit, and you don’t have to.”
“She is much more effective at guilt-tripping than I am,” Clint admitted, beginning to straighten back up. Okay, yeah, this could work. It could totally work, and he might even come out the winner after it was all said and done.

“And hey bonus,” Skye said, “she and I can tag-team him. He can’t resist two of us.”

Clint pictured that, Skye pestering Phil in the halls while Katie blew up his phone. He winced.

“I think I’m starting to feel sorry for Phil,” he said.

“He’ll live,” Yolanda said, sagely.

“Yeah he will,” Clint said, because it was true: Phil wasn’t dead. Phil was alive. And if Clint had anything to say about it, Phil was going to continue being alive for a very long time. “Yeah. He will.”
“I’m going to kill him,” Kate said. “You, too, probably. But definitely him.”

“That… seems counterproductive,” Clint replied, trying for the same tone he’d used before with terrorists with itchy trigger fingers and people vying with him for the last cup of coffee on overnight watches at S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Yeah, but it’d be satisfying,” Kate said.

“Maybe it’s a good thing AC didn’t do this himself after all,” Skye murmured.

Clint had barely let them all get off Edna’s drooping porch and inside her home before he’d broken the news, and then he’d done it as fast and baldly as possible, as part of Skye’s introduction: hey guys, this is Skye, she’s a S.H.I.E.L.D agent, and she works for Phil-- who isn’t dead anymore, by the way, so that’s different.

Edna had paused in the act of closing the door and blinked at him once, murmuring “goodness-” and then she had taken the bottle of tequila from Skye and walked it over to the china cabinet. She was currently setting out a selection of her souvenir shot glasses and muttering to herself.

Basil had let out a huge, honking sigh that fluttered his moustache, and said “‘bout ‘time, bro.”

And Katie, well…

I’m going to kill him, was at least a more comprehensive reaction than her first, flat, incredulous “what.” It also came after Clint explaining just how long Phil had been alive, and giving them the S.H.I.E.L.D had some freaky tech explanation for how that came about. He’d also explained about the IOU from Kurt, and that it’d been Clint’s fault Basil couldn’t tell them, and-- well. If Clint hadn’t known about TAHITI, he supposed he might have felt the same way.

“‘AC’ is Coulson?” Kate asked, looking rather mulish. “Yeah, after a trick like that, I wouldn’t want to show my face around here either.”

And then she paused for a moment, and her expression crumbled.

“Why didn’t he want to show his face?” she asked, sounding a little young. “You told him we all remembered him, right? He knows you… he knows we helped you, right? What’s… why can’t we see him?”

Clint only realized he was hugging her once he’d actually started.

“He remembers,” he said into her hair. “And he does care, he’s just… setting up a secret spy agency half from scratch. He’ll come soon, okay? Promise.”
Skye was watching Kate a little awkwardly, looking lost. Edna put an Iffley Mill souvenir shot glass in her hand and patted her shoulder.

“It’s good to meet you,” she told Skye. “Come and have tacos. And tell us all about what Pablo--pardon, Phil--has been doing. Basil? Yolanda?”

They both took shot glasses and followed Edna back into the kitchen.

Yolanda slung her arm around Skye’s shoulder and dragged her in, too, saying:

“Let’s get something more in you than protein bars, lady. Flying takes it out of you.”

Kate, meanwhile, snuffled into Clint’s shoulder, finally looking up to mutter “I’m stupid.”

“What? No,” Clint told her, a little shocked, “why would you say that?”

“Because I barely knew Phil at all, and he’s obviously doing save the world shit again, and I’m all angry because he’s not here.”

“Well, I mean,” Clint said, “you could be angry at me not telling you, instead?”

She thought about that for a moment.

“Yeah okay, I could, except-- I spent how long running after your crazy ass trying to keep you alive while you did this weird mourning thing with IOUs and the Russian mob and crazy clown types--”

“The clowns were your fault,” Clint interjected.

“-- and crazy clown types. And all this time you didn’t know he was alive. How is that fair? How are you not mad? I’m mad!”

“I--” Clint stopped, and thought. It wasn’t just knowing about TAHITI, he realized. Or knowing how scared Phil had been, how lost. Or understanding, bitterly, how important the work Phil did was. “He’s alive, Kate, and I’ve seen him, felt him. He’s managed to somehow not be dead. That makes up for a lot. And being mad seems like a waste of time, anymore, when so much has gone to shit. Not when I can hold him instead.”

“Kay,” Kate said, and her voice was small, “then you tell him I want to see him, too. He loves you, and we kept your ass alive. I think we’ve earned it.”

Clint nodded, since words weren’t going to make it past the lump in his throat.

“Yes, you have,” Edna said, from behind them. She was holding two very generous margaritas in her hand, and gazing down at them. “And nevermind Clint, I will tell him so. Meanwhile, come eat. The others are waiting.”

--

Given what Clint had already seen the group do, he wasn’t surprised to find Taco Tuesday already a seemingly elaborate event with well-established traditions and expectations. Edna’s counter was crowded with taco components both authentic and not, lime wedges and radish slices cheek by jowl with diced tomatoes and shredded iceberg lettuce.

“Okay,” Kate said. “Quick tour for the newbies.” Skye, who was standing by an honest-to-god cut glass punchbowl full of what appeared from the smell to be really strong margaritas, perked up and
came over to stand beside them.

“Corn tortillas in the red basket, sprouted wheat in the blue, the green one is Old El Paso hard taco shells,” she said, sweeping her hand at the counter. “Chicken, ground beef, refried beans, carne asada. Veggies, couple kinds of cheese, sour cream, cilantro rice, Basil’s homemade salsa--”

“My mother’s recipe, bro,” Basil interjected.

“--and heirloom corn chips to go with. They’re purple,” she told Clint, and he grinned at her.

“Sounds perfect, Katie-Kate,” he said.

After they’d all made their plates and Edna had laded everyone out a generous serving of margarita from the punchbowl (and, Clint decided, he hadn’t fully lived until he’d witnessed a gigantic mustachioed Russian putting a salt-rim on a Grumpy Cat coffee mug that said “I hate Mondays”) and they all crowded in around Edna’s kitchen table.

The food was great, the margaritas were strong, and the conversation lapsed for a few minutes while everyone applied themselves to their food. Pretty soon, though, Kate looked up, her eyes sparkling with a light that usually meant clown pants were in somebody’s future, and said, “So, I vote that we all go around the table and say how we first met Phil.”

Basil beamed. “I like it, bro. Like wedding, when you say how you met the bride.”

Everyone turned and looked at Clint, who choked on a purple heirloom corn chip.

“What?” he wheezed, once he’d gotten his breath back.

Beside him, Skye giggled.

--

“I’ll go first,” Edna said. “As it’s my house. When I met Phil, he was going by the name Pablo Jiminez--”

Skye let out a little shriek of recognition. “Oh my god!” she said. “He just used that name like a month ago!”

Clint sighed. “It’s actually one of his established covers,” he said. “Don’t ask me how he pulls it off, his Spanish isn’t even that good.”

Edna laughed. “He’s got balls like shotputs, is how,” she said. “I like that in a man.”

Clint opened his mouth.

“Say it and you’re walking home, Jets,” Yolanda said, pointing at him with a half-eaten taco.

Clint closed his mouth.

“Anyway, I met Pablo at a party at the Nicaraguan embassy in Tegucigalpa,” Edna said. “He was there for work. I was… also there for work. I needed a dance partner, he obliged me, we danced a tango, and I told him I owed him one.”

Clint blinked, a memory jumping to mind. “Wait,” he said. “Was this in 2004?”

“Might have been,” Edna said. “Why?”
Phil’d been on a solo mission—supposedly a low-risk information gathering trip—and had come back with a broken arm, a burn pattern on his neck that looked like flowers, and an infuriating air of smugness. He’d refused to say what had happened, just saying something about “interdepartmental cooperation.”

“When you say *dance partner*,” Clint said slowly.

“He’s a good dancer,” Edna said, taking a sip of her margarita, which was in a purple mason jar and had a twirly straw sticking out the top.

Clint grinned, and she winked at him over the rim.

“Why do I feel like ‘tango’ is probably code for ‘I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you’?” Skye asked.

“Because you’re smart, bro,” Basil told her.

“Thanks, bro.” She reached a fist across the table, and he bumped it gingerly.

“I hate spies,” Kate said glumly. “How do you even remember what name you’ve given to who?”

“You can talk, Cathy,” Clint said.

She rolled her eyes at him.

“You get used to it, though,” he told her. “And I mean, it helps to have people who know you. Really you, I mean. Helps keep you from getting… lost.”

“Like you and AC?” Skye asked.

“Yeah,” Clint said. “Natasha, too. Even aside from the whole, uh, romance part, we were always friends, you know? It makes a difference, having people you know you can trust.” He looked down at his purple corn chips, sniffing a little. “That’s why… I think that’s one of the reasons Phil left me, well… you guys. If he couldn’t be around, he wanted…” he broke off, clearing his throat.

“Anyway. Storytime. Basil, you wanna go next, bro?”

Basil gave him a watery smile around the salsa bowl and wiped his nose on a napkin. “Sure thing, bro.”

While Basil was telling the story of how he’d flipped on the Russian mob and turned into a building super in Brooklyn, Clint looked around the table, warmth rising in his chest. When he’d met most of them, he’d been a mess, but they hadn’t held it against him. Now, after cross-country drives and clown pants and mobsters and jalapeno pepper jack beef patty MREs, they were… his, somehow. Even Skye, for all he hadn’t known her long; she was one of Phil’s, and Phil was Clint’s, and so Skye was his, too.

It had been a long, long time since Clint had felt like this, a part of something like this. Not since the days when he and Phil and Nat had lived in each other’s pockets. He felt the urge to get them both here, to have all his most important people in sight, safe and tipsy and eating tacos.

“So what about you, Kate?” Skye asked.

“I was setting an ambush to catch a serial mugger, and he ‘rescued’ me,” she said, making finger
“God, I was pissed, I’d spent two weeks on that. He apologized for ‘interfering with my operation’ and gave me the IOU.”

“He was thinking about recruiting her,” Clint added. “If things had gone different, you two might have been roomies at SHIELD Academy.”

“That might have been fun,” Kate said. “Sure better than finishing school.”

“Well, *that* was never an option for me,” Skye said, a wry twist in her voice.

“How so?”

“I met AC when he busted me hacking into SHIELD for the Rising Tide,” she said. “I was in my van, on a laptop, and then the Men in Black were breaking down my door! I thought it was Gitmo for sure, it was terrifying.”

“Ugh,” Kate said. “I bet.”

“But then, um, he said that I could use my talents to do good in the world,” she continued, eyes shining. “And… he was just, you could tell he meant it, you know? And it was tough, but I… I wanted that. To help. And then I got my badge and I thought, hey, this is it, I’ve found what I’m meant to do.” She took a belt of her drink. “And then like two weeks later, Hydra.”

“Man, fuck those guys,” Yolanda muttered.

“I’ll drink to that,” Edna said, toasting them with her curly straw.

--

Skye was looking like she maybe wanted not to be the center of attention for a minute, so Clint picked up the ball. “Yolanda, you want to tell your story, now that you and Phil have actually met? I know it’s pretty recent…”

She snorted. “Jets, you really want me to tell that story?” she asked. “Bathroom and all?”

“I meant the part before we got there,” Clint protested, but she was already elaborating.

Hand gestures and kissy-noises were involved.

“Oh my god, Clint,” Kate said, looking torn between horror and glee. “Right there in *public*?”

“We did *not*,” Clint protested. “We were very dignified!”

Skye cackled. “Oh man, you don’t know the *half* of it. You should see them on base, they’re constantly--”

“So anyway!” Clint said. Okay. Maybe yelled a little bit. “My turn for storytime!”

He got an assortment of eyerolls, but they quieted down, looking at him expectantly.

“Okay, so,” Clint said. “When I got recruited to SHIELD, they didn’t put me through the standard Academy like they do most recruits. I knew way more than usual in some areas, and way less in others, because I wasn’t coming straight from, like, ROTC like a lot of them do. So my training period was more of, like, an apprenticeship type thing. My SO--supervising officer, like a trainer, sorta-- made up a training program for me, sent me on missions or to do practicals with different people, that kind of thing. Kind of like Phil’s doing for you, Skye.”
She nodded. “I bet it works out better when your SO isn’t a Nazi,” she said bitterly, and Clint winced.

“Yeah, that’s tough,” he said, nudging her foot sympathetically under the table.

“So, was Phil one of the people you went on missions with, or something?” Kate asked.

“No, actually,” Clint said. “See, he’d been in SHIELD since right after high school, so he was doing way too sensitive stuff by then to do training runs. But my SO had also been his SO, so I’d heard about him a lot, I just hadn’t actually met him yet.”

“Who was your SO?” Skye asked. “Anyone I know?”

“Uh, kind of?” Clint said. “It was Director Fury.”

“Holy shit, so many things make so much more sense now,” Skye blurted. “I mean, about both of you. No wonder you take all the weirdness in stride.”

Clint shrugged. “I mean, you kind of have to, in our line of work, or you’d spend your whole life freaking out.”

“So when did you two finally meet? Some kind of SHIELD all-hands?”

Clint made a face. “Ugh, don’t remind me. I think the only silver lining in this whole mess is that I’ll never have to go to one of those again.” He shook his head. “Nah, what happened was, he was out on a solo mission that went south, and the Director sent me after him.”

“By yourself?” Kate demanded.

“It was a sensitive situation,” Clint explained. “Somewhere we weren’t really supposed to be. We had to keep a low profile.”

“Kalashnikov,” Yolanda fake-coughed.

“Okay, fine, stealth isn’t my first line of defense,” Clint admitted, “but I can do it when I have to. And, you know, I wanted to impress the Director, right? Not to mention, everyone talked about Phil like he was, like, the quarterback of the SHIELD football team AND the prom king--”

“SHIELD had a football team?”

“No, I meant, you know. Metaphorically. Anyway. So I sort of felt like, um, if I could pull this off, get him out safe and all, I’d have it made, right?”

“Yeah,” Skye said. “Makes sense.”

“So anyway, I get there, and they’re holding him in this, like, fucking shitty business park thing. Swear to god, it was like a Dilbert strip come to life, cubicles and all, and I was this close to retreating and trying to figure out what went wrong with my intel when someone threw a stun grenade at my face.” He shrugged. “So at least I knew I was in the right place. We didn’t have a lot of intel, but I figured he’d be somewhere in the center, somewhere secure, so I just fought my way in and started checking rooms. Place was a mess, you know, like, copy paper and shell casings everywhere. Finally found a server room that was locked down extra hard. I picked the lock and came through, all ready to shoot some dudes, and I nearly got brained with a roly-poly chair.”

Skye giggled. “I bet I know where this is going.”
He grinned at her. “Yeah. I looked around and there was, like, a pile of dudes on the floor, and this guy is poised to hit me with an office chair that he’s still fuckin’ handcuffed to. He looks me up and down, sets the chair on the floor, gives me this little nod like we’re meeting in the break room getting coffee, and says—”

“Did he make a dad joke?” Skye looked around the table. “Did he do that with you guys, too?”

Clint chuckled. “He goes, ‘Agent Barton, I presume? I’m Phil Coulson. Have you got a handcuff key? These idiots lost theirs, and I’d rather not dislocate my thumb unnecessarily.’” He smiled to himself, remembering the scene; toppled server racks, a few of them smoking gently, the pile of dead and/or unconscious bad guys, some of them showing signs of ethernet cable garotting, and in the middle of it all Phil, sporting most of a blue suit, a gigantic shiner, and a rakish smirk.

Clint had taken one look and fallen pretty much instantly in lust. SHIELD prom king, indeed.

—

“So then what happened?” Kate jarred him from his reverie.

“I picked the lock on the handcuffs, and then we fought off another wave of dudes, and then we got the hell out of there,” Clint said. “It took us a week to get out of the country quiet, and by the time we got back to HQ, we were…” he trailed off, unable to think of a way to describe the mix of camaraderie, friendship, and desire that had grown between them in those adrenaline-packed days.

“BFFs?” Skye suggested.

“In luuuuuuuuurve?” Kate waggled her eyebrows.

“I… kinda both, yeah,” Clint admitted. “Fury took one look at us when we got back and laughed for five minutes straight, and then he said, ‘it’s nice to see you getting along, agents, because I have some joint projects in mind for you,’ and that was that.”

He missed those days, sometimes. He missed being that person, young and burning to prove himself and confident that he could. He missed the way it had felt to feel invincible, to feel like Phil was invincible, that together they could save the world and save each other, unstoppable in bed and out of it.

What he had now, though, was even better. His friends, his work, his life. And Phil, miraculously returned to him, a second chance to apply the lessons he had learned through the tempering fire of grief. Phil had been resurrected, but it felt like Clint had, too, and now every time he saw Phil, touched him, heard him, was unspeakably precious.

“We should send AC a selfie,” Skye said. “Show him what he’s missing.”

“Oooh, yeah!” Kate agreed. “Clint, you should take it, you’re on the end and your arms are longer than mine. Everybody lean in…”

It took several tries--what, Clint was an Avenger, not a photographer--but eventually he captured an image that met with Kate’s approval; everyone had their eyes open and Clint had kept his thumb out of shot.

“Text it to everyone,” Kate ordered, so Clint did. He was tempted to just add Phil to the group text, but… well. Phil’s number was secret for a reason, and it wasn’t Clint’s to give out, even to people he trusted.
He opened a new text to send the picture to Phil. “What should I say to him?” he asked the table at large.

“We’re saving you a seat at family dinner,” Kate said, then turned pink.

“Hashtag Taco Tuesday!” Skye suggested, and the two girls grinned at each other.

“Sounds good to me,” Edna said, and the others nodded.

Chapter Summary

A rare quiet moment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somehow, magically, Clint managed to find some time to spend with Phil only a week after they'd seen each other in the Hagerstown airport.

Some time in a bed. By themselves.

In Amsterdam.

It was heaven and Clint was fairly sure it’d come about through some infernal combination of Waarzegster, Melinda May, Maria Hill, and possibly Skye, finagling his and Phil’s schedules.

He probably ought to have worried, but it had been so long since he and Phil had managed time like this, free from the demands of work and world-saving. He could barely remember an interlude in Jamaica, back when they were first together-- and he might actually have dreamed it. So even though they only had 24 hours or so, Clint was determined to memorize every moment.

They stayed up late over rijsttafel, then wandered down backstreets by a canal, holding hands and talking about nothing. They’d even managed not to look over their shoulders for Hydra agents or US intelligence operatives more often than every third minute. And once in their room, their security set, they’d spent another hour or so testing the strength of the bedframe.

Phil would have to leave for his connecting flight before noon, but Clint figured that still gave them time for sleep, more sex, and coffee. He was debating in his head the merits of coffee before morning sex versus after as he came out of the bathroom, and paused.

“You keep looking at that, you’re gonna wear it out,” he said, trying to keep it light, not like he was mad at whatever was on Phil’s phone that was making him look so bleak.

Phil looked up, blushing, as Clint climbed back into bed.

“I wasn’t-- I was just--” he protested as Clint took the phone from his hands, and looked.

It was the picture Clint’d taken, of him and Edna and Basil and Kate and Skye, all grinning at the camera. The We’re saving you a seat was blurry, and Clint’s thumb came away wet when he swiped it over the screen.

When he looked up again, Phil was quiet, everything tucked away on his face.

“You could visit any time,” Clint said quietly. “They’re all real good at op sec by now; no one’s picked up on my visits. Not even Tony and Maria.”
“That’s not…” Phil sighed, shaking his head. “That’s not the problem. I just don’t have time. It’d be… self-indulgent. Every minute Hydra is making more plans, there are agents still out in the cold, and I need… I need resources, I need more people and supplies and safehouses and….”

“And a break,” Clint said, leaning over and kissing Phil’s neck, keeping up the nibble until he started to slump again.

“This is a break,” Phil protested. “I’m taking one right now.”

“This is one day, out of how many? You’re going to run yourself into the ground, Phil. You’ve been up and going since SHIELD fell.”

“So have you,” Phil said, turning his head to nose into Clint’s hair in a way that made him feel tingly all the way down to his toes.

“Not like you have,” Clint said. “I’m not Director of SHIELD. Phil, how hard is it to go through New Jersey on your way somewhere? You seem… I’m worried about you, okay? You used to have friends all over, everywhere-- god, I’ve got your black book and it’s enormous. Now you seem so, so… isolated.”

“I’m not isolated,” Phil protested. “I have you. And Melinda and Skye and--”

“And except for me they all report to you,” Clint interrupted, pulling back to look at Phil properly. There was a faint tension in his eyebrows, and Clint raised a thumb to smooth it away. “And I’m glad you have me, but you deserve way more. You-- look, okay? These guys and Nat, they kept me sane after you… after you died. Well, more or less sane, anyway. But I wouldn’t have made it without them after SHIELD fell. And hell, even though Tony complains I’m never there, he and Banner and Maria all got their high points, too.”

“I can’t see Stark--” Phil started, and Clint kissed him quiet.

“Yeah I know, I know. He’s way too goddamn high profile. That’s why I’m never at the Tower. But Edna and Basil and Kate are the opposite. And I… “ Clint paused, swallowing hard, “I wanna have you in all the parts of my life I can, okay? And they were parts of your life first anyway. I just… maybe I’m way off base, but I keep feeling like you’re scared to do it or something.”

Phil froze under his hands, and Clint felt his heart stop, too.

“I…” Phil paused, clearly struggling for a light tone. “I admit the prospect of Kate Bishop lecturing me is a little daunting.” He looked down, then back up, and Clint watched the remaining nonchalance drop from his face.

“This means a lot to you,” he said.

“Yes,” Clint replied, surprised at his own vehemence. He shook his head, trying to bleed a little of the sudden tension out of himself, and paused long enough to slide back down under the cool, fluffy duvet, taking Phil along with him.

He didn’t start speaking again until he had Phil snuggled up against him and was running fingers through his chest hair-- one of his favorite habits since the very first time he’d gotten to lie with Phil.

“I’m selfish,” he admitted to the top of Phil’s head, where his lips were pressed. “I need all the proof I can get you’re here, and you’re finally mine. I want people to know, to see, to… to know who you are and what we mean to each other and for me to be able to talk about that when
“You’re… when you’re gone.”

“Clint, I--” Phil started, sounding utterly horrified in a way that made no sense until Clint rewound his own speech.

“Oh! No. I mean… when you’re traveling. Jeez. Sorry, babe. That came out unnecessarily morbid.” Clint kissed his head, then gathered him in tighter, because while he hadn’t meant to imply anything about Phil dying again, now that he had thought of it, echoes of his old despair were rapidly swamping him.

“I’m sorry,” Phil said, reaching up to stroke down the back of his spine. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, I… it’s okay,” Clint sniffled. “It’s gonna come up sometimes, no one’s at fault. I just… I remember sitting there listening to the lawyer read your will and hearing what you wrote to Nat and then… wrote to me and… I couldn’t stand it. That there was no hint… that no one knew what I’d meant to you, or you to me. Even though it was just me and Nat and Nick and the lawyer. Don’t you dare say you’re sorry again,” Clint finished, feeling Phil’s mouth open.

Phil shut it.

When he opened it again, after several long moments where they lay quietly in the moonlight, both of them clutching each other like they were still suffering from a skin-drought, and their breathing slowly coming to match, Phil’s voice was gentle.

“After all the time I spent imagining us being together again, you’d think I’d be better at actually doing it,” he sighed.

“Um, I’m not having complaints about us doing it,” Clint said, because the atmosphere was getting awfully heavy. Phil chuckled smugly, and Clint felt his own heart lighten.

“Good to know,” Phil said. “But that’s not what I meant. I… don’t feel like we have a rhythm yet, do we? What we used to have--”

“Is gone, since that whole world is gone,” Clint said. “And we’re not those people anymore.”

“No,” Phil agreed, “we’re not. Though I like the new person you are just as well as the old. I’ll… it may not be right away, Clint, but I’ll see what I can do. I will go see them.”

He said it like he was telling Clint that extraction would be coming. While he appreciated that was the voice Phil used when he was going to do something come hell or high water, it seemed out of place for the conversation.

“Well if you want to start with someone less scary, how about Nat?”

“Natasha…” Phil rolled her name around on his tongue. “I miss her.”

“She’s missed you. I’d love to let her know you’re alive-- you know she’s safe.”

“How is she doing?” Phil asked, still sounding thoughtful.

“I wish I knew; we’ve talked on the phone but I haven’t seen her since before SHIELD fell.”

“You-- what?” Phil sounded absolutely scandalized. “But Clint!”

He shifted in bed, pulling away from Clint and rolling over onto his elbows, so he could look down into Clint’s face.
“Was that… that’s not because of me, is it?” He looked stricken.

“A little bit,” Clint confessed. “And a lot because of schedules. We’re never at the Tower at the same time, she’s still in DC a lot or with Maria. And I’m off doing Nick’s rescue work or I’m with you. But also I… I’m pretty sure if I see her she’ll somehow sniff you on me or something, right? And… well.”

The “well” was shorthand for the whole long, messy conversation they’d had about who Clint could and couldn’t talk about Phil to, without prior authorization. Natasha’d ended up on the “don’t” list until Phil could figure out how to handle it without compromising anyone. But that shouldn’t have taken him near this long.

“I never… I never meant you not to see her,” Phil said.

“So let’s go see her together,” Clint told him. Phil looked conflicted, but Clint thought he saw desire starting to win out over worry on his face. “Come on, Phil. If nothing else, if Nat kills you, you won’t have to worry about Kate doing it.”

“There is that,” Phil said, faintly. He took a deep breath, but when he looked at Clint, his face was clear and calm. “Let’s do it.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter starts on tumblr... now.
Clint was just wandering out of their hotel and onto Princengracht, slinging his duffel over his shoulder with one hand while texting with the other, when a man accosted him.

Well… when a man *tried* to accost him.

In Clint’s defense, he still half-expected Hydra every time he looked over his shoulder.

Also, it should be noted, that he realized the man was Phil halfway through his instinctive shove, and while he did end up slamming Phil into a wall, he followed it up with a kiss rather than a knee to the groin. It wasn’t exactly a chaste kiss, either; Clint was still caught between the afterglow of morning sex (they’d managed a round both before and after breakfast), and the disappointment of watching Phil walk out the door, on his way to wherever SHIELD wanted him next. So the kiss turned half into a hello and half into picking up where they’d left off, and Clint had gotten his leg right up close and personal with Phil’s groin after all before he remembered that they were very definitely in public.

Also, he was pretty sure they’d just been whistled at by two sailors, a college student, and an elderly lady. Maybe Skye had a point about them and public displays of affection after all.

Regretfully, Clint started to pull back, ignoring Phil’s little moan of protest with real effort.

“Sorry,” Phil said when his tongue was finally free, “I thought you’d seen me. Texting while walking is a horrible habit; you could end up in the canal.”

“I love you too,” Clint said, letting him go. “Just thought you’d be at Schipol by now.”

“I was supposed to be,” Phil agreed, wrinkling his nose. “But my flight was cancelled. Thought I’d surprise you… if you’re amenable to being surprised.”

“I’m always amenable to you,” Clint leered, and it earned him an amused snort that made his heart clench maybe a little more than it should. “And I’ve got a few hours. Lunch first, or find another place to be? I just checked out of the hotel, but we could always un-check out….”

“Lunch,” Phil said, “as amazing as the other idea sounds, I’m starving. And, no, not just for your cock.”

That did it. Clint collapsed into sniggers, leaning against Phil’s strong shoulder. He felt nearly weak with happiness, between the sun on his back, the warmth of Phil’s body and smell of his cologne filling his senses, and the sheer stupidity of the joke.
“And Skye thinks we’re adorable,” he managed finally. “It’s a good thing she’s never heard what you actually say to me, babe.”

“... yes,” Phil said, sounding vaguely horrified, “that’s probably a good idea. Shall we go? Maybe I’m anxious, but it feels like a miracle someone hasn’t interrupted us alrea--”

At that moment, Clint’s burner phone chose to start burbling in his pocket.

“Goddamnit,” Phil sighed.

Clint snorted at him, and answered it with a briefer-than-normal “What.”

“Birdie with a yellow bill, hopped up on my windowsill,” said the voice on the phone.

Clint swore, hard, and turned to Phil.

“Those IOUs of yours are really damned inconvenient sometimes.”

“Um,” said the voice, “that’s not the pass phrase.”

“Yeah I know, I know,” Clint told it, as Phil leaned in to listen. “Gimme a moment. I don’t have that one memorized.”

“Cocked a shining eye and said ‘I’m a frayed knot,’” Phil interrupted him, speaking into the phone.

“Seriously?” Clint mouthed at him.

“Coulson!” the voice said, sounding vaguely shocked. “Now that’s unexpected-- heard you were long dead and you’d given your black book to some other poor schmuck. But hey, lucky for me.”

“Yeah, Sam? Why?”

Phil took the burner phone from Clint, and put it to his own ear. Clint, in his turn, leaned closer.

“I need to call in my IOU.”

“Can it possibly wait? This is really not a good time.”

“It’s not for me, either,” said ‘Sam,’ whoever he was. “That’s why I’m calling it in. C’mon-- you promised. A six-pack and a cover-up. Can you do it?”

“Depends. Where?”

“Miami. Soon as you can.”

Clint and Phil looked at each other, and Phil muted the phone.

“I was heading back stateside anyway,” Clint said. “I can deal with it for you.”

“No,” Phil sighed, “if I know Sam, this is going to take more than one of us to do safely. I’ll work it out with Melinda and go with you.”

“You’re sure?”

“Sure I’m sure,” Phil said, with a reassuringly wry little smile. “Anyway, didn’t you want to do a few of these together? No time like the present.”
They landed in Miami in the early evening, Phil grumbling under his breath all the while about flying commercial. Clint refrained from reminding Phil that he, at least, hadn’t had to check his bow case, with all the attendant dangers that brought. This time, at least, the baggage hadn’t been lost, and he was smart enough these days to travel with the hard case, so while his luggage smelled weirdly of fish sauce when he picked it up, that was the worst of the damage.

Clint stood at the taxi stand outside the airport, pissing off the taxi drivers while he took in the humid air and the sunset, and Phil texted his friend Sam.

“Okay,” Phil said after a moment, “Sam gave us an address. He wants to introduce us to some friends. Also, he says he hopes we like yogurt.”

“Well that’s a deal-breaker,” Clint replied, smiling through it. How stupid was it that even getting to go on a quick little side-mission like this one seemed likely to be with Phil was making him giddy? Back in the Strike Team Delta days it would have been a normal Tuesday night. But this had Clint practically bouncing on his heels-- another IOU, another chance to learn about Phil… and this time, he’d get to have Phil with him when he did it, instead of the dusty memories.

The two of them piled into one of the waiting cabs, gave the driver the address, and Phil leaned back, looking out the window.

“It’s been quite awhile since I last saw Sam,” he said, looking out at the boulevard as the taxi snaked in and out of traffic. “Not that he was going by that name the last time I saw him, either. In fact, he-- wait… Clint, do you see--”

Phil never got to finish the sentence, because a large black SUV slammed into the taxi, spinning it around, over the median, and into a series of newspaper boxes before it finally came to a smoking stop. Several really classic henchmen poured out of the SUV, drawing weaponry.

“Oh, man, does this bring back memories,” Phil chirped.

Clint was already pulling his bow out of her case, adrenaline starting to sizzle through his veins.

“Just like old times,” he agreed.

Three days later and still sadly yogurtless, Phil sighed wearily and said it again.

“Yeah, I know,” Clint replied, “now hold still. I can nearly reach your wrists.” He shifted, straining backwards against the ropes that bound him to his chair, and tried to stretch the last half-inch it would take him to be able to grab at Phil’s bonds. Phil, who was bound to another chair placed back-to-back with Clint’s, shifted himself.

“I do appreciate it when they use the good ropes,” he said. “There’s at least that. The jute stuff chafes.”

“Ugh, what I hate are zip ties,” Clint agreed. He’d managed to grasp one end of the knot with his middle and forefingers, and was starting to tug. “They bite. Twist a bit please, can you?”

“Sure,” Phil agreed, then froze. “Babe… do you… smell smoke?”

“Um,” Clint said, because now that Phil mentioned it, he did smell smoke. It was hard to tell over
the general scent of mildew, decay, brine and fish guts in the warehouse, but it was definitely there, and getting stronger by the minute. “Shit. Got a direction?”

“Starting to curl under the door across from me,” Phil said. “Maybe speed up the getting us loose process.”

“Can’t,” Clint sighed. “They’re wet. Gonna take time. Maybe we pull an Indiana Jones and start shifting towards my door?”

They were nearly to the far wall, and the fire had only just started to lick up the crates on Phil’s side of the warehouse, when the door not covered in flames burst open, followed by a hail of gunfire outside.

“Clint Barton, answer your goddamn phone for once,” Nat snapped at him, before she turned around and fired back at whoever was outside. “And don’t you dare tell me you were all tied up.”

Behind him, Clint felt Phil freeze.

“You’re no fun,” Clint told her, hoping his voice was as teasing as it would normally be under the circumstances. He’d been trying to arrange a meeting with her for the last few days; she must have gotten worried when he stopped returning texts. “Can I borrow a knife?”

“You’ve gotten soft in your old age,” Nat told him, but she started to pull one from her boot. “I’d better do this for you; if I wait we’ll be here forever.” She fired one last salvo out the door and stalked over to Clint, moving around him to cut him loose.

“You can’t rush an artist,” Clint said, only half paying attention to the banter. He was too busy waiting to see if Phil would manage to chime in, but Phil was so silent he might have been dead. In fact, Nat got as far as

“Aren’t you going to introduce me--” before she evidently recognized Phil.

Clint heard the knife clatter to the floor.

“Hello Natasha.” Phil’s voice was so gentle it circled back ‘round and cut. “I’ve missed you.”

--

So as it turned out, it was a fireworks warehouse.

“Do you think this is enough for Sam’s cover-up?” Clint asked, as purple sparks rained down over the dock.

“It had better be,” Phil said, rubbing at his chafed wrists. Clint grinned at him, a bubble of rightness in his chest; despite everything else that had happened, there was no place in the world that felt quite so homey as looking at a spectacular explosion with Phil and Nat beside him.

“If you two are quite finished,” Natasha said, and Clint winced at her tone, drawn tight as the cables on a bridge.

Phil’s face did something very complicated, remorse and worry and anxiety and, Clint thought, an echo of his own inappropriate glee at having the band back together. When he spoke, his voice was so gentle it made Clint’s chest ache.

“I owe you an explanation,” he said. “But you don’t owe me anything, not even listening to it, so
we’ll do this your way.”

“Neither of you are getting out of this that easily,” she said. “Come on.”

They exchanged concerned looks and followed her as she spun on her heel and stalked off. Clint slipped his hand into Phil’s, and felt quietly smug at the way a couple degrees of tension fell off his shoulders. Nat was mad, but she was still there, and that meant things would be okay. Clint would have been a lot more worried if she’d put on a front of not being bothered and then left; she was still letting her reactions through, which meant they were both still trusted, still family. They’d work it out.

She led them to a nearby car, a silver Corolla that looked exactly like about a third of the other cars in any given parking lot, slightly but not unusually dirty, with a Jiffy Lube sticker on the windshield; a perfect spy car.

“In the front,” she told Phil, and he nodded. Clint sympathized; he’d spent a lot of time sure Phil was going to disappear if he looked away too.

They were all quiet as Natasha drove them to a safehouse--one of hers, another encouraging sign of trust--though Clint could see her eyes flicking sideways in the rear-view mirror every few seconds, to where Phil was sitting, soot-streaked and rumpled and real. Clint slouched forward in his seat so he could nudge the back of Phil’s seat with his knee encouragingly.

The safehouse was a midpriced suburban condo, and Nat pulled the car into the tiny garage and led them up into the kitchen, which looked like a sample home more than anything, right down to the bowl of fake fruit on the counter.

“First aid?” she asked.

“Just bruises and rope burn,” Clint said.

“Maybe a little smoke inhalation,” Phil added.

She pulled open a kitchen drawer--Clint caught a glimpse of a terrifyingly sharp corkscrew, a package of zip ties, and a switchblade--and dug out a bottle of Advil and a half-empty tube of bruise balm. Two sealed bottles of water and two protein bars joined them on the kitchen island, and Clint’s throat went tight when he saw that she had Clint’s favorite chocolate chip and Phil’s favorite pina colada flavors stocked. If she’d been too mad, she’d have given them oatmeal raisin.

“Pills,” she said, “then talk.” She crossed her arms over her chest and watched as they perched on the barstools side by side, downed the painkillers and most of the water.

“This isn’t Clint’s fault,” Phil blurted. “He didn’t know until right before everything with Hydra blew up, and then I asked him not to tell anyone until I could make contact myself.”

“I’m assuming your deep-cover mission was Hydra-related,” Nat said, “which, I suppose--”

“Nat, no,” Clint interrupted her. “It wasn’t like that, it wasn’t fake, he didn’t do that to--” me, he didn’t say. “He didn’t do that.”

Phil’s foot snuck over from his own stool to Clint’s, nudging next to his on the footrest, obscurely comforting.

Natasha cocked her head to the side, listening.
“I did die, Natasha,” Phil said. “For… for some time. Apparently. The Director had a secret project. Resurrection technology.”

“Creepy experimental alien resurrection technology,” Clint clarified. “Since blown up.”

“There were… issues,” Phil continued, looking down at his fingers, twisting together on the countertop. “Side effects. Apparently the solution required a partial memory wipe.”

Natasha flinched. Clint wanted to go to her, hug her and hold her, but he knew they needed to get this part over with first.

“I wasn’t fully recovered for more than a year, and by then… well. Fury was insistent I stay classified, and you had already--as far as you knew I was dead and buried. I…” Phil buried his face in his hands, elbows on the counter, back slumped, and Clint put a hand on his shoulder, holding back his impulse to carry him off somewhere and spend half the day kissing him until he stopped looking like that.

“When you think that a door has been closed,” Natasha said slowly, “it can be difficult to open it again, even if the room behind that door is somewhere you very much want to be.”

“You had my letters,” Phil said. “My last words, my effects. And there were so many questions I didn’t know the answers to. Still don’t. The treatment… TAHITI. There aren’t exactly long-term studies. I was never sure I hadn’t come back… wrong.”

“But you didn’t,” Clint said firmly. “It was fucked up, how they did it, but they did do it, and you’re back, and you’re fine, and you’re gonna be around a good long time.”

Phil looked over at him, his eyes soft and full of pain. “Clint,” he said, and Clint hated that tone, the I-regret-to-inform-you tone. “We can’t know--”

“Do you want to be here?” Clint interrupted him. He could see Natasha watching them in his peripheral vision, but kept his focus on Phil. “Do you want to be with me, do you want to have your friends in your life again?” He knew the answer, he did, but it didn’t stop his heart from pounding.

“More than anything in the world,” Phil said, his voice catching.

“And the one thing I can tell you with 100% certainty is that not letting yourself have the people you love does not do shit to make it hurt any less when you lose them, so all you can do is go for whatever you can get while you can.”

Phil looked over at him, eyes red. “I know,” he said. “I’m so sorry. To both of you. Part of it wasn’t voluntary, but part of it was, and that part was… mostly it was me being afraid. And you both deserved better of me.”

Natasha let out a long sigh, then came around the counter and tugged at the back of Phil’s collar. “Stand up,” she told him, and the minute he did, she hugged him fiercely, so hard she squeezed a startled huff of air out of him. He stood frozen for a minute, something broken-open and aching in his face, and then wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair.

“I’m not giving you the apartment back,” Natasha said into Phil’s chest. “I just got it set up the way I like it.”
“I’m glad,” he said. “Oh god, Natasha. I missed you.”

She didn’t say anything, but her arms went even tighter.

“Group hug,” Clint said, trying to sound goofy and missing by a mile, mostly on account of how he was tearing up a little at having them both there at the same time. He approached from the side and wrapped his arms around them both, breathing in gunpowder and vanilla, and for a long, quiet moment, everything was perfect.

“Oh,” Clint said, because leaving well enough alone was not really in his skill set. “Also, Fury put Phil in charge of rebuilding SHIELD on the DL.”

“Bozhe moi,” Natasha muttered, and Phil laughed, and that made Clint laugh, and then Natasha started up; they still had a lot of talking to do, he knew, and some of the sore spots would take a while to work out, but they were there, together (and alive!) at last, and just then, that was everything.

---

“You know what,” Clint said a while later, as the three of them were headed in the door of a fusion restaurant right on the bay, “I never did get to meet Sam.”

Phil stopped in front of the empty host station and turned to blink at Clint.

“Sure you did,” he said. “The guy in the cheap suit, stinking of Paco Rabanne? Oh so conveniently stumbled through the hostage swap?”

“That was Sam?” Clint asked, desperately trying to remember what the guy had looked like. “That has me rethinking the entire yacht thing. But it doesn’t count.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Definitely not,” Natasha agreed, coming up next to Clint and sliding an arm through his. “There were no Phil stories. I liked the Phil stories.” Clint squeezed her arm lightly; he hadn’t been entirely sure she wasn’t just humoring him on their IOU hunts. Even if it had been mostly for him, he was glad she’d gotten some solace out of it too.

“Sam’s Phil stories are… better left redacted, really.” Phil said, but his eyebrows were doing that tilted-up thing they did when someone surprised him with something nice, like a new Glock.

“Even better,” Natasha said. “Perhaps we can find your Sam again, after dinner.”

“I’m owed yogurt,” Clint added. “With interest.”

“What, like… whey?” Phil said, then spun to the host station as a chic woman trotted up and looked the three of them over. “Jiminez, party of three,” he told her. “What’s the wait?”

“For you?” she replied, looking them over with pursed lips, “about fifteen seconds then out through the kitchen.”

“What?” Clint asked, straightening up. Natasha let her arm fall from his, and he felt her shift. The woman glared at him.

“Sam says thank you,” she continued, “but you were noisier than expected, and we can’t keep everyone off your tail. Especially not once you brought the Black Widow into it. That was not in
the plan.”

“Well, if someone would answer his phone,” Natasha grumbled, under her breath.

“Okay… so out through the kitchens and… what?” Phil asked. “Have you got transportation or are we on our own?”

“There’s a cigarette boat waiting,” the woman said. “Michael will take you as far as he can, then divert suspicion. I’ll take you to your table, come with me.” This last was said in a carrying tone of voice, and she scooped up three menus and turned on her heel.

Phil, Clint, and Natasha exchanged looks as they moved past the tables.

“I’ve met her,” Natasha whispered to Clint. “In Belfast.”

“D’you trust her?” he whispered back. Natasha considered.

“I don’t not trust her,” she said, “but… I am not dressed for climbing into boats.”

Clint nodded, and tapped Phil on the shoulder.

“Mmm?” Phil said, and Clint flashed him “plan B” in ASL.

He nodded, then bumped into a passing busboy, scattering plates and wineglasses everywhere.

As the three of them took advantage of the commotion to vault the bar and head for the far end, Clint felt an involuntary grin creep across his face. *Man* was it good to have Strike Team Delta back, even if only for a night.

Chapter End Notes

The Sam and Michael that Clint did not get to meet are from Burn Notice, along with Fiona in a cameo at the end.

The next chapter of Passepartout is up [here](#).
On the Beach

Chapter by Kathar

Chapter Summary

Getting home from Miami, Clint and Phil end up detoured... again.

Chapter Notes

Hi! The chapters seem to be going long these days, so... assume about a week between posts. As always, we're up to date every week day on tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey Phil,” Clint said, as they watched Natasha disappear on a scooter three days later, their arms wrapped around each others’ waists as they waved her goodbye, “when I said you needed a break? I swear I didn’t mean like this.”

They were standing on the porch of the creaky, abandoned little beach-side bungalow that had hidden them for the past 48 hours, and was going to hide them for another day or so until they finally deemed that Natasha’d drawn the pursuit far enough off that it was safe to call May for a pick-up. Phil was, Clint thought, keeping a mental tally of everything his friend Sam was going to owe him for this one.

“I know you didn’t,” Phil sighed, dropping his arm from Clint’s waist and wrapping it around his own. “I… it’ll be all right.”

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself, and Clint looked over to find a blank, kind of in-drawn, look on his face.

“It really will,” Clint told him. “Melinda’s got it covered, you gave her really, astoundingly thorough directions before we left. I thought she was going to stab you with your own pen.”

Phil snorted.

“And Skye’ll take care of what she doesn’t, and you’ve got Koenig to make sure they eat, and Trip and everyone-- they all know what they’re doing, Phil. They’ve got a good Director. You’ve gotta trust them on their own for a few days. It’s not like they’re going to get into fights on the streets of DC or anything.”

“You sure about that?” Phil asked, sounding skeptical-- and on reflection, Clint had to agree.

“Okay, they’ll win any fights they get into on the streets of DC. Have some faith. And… have a beer. It’s lukewarm, but it’s wet.”

Phil looked back towards the bungalow’s interior, which had no electricity to speak of but plenty of airy, shady spots to lounge around in.
“Yeah,” he sighed, sounding more resigned and less relaxed than Clint really wanted, “yeah. All right.” He dropped his hands and wandered indoors, letting his fingers drag on the entryway table in loose circles as he went.

“Hey,” Clint said, following him, “if you’re really that worried, we can cut out tonight, take our chances. Any accidental mobsters we lead to SHIELD’s door, your people can probably deal with. Or mine, depending on whose door we lead them to.”

“No,” Phil said, turning, “no-- there’s too many ways it could go wrong. We’re stuck here for now.” He flopped down on the couch with a sigh and stared morosely out at the beach, visible through the french doors.

Clint shivered, an itchy feeling he couldn’t quite define making its way up his spine. Phil was still sulking, his index finger digging into the wood arm of the couch and making an unpleasant little scrtch, scrtch, scrtch noise. Clint clenched his fist to keep from going over and slapping it away and-- oh.

Irritation.

That was what that itchy feeling was.

How long had it been since he’d last been irritated at Phil, years? Well-- yes, since Phil had been supposedly dead for about two, and before that Clint hadn’t seen enough of him to be irritated by for at least another two. He wasn’t sure if he was appalled at himself for being irritated by someone he’d only barely found again-- or if he was relieved. Because you couldn’t be irritated at a dead guy, could you? There was something… domestic to it.

And fucking hell, would Phil stop already?

“I’m sorry it didn’t go as planned,” Clint started, his voice coming out tighter than he expected, “but I’m not the one who used too much C4. This is a joint fuck-up, Phil. You don’t have to take it out on me.”

“I’m not,” Phil snapped, rounding on him. “I’m just expressing general frustration, Clint. Which shouldn’t be that much of a shock since I’m currently supposed to be rebuilding an intelligence agency from scratch and instead I’m stuck in a rickety bungalow in South Florida without even a goddamn hotplate and I’m not saying it’s your fault, because it’s not, but this is why I don’t take breaks.”

“Well you keep on not taking breaks, Mr. High and Mighty SHIELD Director,” Clint spat back, deciding that if Phil wasn’t going to bother to keep his temper, neither was he, “and you’re going to have a goddamn breakdown. Fat lot of good you’ll do SHIELD then.”

And then he bit his lip, because he didn’t think he’d ever yelled at Phil quite that way before-- and from the way Phil had turned pale and splotchy on him, he was pretty sure Phil was as shocked as he was. As well he should be; it wasn’t like they didn’t used to argue, from time to time. But this was the first time Clint thought he’d done it from a place of, for lack of a better word, entitlement.

“Is it just SHIELD we’re talking about?” Phil rasped when he finally spoke, his voice nearly too quiet to hear. “Because if it’s you… if it… if you don’t…” he huffed a breath, and started up again, looking like the words coming out were poison to him, “if you can’t handle that this is my life now, I… I… I don’t know what to tell you, Clint.”

“Don’t you?” Clint asked, feeling his stomach drop; Phil looked miserable.
“No,” Phil said, looking up at Clint with swimming eyes. “I do. But I don’t want to say it.”

“Phil—” The world was unsteady under his feet, all of a sudden. Phil sounded… like no way Clint’d ever heard him. Despairing and frustrated and… and something else, underneath it, something that sounded an awful lot like fear. And Clint hadn’t heard fear in Phil’s voice hardly at all. “Are you… are you telling me you want to… you don’t want to… anymore?”

Phil’s eyes closed, and he heaved in a breath--

And nodded.

… And then shook his head, just as Clint was opening his mouth to say-- well, Clint didn’t know what he was planning to say, because heartbreak had stolen his language.

“No,” Phil said, as much to himself as to Clint. “No, no no, I promised myself I wouldn’t lie to you if I-- if I could help it.” He looked back up at Clint, his face strained, and twisted his fingers together to stop his hands from shaking. “I do want you. I will always want you. I… am not sure… I don’t think….”

Clint realized his own hands had come up to press at his mouth, and he tried to drop them-- they made it as far as his throat. As he waited for Phil to continue, he rubbed his own collarbone fitfully with his thumb, as if he could soothe his pulse that way. It didn’t particularly work.

“What are you saying then?” Clint asked. “What don’t you think?”

Phil sighed.

“Wanting doesn’t always mean getting,” he said, shrugging. “I want so much-- I want that lifetime we never got. But… what if it isn’t possible?”

Clint felt like he somehow he'd stepped off a cliff without realizing it, back at the start of their fight-- or onto a landmine. Yeah, he knew their unplanned break was getting absurd-- Clint had obligations of his own, thank you-- but Phil's reaction seemed a tad drastic.

Still, Clint couldn't help that now, he had to get them out of whatever this was they'd stumbled into first.

“Well, I admit the condo in New York seems pretty far-fetched, since I know for a fact Talbot confiscated it,” Clint replied, trying to keep his voice light but only managing to strain it. “But otherwise I don’t get it, Phil, we’ve had this conversation more than once. Hell, we had it with Natasha. No, our life isn’t going to be what we thought it would but… if you want me, then we’ll make it something new. I’m not sure what happened to make you doubt that now. I mean, I know I’m not who I used to be, or you, but you said-- you told me-- we agreed we just needed time to settle into what it was going to look like.”

“Time.” For just one word, it held a heavy load of bitterness. Phil shook his head again, looking sour. “Time.”

“Yes,” Clint said. “Just time. And effort, but when have either you or I ever backed down from a fight?”

“Clint.” Phil stood up, brushing off his knees, and stuck his hands in his pocket. He seemed a little steadier, now that he and Clint were even-- no one looking down or up. “I can fight as hard as I want, and I might not win. Are you prepared for that?”
“I don’t understand--” Clint started, but Phil cut him off.

“Because every time I bring up any hint of the reality of our situation, any time I mention that we don’t know if I… what the future will bring, you cut me off. And I wonder-- is that because you’re afraid I’ll back out right now-- or that you would, if you really let yourself think about it?”

“I suppose,” Clint said, when he had finally swallowed back the bile in his throat, “that’s a fair question… all things considered. I’d hoped… I’d hoped you’d actually believed me when I told you I was in this, this time, no matter what. That…”

Memories swamped him, for a moment, and he had to stop to force them down-- he couldn’t afford to remember that awful time after Budapest, after he’d given Phil up-- after he’d cut and run. Those months where every time he’d look at Phil, even out of the corner of his eye, he’d remember everything he’d cut himself off from and it would feel like the world had suddenly been drained of oxygen. When he’d first begun to cling to the promise of “when we retire” because it was the only way he could stay strong.

“… I’m not doing that again,” Clint managed, through a thick voice. “I promise you, Phil.”

“Please don’t,” Phil told him, in that terrible gentle voice of his. “I need you to… to be able to reevaluate, if you have to. Because I… I should. But I don’t think I’m strong enough to. So you have to do it for us. If you need to promise me anything, Clint, promise me that.”

He looked so earnest Clint nearly did, just to clear the worry off his face. But Phil had never had to bury Clint. He’d never walked through orange groves talking about moments-with and moments-without like he wasn’t trying to re-stack the building blocks of his world while missing half the set. Of all the things Phil could ask him, he’d found the one thing Clint didn’t think he could do.

“Phil, I know what I’m doing,” Clint told him. “And I love you. And I want to be with you for as long as I get. And I can prove it to you.” His hand dove into his pocket as he said it, even though he knew he wasn’t going to find the rings there-- he’d carried them for so long, that it felt like a self-betrayal to realize that they weren’t there. He’d put them in a little pocket in his go-bag, instead, so that he wouldn’t be tempted to propose all the time.

“You don’t have to prove it,” Phil said, looking both sad and fond, “I know it. And I hope you know I love you, too, but Clint, sometimes, love just--”

“NO.”

All right, it came out kind of scandalized, but Clint felt it was justified.

“Okay, see, this is you cutting me off again,” Phil said.

“No, this is me keeping you from quoting Patti Smyth, because there’s no call for that, Phil, that’s playing dirty. I get what you’re trying to say, okay? Sometimes, love… I mean, there’s reasons why… you can love somebody too much and-- oh goddamnit. See what you did? I can’t even make a fucking point without it being a pop song. How am I supposed to have a serious argument with you now?” Clint asked, throwing up his hands in frustration.

But really, now-- it was a rule: no using pop songs in arguments. Godwin’s law. No, wait, not Godwin’s law-- that was Nazis, which ironically, given Hydra, neither of them had brought up. It was a different law. Barton’s law. Anyway.

“I guess you can’t,” Phil agreed, and oh, there was a seed of amusement in his voice again at last, even though he still looked far from himself.
“You understand that you don’t win just because I tapped out first, right, Phil?” Clint asked, narrowing his eyes. “I’m not going away just because you got my brain twisted up. I know what I want, and I’m way too stubborn for that.”

“I know,” Phil said. “It’s one of many reasons I love you.”

It was said so helplessly, so fondly, that Clint gave up.

“Still together?” he asked Phil, just to be sure, and Phil nodded.

“Yes. I’m not ever going to… I mean, unless you… hell. I’m going to stop talking now. Just: yes.”

“Okay.” Relief made him speechless for a moment, and he nodded through it until he found his voice again. “Then we’re done arguing for tonight. But babe--” he said, just as Phil was starting to relax. Phil stiffened again immediately, apparently seeing something in his face. “I don’t know where all this anxiety came from, but don’t think I didn’t notice something more going on in your head than you were telling me.”

“It’s… just SHIELD stuff,” Phil told him, waving it off. “Promise.”

Like hell it was, Clint thought. Like hell. But he confined himself to saying:

“We’ll see.” And then his stomach rumbled, reminding him they hadn’t eaten since breakfast. “And… now sandwiches, I think. I hope you like peanut butter.”

“Well, it beats nothing,” Phil said, and then walked over to Clint and leaned his head on Clint’s shoulder. Clint took a moment to let his heart unclench, then wrapped his arms around Phil, and they stayed there until Clint’s stomach repeated its request.

“Go make dinner,” Phil mumbled into Clint’s neck. “Is it alright if I take a walk on the beach?”

“Yeah,” Clint told him. “I know you’re going stir crazy. Go walk it off.”

“I’m going something all right,” Phil muttered, and kissed Clint on the cheek.

Clint watched him walk out the french doors and start down towards the sand, and closed his eyes, still unsure what had just happened and how they’d managed to survive it.

“It’s just nerves,” he muttered to himself. “Just nerves. We’ll be alright.”

And he went into the kitchen to make sandwiches. After all, he thought as he spread peanut butter on squishy convenience store bread, they’d survived Phil’s actual death. How much worse could it get?

---

Clint waited about ten minutes after he’d finished the sandwiches, then started eating his own, standing over the counter. When, a few bites and a large bottle of water later, Phil still wasn’t back, Clint poked at the remaining sandwich, and considered.

Phil was a fairly quiet, reserved man, or at least he liked to present himself that way. But Clint had known him for many years, and it had slowly become clear to him that underneath the surface, Phil could occasionally an overly dramatic idiot.

Sometimes it took an endearing form-- his obsession with Captain America and his early spy gadgets collection, for instance, or his fondness for truly bad puns. (Or the way he’d turned an
entire safe deposit vault into a hope chest for Clint.) A few times, though, Clint had noticed a tendency in Phil to, for lack of a better word, *sulk*, like he had been tonight before Clint stepped in it. And after Phil was tired of sulking, he didn’t seem to know how to get himself out of it.

It was easy enough for Clint; he just decided he’d been stupid, told the victim of his bad mood as much, and made it up to them as best he could. Coffee was usually his best bet with Phil, for instance-- at least, once kisses were off the table.

But Phil… Phil got embarrassed. Once, after about two weeks of little sideways glances and deep sighs but no direct communication, Phil had finally confessed to Clint that he’d wanted to stop, he just couldn’t figure out how talking worked anymore. It’d been perversely, stupidly endearing (and that had been post-kissing times, so Clint had been left to run off and find the biggest, strongest espresso he could.)

Clint was espresso-less now, and he couldn’t kiss Phil until he found him, and they didn’t have time to waste while he waited to find out if Phil had finally gotten a handle on his shit. So he picked up the peanut butter sandwich, tucked another bottle of water under his arm, and went out to find his partner.

---

The sun had set not long ago, and stars were starting to venture out above the tops of the trees. Clint shined a pocket light on the steps and across the path down to the beach, stepping carefully as packed dirt and leaves turned into soft sand. Midway down the path, he noticed little squiggles here and there, the lollipop doodles Phil had taken to sketching on occasion when his mind was elsewhere.

By the time he reached full sand, the doodles had started to fill the path, except where Phil’s footsteps had erased them. Clint paused, where Phil had, his own feet filling Phil’s footprints, and looked around, a lot less fondly than he had a moment ago. Whatever this was, it wasn’t the equivalent of little pen-and-ink drawings of Cap’s shield or Clint’s latest bow in the margins of Phil’s notebook.

Clint raised his light, shining it up and down the beach, and what he saw took his breath away. The scrawling continued in a fairly narrow path, winding slightly, until it reached the tideline, where the sand was packed and damp. There, Phil had apparently found the right medium for his… whatever this was… because the entire liminal zone was filled with circles and lines etched in complex patterns, some so light they were nearly invisible, but some done so emphatically Phil’d sprayed bits of sand around the rings.

It was completely, aggressively alien, nothing Clint could ever have hoped to experience before-- except that some little, niggling, part of his brain said that he *had*. And yes, these were Phil’s doodles, just overgrown like a cancer, multiplied beyond anything sane.

Clint swallowed, clenched his light more tightly in one hand and his sandwich in the other, and followed them.

He found Phil around a little hump of trees, still etching with a long stick, his gaze focused on the sand in front of him and his face blank.

It would have taken a much slower man than Clint not to put it together, then. What had Fury said about the survivors of TAHITI? Insanity, compulsive behavior, hypergraphia…. If this didn’t qualify, Clint wasn’t sure what the fuck would.
“Phil?” he asked gently, and got no response.

“Phil?” a little louder this time, but Phil just moved backwards again and dug his stick firmly into the sand.

Clint walked right up to him, then, close enough to lean forward and kiss-- but he stopped short of putting a hand on Phil, telling himself he just didn’t know what would happen if someone took Phil out of his fugue state by force.

Instead, Clint sat down on a nearby piece of driftwood, and waited.

Chapter End Notes

New chapter begins Monday on tumblr. Yes, we'll make it better. Maybe worse first. There's some talking to do. But better by the end!
Interlude With Sandwich

Chapter by Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

Clint finally knows what Phil has been hiding. Where do they go from here?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All the stars were out, and several satellites were drifting slowly by in their orbits, before Phil finally stopped, sighed, and looked up-- and then his face fell, horribly, as he saw the extent of his work. As Clint tried to think of what to say, Phil turned back towards the bungalow-- and spotted Clint.

If anything, his face crumpled even further, and Clint was pretty sure his own heart crumpled with it.

“Hey,” he said, willing his voice to come out something like normal, “I brought your sandwich.”

“Clint.” Phil’s voice was just as wrecked as his face. “I can explain--” he swallowed hard, and looked around at the geometric insanity beneath his feet-- “well, to an extent. I know it looks bad.”

“It’s not bad?” Clint asked, despite himself, and Phil hunched further in on himself.

“It’s not good,” he admitted. “I’m just… not sure yet how bad it is.”

“Well clearly the hypergraphia’s back,” Clint said, more than done dancing around the topic now that he’d figured out what it was they’d been two-stepping around while fighting, “and I don’t imagine that’s exactly good.”

Phil whipped his head up.

“You knew about the--” his voice cracked. “How-- did Nick tell you?”

“Babe,” Clint said patiently, “I told you we talked.”

And then he paused, rethinking what he was about to say, because Phil’s evident relief on hearing the word “babe” just hurt.

“Jesus, just-- come sit and eat, Phil. And have a drink.” Clint patted the section of log next to him, and Phil shuffled over, still looking abashed. When he he sank down onto the log at last, Clint passed him first the sandwich, then the water.

“Clint, I--” Phil started.

“Eat,” Clint growled, glaring at Phil until he finally gave in, took a bite, and chewed. Happy now? Phil’s eyebrow said, and Clint felt himself relax a little. If Phil was capable of eyebrow sign again, he must be starting to settle a little. He still looked nervous, yes, but it had a different quality to it
than it had in the bungalow. Phil wasn’t being furtive anymore; his anxiety was pretty clearly all
directed towards what Clint was going to do next.

What Clint was going to do next, Clint decided, was scootch over on the log and press his side up
against Phil’s.

“You keep eating,” he told Phil, “and lemme tell you what I think.”

“Okay,” Phil said, around a mouthful of sandwich, still watching Clint warily. There was tension
all up and down his body where it pressed Clint’s, and Clint half wanted to reach out and stroke his
back until it all left. On the other hand, Clint also half wanted to throttle him for letting Clint find
out his partner might be going insane like this, so instead of doing either he knotted his fingers
together and concentrated on keeping his breathing even.

What he mostly wanted, really, was to go back to the moment before he’d seen Phil’s scribblings
on the beach. But not even Tony Stark had managed a time machine, yet.

Clint let his breath out and thought, again, of Charlie Crews and his oranges, and his mostly-empty
house that Ted filled for him. Of Nick Fury and Waarzegster, who seemed to have had a love
affair, before SHIELD fell, where they barely met or touched. Of his own self, ten years gone,
walking away from Phil rather than facing the depth of his feelings. Of Phil’s full vault and empty
life.

“Here’s what I think,” Clint said after another inhale. “I think that the reason you haven’t wanted to
see Edna and Basil and Kate and all was because you knew that you were starting to have…
episodes. Side effects of TAHTITI. I think that was the reason you kept putting off telling Nat you
were alive. And… I think that’s why you were so nervous tonight. You must have felt one coming
on. Right so far?”

“Clint,” Phil said, and that was all. Clint decided it meant he was on the right track, and kept going.

“I think that it must have been happening for a little, and that you’re scared—” Clint tried not to let
his voice crack with his own fear—“that it’s going to get worse, and you’re going to end up like the
other poor bastards who needed a full memory wipe. Except… that’s not really an option for you,
is it?”

Phil shook his head.

“Don’t know if we could recreate it,” he rasped. “Even if we could… no idea if it would take
anymore. And… I don’t want to.” He stared down at his hands, still holding the half-eaten
sandwich. “Does that make me selfish?”

Clint reached out and put a hand on Phil’s thigh, squeezing lightly, feeling the warm, tight muscle
beneath his palm.

“I have no idea,” he said. “I remember, when Nick told me that had been an option, that I
wondered what I’d have thought if I ever found out you were alive, but not… not you anymore.
And I couldn’t… I couldn’t manage to wrap my head around it. Still can’t, really. Anyway, it’s
not… it’s not relevant. You’re not nearly that far gone.”

“Yet.”

“Or maybe ever,” Clint said firmly. “We’re talking about now, Phil, not that.”

“You can’t split it off like that,” Phil told him, setting down the sandwich in order to close his own
hand around Clint’s. It was shaking. “It’s not… it’s not getting better. The episodes are getting more frequent, and I can’t hold them back like I used to.”

“Just how long is that, that ‘used to’?” Clint asked, feeling panic begin to set in against his will. He swallowed it down and rubbed his thumb against Phil’s thigh like a worry stone. “How long have you been… doing this?”

Phil ducked his head, a sharp gesture, and looked off down the beach.

“Since our first… that first night at the Playground,” he admitted. “I--I woke up surrounded by carvings and all I could think was that it wasn’t fair.” He laughed, short and bitter. “Like some kind of child. I just-- I’d only just gotten you back, you were there, in my bed, you said you loved me again--”

“I never stopped,” Clint said. “Phil, never .”

Phil sobbed, just once, his body getting somehow even smaller next to Clint. “I could see it all slipping away,” he whispered. “The way you’d been looking at me, Clint. How much I’d hurt you. How could I tell you that I was going to have to break all the promises I’d just finished making?”

Clint went still, thinking back to that first morning, to Phil, smelling like dust, saying things like “sometimes things don’t work out the way we want.”

“That’s why you were so weird the next day,” he said, stricken. “Phil.”

“I thought--I thought I should make you go,” Phil said. “But I couldn’t. Clint, I couldn’t. I told myself, maybe if I could make you happy, if I could give you--if we could have each other, as long as I could do it, as long as I could hold out…” He swallowed, hard enough for Clint to hear. “I promised myself I wouldn’t make you watch me… dwindle.”

Clint drew a deep, shaky breath, his mind flicking over all his interactions with Phil, everything he knew about TAHITI, all that Nick had told him, and then he had a horrible thought, settling dark and hollow in his chest like all the joy had been scooped out of him.

“Oh shit,” he said, staring down at the figures in the sand. “Phil, I think it might be my fault.”

“What?”

“Fury said--when you were at TAHITI,” Clint said, every word dragging out of him like they had barbs, “They didn’t do the wipes all at once. They were trying to take as little as possible, but every time… the carving would come back. He said you kept… you kept trying to write me letters. In between.”

“I don’t remember that,” Phil said. “I don’t… I don’t remember any of it.”

They were both trembling, now, pressed together in a knot of misery and fear on the beach. “He said it never took until they wiped everything you knew about TAHITI. That’s why he told you not to contact me--not to contact any of us, the Avengers. He was worried we’d ask too many questions and trigger another memory cascade.” He twisted his hand around to capture Phil’s fingers, clinging like Phil’s hand was the only thing holding him on the shore. “I’d convinced myself that I was safe, as long as I didn’t ask too many questions, but the very day you saw me again--”

“No,” Phil interrupted. “Clint, no . It wasn’t your fault.”

“How can you be so sure?” Clint wanted to believe him, wanted to quash the sick fear in his gut
that by going to Phil, he’d doomed him all over again.

“This all started a long time ago,” Phil said. “I knew from the beginning something wasn’t right, and then there was this machine—”

“Fury told me,” Clint said.

“I knew it was dangerous, but I needed to know,” Phil said, staring out at the ocean. “I started having breakthrough memories, after that. Dreams—well. Nightmares. And then when we caught up to Garrett, right before we went back to the Playground—he’d been carving, they were all over the Bus. I think seeing the designs… triggered something in me. And even if that wasn’t it, there was the theta wave machine, and the video. Once there was a crack in the false memories, I would never have let it go. I could tell something was… was wrong with me.”

*There’s nothing wrong with you,* Clint wanted to say. *You’re fine.* He stayed quiet, though, tightening his grip on Phil’s hand. Phil deserved better from him than lies.

“I haven’t—I’ve not been like Garrett, not so far,” Phil said. “I haven’t hurt anyone, or even wanted to. It’s just the—” he waved a hand at the drawings in the sand. “Those. I promise, I’m taking precautions. May knows. If I become—if I’m a danger. She’ll take care of things.”

Clint’s blood froze in his veins. “No.”

“Clint—”

“That’s not going to happen,” Clint insisted. He half-turned on the log, grabbing Phil’s other hand, pulling him around so that they were facing one another. There were tear tracks on Phil’s face, silver in the starlight, and it hurt Clint like knives. “Garrett was Hydra, Phil, plus he was halfway to crazy already. You’re not gonna go like that. We’re not gonna let you.” He squeezed Phil’s hands, so hard it must have hurt, but Phil held back just as tightly, his expression conflicted and desperate. “But, Phil. You *have* to stop keeping things from me.”

Phil flinched. “I’m sorry.” He met Clint’s eyes, his own still bright with tears. His voice was rough and painful-sounding. “I—I know I should have told you, I know it was wrong to hide. I just wanted to pretend for a little while.”

“Pretend what, babe?”

Phil tried to smile, but it came out twisted. “That I was going to get the happy ending after all,” he whispered. “That I really had you back, that I was going to get to k-keep you.” His voice broke, and he paused for a long moment, his throat working like he was swallowing back bile. “I thought, as long as I could hold it together, I could have that much, I could give you that much, if you wanted it.” He shook his head. “I was being selfish.”

“Yeah, you were,” Clint said. “I can understand the impulse, I guess. Wanting a space where you could pretend it wasn’t happening.” He sighed, his heart aching both for himself and for Phil, and ran his thumb over the back of Phil’s cold hand. “I know you were scared,” he said. “That you are scared. God knows I am, too. But what did you think was going to happen? That one day you’d finally crack and May would lock you up somewhere and I’d just, what, forget to wonder where you were?”

“I tried not to think about it,” Phil admitted, and it was that more than anything that drove home just how messed up Phil was about this whole thing, because in all the time that Clint had known Phil Coulson, he’d never known him to actively avoid making plans about something this
important. “I hoped we could figure something out, fix it somehow, and you’d never have to know I almost--” he cut himself off. “And it isn’t just me,” he added.

“Shit,” Clint said, the memory slamming into him. “Skye. You gave her the TAHITI drug.”

Phil nodded. “She doesn’t seem to have had any side effects yet. I don’t know if it’s because she wasn’t dead yet when we gave it to her, or some other reason, but…”

“Yeah,” Clint said. “We need to figure it out.”

“I tried to stop them,” Phil said, his voice rising. “I wouldn’t have given it to her if I’d known what it was, but by the time I found the, the body, it was too late, they’d already--”

“I know,” Clint said, soothing. “She knows you’d never do anything to hurt her, Phil. She loves you.”

Phil drew a deep, sobbing breath, his eyes closing. “If I’ve doomed her to this…”

“You saved her life, Phil,” Clint said. “We’ll deal with the rest of it. Whatever ‘it’ is.”

“We,” Phil said, his voice shaking. “You keep saying that, still. Clint, you know I don’t expect--”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” Clint said. “Of course, ‘we.’ It is never going to be any other way, Phil, never again, not as long as we both--” he stumbled to a halt, hearing in his own words the echo of more. For as long as we both shall live.

“I lived without you for a while,” he said after a pause. He chose his words carefully, like he was picking his way along the edge of a roof. “I didn’t much care for it.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” Phil whispered, his face bleak.

“Then don’t,” Clint said, and all in a rush, he knew. It was time. “Stay with me. Be with me.” He slid off the log, onto his knees in the sand, still holding Phil’s hands. “Marry me, Phil.”

For a single, beautiful moment, all the hurt and worry slid off Phil’s face, leaving pure and unvarnished surprise. “I--you--what?”

“You heard me.” Clint bent down to kiss Phil’s trembling hand. “I found the rings. Been carrying them around with me, waiting for the right moment. Only, you know what? I’m done waiting. This is the right moment for us, Phil, right now. And I know,” he held up a quelling finger when Phil opened his mouth, probably to tell Clint some of the reasons why he was a bad marital prospect, like how he was technically a fugitive and maybe going insane. “I know what the writing might mean. That even though we try our damnedest to fix it, we might not succeed. But Phil, if you only have a little time left to be…” Clint’s voice wobbled. “To be you? I want that time. And if you get worse and someone has to make decisions, I want it to be me that makes them. Whatever is coming, whatever happens, I don’t want you to protect me or hide. I don’t want a happy façade of you, Phil, I want you. I want us, together, the way we always should have been.”


“Marry me, Phil,” Clint said again. “Whether we have a week left or a hundred years, spend them with me.”

Phil slid down off the log beside him, knocking his half-eaten sandwich over as he clutched at Clint’s arms, his shoulders. “God,” he said, his voice trembling. “You--you really mean that, don’t
you? You really want--"

“I do,” Clint said, and then started laughing. “Shit, Phil, I really, really do--” and then Phil was swallowing his laughter in a kiss, fierce and quick, before pulling back to meet Clint’s eyes.

“I can’t help feeling like it’s cruel,” he said. “Like I’m just going to hurt you worse than ever. But I can’t--I’m through giving you up, Clint Barton. If you really want me, even with all of this--then I’m yours.”

Clint looked at him, tear-stained and worn, infuriating and beautiful and unbearably dear. His fiancé for real, now.

“You’re mine,” he whispered, and he pulled Phil into his arms, holding on as tight as he could and feeling Phil clinging to Clint in his turn.

Eventually, they shifted around, winding up with their backs pressed against the log, arms still intertwined, clinging to each other, and if their kisses had a little more flavor of desperation than is normal for newly-engaged couples, neither of them were pointing it out.

“Tide’s gonna turn soon,” Clint said at last. “Do you need to take a picture of your… writing?”

Phil slumped against his side. “Probably,” he said. “Not that our analysis has turned anything up so far, but…”

“We should probably put a sidelight on it or something,” Clint mused. “So we can approximate the depth.”

Phil pulled away, startled. “I’m sorry, what?”

“The depth,” Clint said. “Look, some of these symbols are barely scratched in, and some of them are like six inches deep. How have you been cataloguing the depth before?”

“I… I haven’t,” Phil said, wide-eyed. “I’ve never--I always used a pen, before, or a knife. I didn’t have a medium that allowed…” he stared at the symbols as though he’d never seen them before. “They never feel right,” he murmured. “There’s always something off about them, that’s why I have to keep going. But what if…”

“They could be 3-D,” Clint said, starting to feel excited. “Phil, this might not be writing at all, this could be, like, like those hologram things Tony uses. Blueprints, maybe, or schematics of some kind.”

“Fitz has a holo-table,” Phil said, and the sudden light of hope in his eyes was almost unbearable. “Back at the Playground--when we get back there, we could set something up.”

“See?” Clint leaned over and brushed another kiss along Phil’s cheek. “I told you, baby. We’re better as a team.”

Phil was opening his mouth to reply, when both their pants pockets buzzed at nearly the same time. They exchanged concerned looks--synchronized messages usually meant something had hit the fan somewhere--and pulled out their phones.

There was a text from Yolanda at the top of Clint’s screen.

911, Jets, he read. Get your shit and your man and get ready. Pickup in 5.
He looked over at Phil, who swapped phones with him without a word.

Phil’s message was from Agent Tripplett. *Package already gone when we arrived,* it read. *I’m clear but Skye missed the rendezvous. Please advise.*

Shit, oh shit. *Skye.*

They scrambled to their feet, all thought of photographing the beach forgotten as they ran back to the bungalow and threw everything into their bags. As Clint finished jamming the peanut butter jar into his—he’d have to eat eventually, no matter what else was going on—they heard the rumbling of a loud and poorly muffled engine. They stepped outside, haphazardly-packed bags slung over their shoulders, just as a luridly-painted Winnebago slewed to a halt, tires spinning on the sandy driveway. The passenger door swung open and Yolanda stuck her head out.

“Well, don’t just stand there, get your asses in,” she yelled. “We’re only about a half hour ahead of Hydra.”

The driver didn’t even wait for the door to close behind them before gunning the engine and barreling back down the secluded little beachfront road, away from the ocean. Clint leaned forward, squinting to see him better by the dashboard lights, and then blinked when he recognized him.

“Oh,” he said sheepishly. “Um. Hi, Manuel. I’m really sorry about your car.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, the new sections post each weekday on Tumblr and new chapters go up here when they are done!
“Pizza and beer, as requested,” Joe said, closing the motel room door behind himself with his foot.

“Took you long enough,” Zak said, turning off the TV and tossing the remote onto the bed. “I was about ready to make a vending machine run.”

“Thanks for picking up our dinner, Joe,” Joe said, spreading out the food on top of the pressboard dresser. “I appreciate not having to walk on my probably-sprained ankle, Joe.”

“It’s not sprained, I just twisted it a little. Don’t be such a mother hen.”

“Because we can all just go to the hospital if we need to, because we aren’t fugitives from Hydra currently at all,” Joe said, putting a couple slices on a paper plate and handing them to Zak. “Also, I got you an Ace bandage and an ankle brace at the drugstore. You’re welcome.” He followed the pizza with a beer.

“Thanks,” Zak said, raising the beer in salute.

Joe opened his own beer, and toasted him back. “To a successful mission.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

They were quiet for a while, making their way steadily through the pizza; they hadn’t had much time to eat that day, and protein bars only went so far. They were down to crusts by the time Joe’s secure phone rang. He picked it up, exchanging concerned looks with Zak.

“Rolette.”

“Do you like omelettes?” Trinh’s voice was clipped and tense, not at all like her usual bubbly tone. Joe felt his shoulders tense at her question. The phones were as secure as they could make them, but Trinh was asking him to use a supplemental scrambler.

He got up and crossed to his bag, pulling out the little machine, which was disguised to look like an electric shaver. When he turned it on, there was a moment of high-pitched sound that made his teeth ache, and then his ears popped and the light went green. He flipped the phone to speaker so that Zak could hear too.

“Scrambler’s active. You’re on speaker, me and Zak in the room. What’s wrong, Trinh?”
“We just intercepted some Hydra comms traffic. They’re sending a team after a package in DC. Joe, it’s the 084.”

“What kind of 084?”

“The 084. The original one. The one that turns people to stone.”

“Uh,” Zak said, leaning forward towards the phone, “Where’re you hearing that from? Because when Darrell and I went through Romanoff’s file dump, I think we would have tagged something like that if we’d seen it.”

Joe believed him; over the past few months, Zak and Darrell had gotten so intimate with those files that Trinh had begun joking about them picking up computer viruses.

“Wasn’t in the file dump; an ex-Agent was selling information on it. He’s dead, but Hydra got the intel. The 0-8-4 is in a warehouse in the area. We can’t get anyone else there in time; you’ve got to go.”

Zak and Joe looked at each other, then down at their crusts. They’d both hoped for a day or two of downtime someplace not surrounded by acres of mary jane and nothing else to do but wait for the next mission. It still surprised Joe that Uncle Bobby had let them turn his farm into a de facto secret base, but then Uncle Bobby had been weird for years. He’d taken all Joe’s friends under his wing, positively gleeful about putting one over on the Army, and he’d taken to treating the K-9 unit like the children he’d never had. Bloodhounds roamed freely over his meadows. It was great— it was also really, terribly isolated. Zak had said it reminded him of his childhood on the kibbutz.

Uncle Bobby rolled his eyes whenever Joe brought up the isolation, muttered something about the youth of today, and said that it was getting so loud he couldn’t hear himself think. So, yes, Joe had leapt at the opportunity for a mission in the old stomping grounds, and Zak had leapt with him.

“You’ll notice,” he’d said, “that I’m not still in the Negev making yogurt.”

Still, there was no one else out there, trying to save the world from Hydra; the Army thought it’d already crushed it. And SHIELD. When Trinh said there wasn’t anyone else, she really meant it. Their day off was going to have to wait.

“All right,” Joe sighed, “tell us.”

Beside him, Zak started tightening the bandage around his ankle.

Fifteen minutes later, Joe shut the phone off and turned to Zak, who’d been taking notes. They were in his own shorthand code, and he’d used Hebrew cursive-- and he’d still burn the damn things before they left the room.

“I once met an IA investigator,” Agent Coulson had once told Joe, back when he’d briefly thought about the career path, “who got so paranoid he eventually started investigating himself, just in case he was actually the mole he was looking for.”

“Was he?” Joe had asked. Coulson had just shrugged and flashed him his little “that’s classified” smirk, and Joe’d decided right then and there that IA was maybe not for him. He didn’t even know how he’d begin to interrogate himself, for one thing.

He was glad Sarah’d picked up Zak though, and he was definitely glad Zak was with him right
now. He couldn’t think of anyone else-- well, anyone else on their team-- who’d be able to find a high-security Army installation on short notice and get them both in to steal a dangerous 084 ahead of the other guys who were planning to steal it.

Sometimes lately, he wondered if he’d have been doing anything half as interesting, if SHIELD hadn’t fallen.

“So,” he asked Zak, “how’re we getting onto the base.”

Zak looked over his notes, sighed, flipped back, then finally looked up at Joe and sighed.

“Grow wings and fly,” he said. He said it so straight-faced that Joe nearly took him seriously.

---

They didn’t actually grow wings and fly.

Joe was mildly disappointed.

They did show up at the front of the base claiming to be SHIELD agents wanting to surrender, get themselves escorted in, then wait until Darrell had hacked into the interrogation room’s security feed and loop it to escape.

“Amateurs,” Zak grumbled under his breath as they carefully stripped two unconscious guards and shimmied into the uniforms. “This is actual dark ages tactics. Older. Greeks probably pulled this one. My Savta literally did, in Argentina.”

“Be nice,” Joe told him, “they’re stretched thin.”

“Yeah,” Zak grunted, “which worries me. Where are all the patrols we should be seeing?”

“Down in the cell block,” Darrell said over their comm. “Diverted there two minutes ago… ah. They lost a prisoner. Creel, Carl. Attacked General Talbot’s family yesterday.”

“And now he’s broken out,” Joe said, sighing. “Okay… we’ll assume he’s hostile, and possibly after the same objective.”

“Why assume that?”

“Because if he is, then it’s a complication to retrieving the 084, and if he isn’t, he’s a handy distraction while we retrieve it,” Joe said. “Either way, our objective doesn’t change. Army’s got lots of people to send after Creel.”

“Point,” Zak said. “Okay, so we’re looking for a crate in the warehouse in the southeastern corner of the base. If we blend in, we can likely just walk right up, but the security to the warehouse is on a separate circuit than the rest; we’ll have to deal with it at the source.”

“Oh, naturally,” Joe said. “Ugh. You have everything you need from here?”

“Yeah,” Zak said. “Let’s go. Sooner we finish this, the sooner we can go home. My foot hurts.”

“This is why I got you an Ace bandage,” Joe said, as they fell into step and headed toward the building exit, trying to look Army-like.

“I’m wearing the Ace bandage,” Zak said. “I very much appreciate the Ace bandage, but it only goes so far. I’m not sure it’s rated for roundhouse kicks to the face.”
“Well, if you have to be showy about things.”

They left the building and fell into step, trying to look like they were only coincidentally heading toward the warehouse instead of making a beeline for it. The rest of the base was still troublingly underpopulated; at this rate, their biggest problem wouldn’t be getting identified as impostors, it would be getting accused of dereliction of their imaginary duty for not being where everyone else was—going after Creel, probably.

Well. If Creel was after what Joe and Zak thought he was after, they’d find him soon enough. And if he wasn’t, so much the better.

They made it to the warehouse without being spotted, but when Zak started testing the security system, he made a face like he’d just found a scorpion in his boot.

“What?” Joe asked. “Can you not hack it? Are we going to have to break in?”

“I don’t know if I can hack it or not,” Zak said, frowning down at his tablet. “Because it’s currently deactivated.”

“Oh, cool,” Joe said, then thought about it. “No, wait. Not cool. If it’s important enough to have its own isolated system, it’s sure important enough for them to keep the system turned on. Which means…”

“Someone’s prepared a welcome wagon,” Zak said grimly. “And I don’t think it’s for us.”

---

“Darrell,” Joe muttered into his comms, “tell us you’ve got schematics. What do we have for cover?”

There was a pause on the coms, and Zak spent it poking at his tablet, as if he could get it to reset the security if he just fiddled enough. Finally, the coms clicked.

“Standard warehouse, far as I can tell. I… oh. Oh. Steel girders all across the ceiling. Shelves against the wall as you go in.”

“In other words,” Zak grimaced, “go up. My ankle thanks you.” But he slipped his tablet back into its pouch, and nodded at Joe.

“If we’re in the rafters,” Joe objected, “how do we find the 084?”

“You don’t,” Darrell said, at the same time as Zak said

“We don’t. We wait for whoever’s after it to find it for us. Going silent.” He was already slipping into the warehouse. Joe followed him.

“Cap says use your judgement,” Darrell added as Joe started climbing one of the heavy steel shelving units near the door. Zak was already halfway up and moving fast, despite his ankle. “Don’t engage if you’re heavily outnumbered. Go dark if you have to; Trinh won’t be happy if you don’t come back in one piece. Whatever is in that box isn’t worth the risk.”

Joe and Zak had both reached the top of the shelving unit, and were crouched on metal shipping containers. Joe reached out to click his coms twice to acknowledge the message. Before he could, however, the line clicked, and then clicked again.
“Joe,” his Uncle Bobby said, “do you read me?”

Joe and Zak turned to stare at each other.

“What the hell-- Mr. Whitefeather how did you get on coms-- where are you--” Darrell broke off, and Joe thought he must be searching for some accidentally open channel.

“I’m down by the creek, Agent Day, and you’re all locked down nice and tight. Joe,” Bobby said again, as if Darrell shouldn’t have been at all surprised that he was accessing their coms line from the middle of nowhere. “Acknowledge. Click or whatever.”

Joe clicked.

Zak stared at him, and Joe shrugged.

“Family,” he mouthed at Zak, who appeared to actually think about it for a moment before nodding back-- as well he should. He didn’t talk much about his family, but from his stories about his Savta alone, Joe didn’t think one Vietnam vet hermit uncle who could apparently access coms without one of his own was really that far out.

“Good,” Bobby said. “Now listen: I know what that 084 is, and I’m telling you now, you cannot let Hydra or anyone else get their hands on it. You boys have to get it, do you hear? Even if it means taking on an army. Or the Army.”

“What is it?” Darrell asked, which was good because neither Joe nor Zak could at the moment. They were both watching movement in the shadows along the far wall.

“Never mind that now; no time for stories you wouldn’t believe,” Bobby said. “But you get that case. Don’t open it, whatever you do. And if you do open it, for God sake, don’t touch the device. And above all-- do not, under any circumstances, let it open. You got it?”

Joe and Zak stared at each other again, and Zak gave him a kind of complicated sign that Joe took to mean “well that’s not ominous at all.”

“You got it? Joe, do you read me?” Bobby repeated, his voice urgent.

Whatever the hell that thing was, Joe decided, it had to be pretty epic to cause his Uncle to pull this shit-- whatever this shit was.

He clicked.


--

“You know,” Zak said quietly, moving along the rafter toward the middle of the warehouse, “I’m starting to have some concerns about this mission.”

“Starting to?”

“Well, I mean, at least there’s no snow?” Zak said. “That puts it above at least three of my recent missions; I am not cold-adapted. Darrell, have you managed to get any indication what general area of the warehouse we should be looking in?”

“I’m trying something, hold tight,” Darrell said. “It looks like they didn’t replace the SHIELD tracking tags, just slapped their own on each container when they took control… there. There’s too
much radio interference for me to locate our package specifically, but the SHIELD stuff is on the southwest side, about twenty meters ahead of you and five meters to your right. I'll let you know if you get close enough for the package’s RFID chip to ping on your scanner.”

“Roger that,” Joe said, as they moved carefully into position. He felt his watch pulse in a distinct pattern on his wrist, and almost immediately afterward the large metal doors at the end of the warehouse opened and a pair of armored black SUVs rolled in.

Company had arrived.

As soon as the doors were closed behind the SUVs, the people inside scattered, moving with purpose and talking amongst themselves in low tones. Joe pulled out his mini binoculars to get a better look, then sucked in a surprised breath.

Zak nudged him, a questioning look on his face, and Joe leaned in to speak as quietly as possible into his ear.

“I think they may be friendlies,” he said. “That’s Isabelle Hartley, she’s SHIELD, or she was. Long-term undercover. And I’m pretty sure the guy in the uniform is Antoine Triplett.”

Zak frowned, and made a wiggly-fingered gesture under his chin that Joe took to mean “a lot of SHIELD agents turned out to be Hydra.”

“Triplett’s granddad was a Howling Commando,” he said. “No way he’s Hydra. Maybe we aren’t the only ones trying to keep up the good work.”

Hartley started to work her way down the row of shelves directly under them. About halfway down, she paused, then Joe could see her smile in triumph.

“I’ve got the 084,” she said, hand reaching up to a comm unit in her ear. She pulled a small but heavy-looking case off the shelf and set it down on a metal crate in front of her, taking out some sort of tool.

“What’s she doing?” Zak breathed.

“Shit, I think she’s opening the case,” Joe said, Uncle Bobby’s warning flashing through his mind.

“Do we stop her?”

“I don’t--shit, there’s someone else here!” Joe drew his gun and fired, catching the--naked muscley guy, what the hell--In the meat of his upper arm. Even suppressed, the sound echoed around the warehouse, and Hartley swung around just as the lid of the case popped open, dropping a butane torch and pulling a knife.

“We’ve got company!” she yelled.

“I’ll go low, you stay high,” Joe said, and when Zak nodded he swung from the rafter to the top of one of the high shelves, climbing down as fast as he could to join the fight. Hartley dodged out of the way, and the attacker’s punch dented a crate; Joe grabbed a random case off the shelf and swung it as hard as he could, connecting solidly with the guy’s head and knocking him over.

“Don’t shoot, Hartley,” he called. “I’m on your side.”
The guy started to get up and she kicked him in the head. He fell back, but obviously wasn’t out yet, so Joe hit him again with the case, which was pretty badly dented.

“Who the fuck are you, and what are you doing here?” she said, eyes narrowed.

“A friend, and trying to keep Hydra from getting some kind of superweapon,” Joe said. Muscles heaved himself up again, his body rippling and going the same shade as the concrete floor. “Holy shit, what the fuck?”

Zak fired from the ceiling, and chips of concrete shattered off the guy’s torso.

“Well, _he’s_ Hydra,” Hartley said, kicking ineffectively at the guy’s knee. “Who are _you_ working for?”

“SHIELD,” Joe said, dodging a concrete punch.

“Try again,” Hartley said. “If you were SHIELD, I’d know it.”

“We’re kind of--” Joe swung his case again, and it finally crumpled against Muscles’ shoulders. “Shit! Fugitives right now, but we’re definitely SHIELD.” He edged around, trying to get close enough to the 084 to close the case and make a break for it.

Hartley clonked Muscles over the head with a crowbar--where had she even _found_ a crowbar?--and knocked another chip off. He growled, hand shooting out to one of the shelves, and then he changed again, his body going flat metallic gray. His fist shot out and knocked away the crowbar with a clang.

A scurry of running steps, and a man in a leather jacket came running around the end of the shelves, gun up and firing at Muscles. Joe seized the opportunity presented by this distraction to make a break for the case, but Hartley saw him.

“Not so fast!” she yelled, and grabbed something off a nearby shelf and threw it at him. He dodged, then watched in horror as it hit the back of the case, flipping it over, sending the object inside flying.

Everything seemed to slow down. The 084 was dangerous, but--dangerous how? If it hit the floor, would it explode? Shatter and release poison gas?

Joe couldn’t take the risk. He dove toward the 084, catching it just before it hit the ground.

--

For a split second, it felt like the world was holding its breath, and then the silvery metal began to glow, a pulsing orange light tracing over its surface, revealing strange designs.

“Holy shit!” Hartley yelped.

Joe gulped, waiting for the light to explode, or incinerate his hand, or something.

Hartley and Muscles both backed away, clearly waiting for the same exact thing.

Even the man in the leather jacket was still, gaping at the object.

“What’s going on?” Darrell demanded over the coms.

“I… I touched the object?” Joe told him, whispering less because of the company and more
because who knew what might set the damn thing off.

“Shit,” Uncle Bobby said, echoing Darrell’s reaction. “Well, better you than anyone else there. Them, it’d kill. And it won’t be pretty.”

Which, of course, was the moment Hartley and Muscles both chose to make a grab for the object, both at the same time.

“Stay back!” Joe cried, yanking it away from them and scrambling to his feet. “This thing’s deadly.”

“So why aren’t you dead?” Leather jacket asked, which Joe felt was a fair question-- just one he couldn’t answer.

Muscles made another grab, and Hartley flung a case at him, which he brushed off.

“I need an exit,” Joe growled into his coms, “now.”

“I need a puppy,” Leather jacket told him, then froze-- and he and Hartley darted glances at each other. Clearly, there was someone on the other end of coms for them, too. Whatever that person was telling them, it didn’t look good.

“We’ve got company,” Zak hissed into his ear, confirming it, “along the perimeter, blocking our exit. Brace yourself.”

“For wha--” Joe started-- just as Zak dropped from his perch onto Muscles’ shoulders. He didn’t stay there long, riding Muscles like a bull for just long enough to get him directed at Hartley before he leapt off. He grabbed Joe by his free arm and ran, taking a moment to block Leather jacket’s attempt to stop him, and fling him into a nearby wall.

Leather jacket sent one burst of gunfire after them as they rounded the corner, before Hartley’s voice stopped him. Crashing indicated they weren’t done with Muscles yet, which was good-- Joe didn’t think they could hold him off if he caught up with them.

“What’s our exit?” Joe asked, and Zak pointed in response.

The two SUVs were still parked next to the loading dock entrance, gleaming in the dim light, and engines clearly on. Joe thought he’d never seen anything half as beautiful in his life.

“You go right,” Zak said, letting him go so he could fling open the driver’s side door of the first and yank out the driver, apologizing as he crammed himself into the seat. Joe hoped Hartley’s team had alternate exfil plans, but decided now was not the time to ask.

It took him a moment longer to get inside, since he was doing it one-handed, and Zak reached over to pull him up, carefully avoiding the object as he did.

“All right,” he huffed, “you concentrate on keeping that thing safe, intact, and off me. I’ll get us out of here. Darrell, give me a route.”

“Can do,” Darrell said.

“No you can’t,” Bobby broke in. “Someone’s trying to intercept your frequency--”

“Besides you?” Darrell asked, sounding grumpy. “You never did say--”

“Would I be worried about me?” Bobby asked. “No, this is-- two someones, now. From the DC
end. Boys, you gotta go dark. And assume you’re being tailed. You read?”

“We read,” Zak said, then pulled his earpiece and flung it out the window, followed by his tablet. Joe did the same with his, watching forlornly as it shattered on the asphalt.

They left the warehouse behind them, busting through the gate as well on their way out.

There was silence for a moment as Zak got them out onto city roads, and Joe glanced behind them for the inevitable pursuit.

And then, Joe looked down at the object, still in his hand. The glow had dimmed, but the symbols were still visible on it, shimmering and slick.

“Bobby never did say if I could put it down,” he mused. “What are the odds I don’t blow us both up if I let go?”

Zak glanced over at him, then at the object, then back up at him.

“Don’t let go,” he said.

---

“Someone’s on our tail,” Joe gritted out fifteen minutes later, as they were careening down the Columbia Pike.

“We’ve switched vehicles twice,” Zak complained, but he double-checked in the rear-view mirror, where two suspiciously anonymous-looking SUVs were converging on them. “You sure that’s not normal DC traffic?” Zak asked.

“No, there,” Joe pointed to the side-view mirror, where Muscles, driving an SUV with a Dominos sign hanging off the roof, was a half dozen cars back and gaining bit by bit.

They’d lost him twice, so far. The first time they’d managed to leap out of the armored SUV and onto the back of an extended cab just before Muscles had stepped in front of their old ride, flipping it over and creating a hell of a traffic jam.

The second time, they’d driven their second stolen vehicle of the day into a parking ramp with him just behind them, then scrambled out and down a level before stealing their current ride, a late model Honda Civic with a rear windshield filled with knock-off beanie babies. Joe wondered at what point they stopped being the good guys and turned into Grand Theft Auto characters.

The way Muscles kept on popping up did a lot to convince him they’d wandered into video game territory.

“You know,” Zak mused, in a tone of voice Joe had learned to hate over the past few months, “if I can just get us to Orme, I can jog hard right, try and lose him in the neighborhood.”

“The neighborhood?” Joe asked, skeptically. “Really? What, are you gonna take him through a housing development?”

“More like Marine Headquarters,” Zak said evenly, his eyes still on the road. “If we blast through the gates they’ll stop him for us.”

“They’ll stop us too, you asshole!” Joe yelped.

“C’mon,” Zak said, turning to look at him, “I know what I’m doing. Don’t you trust me?”
“You know I-- Zak! Brake!” Joe yelped, pointing forward.

Zak broke, and then groaned.

In front of them-- directly in front of them, since Zak had ended up about a foot from the bumper of an orange Aztek-- the traffic stretched in every direction. And it was not moving, not at all. Bright orange construction signs decorated the sides of the road.

Joe stared forlornly out his window, at the driver of a nearly identical Honda in the next lane, who was simultaneously texting and tuning his radio.

Behind them, Muscles was still gaining, nearly hidden now by two semis and a conversion van that had all gotten stuck behind them.

“Fuck everything,” Zak sighed, glancing in the rear view mirror. “I thought they finished this damn bridge.”

Joe glanced behind him, then ahead of him, where yet another blue Civic was caught in traffic, and he had an idea.

“Grab the beanie babies, Zak,” he said, “and roll out.”

Something in his voice must have made Zak decide not to argue, or ask for explanations. He grabbed a handful of plush animals from the back, then dumped himself out the back seat.

Joe did the same, and rolled himself right over to the next Civic over. He yanked the back door open, shoved his handful of plushies in, and slammed the door shut. The driver never looked up.

Zak must have seen what he was doing, because Joe caught up to him just as he was unleashing his own load of beanies in the next Civic up. There were at least three more in the traffic jam, scattered at uneven intervals.

“It’s not going to take him long to find the empty car, though,” Zak said.

“You left your door open,” Joe told him, “it may not be empty when he finds it. Let’s go.”

“I like the way you think,” Zak said, grabbing his arm as they ran-- the one holding the object. “Got you a present,” he said, and enveloped the object in a plastic shopping bag.

“I look like an idiot,” Joe complained, wrapping the bag tightly around his wrist as they ran.

“Yeah but not an idiot with an 084,” Zak panted. “Follow me.”

He was running, Joe thought with despair, straight towards Orme street and Marine HQ.

---

Sometime later, slumped in the booth of a diner in Raleigh, Joe sighed and eyed his WWACD bracelet. For the first time, he was startled to realize he didn’t really know what Agent Coulson would do. Coulson’d told stories about being cut off from HQ, about being tracked, about agents who muddled on when they didn’t know what the hell they’d gotten into or what was in their hands-- most of those stories started “when the Widow and Hawkeye and I were…” in fact.

But Joe didn’t think any of them had prepared him for something quite this disorienting. He and Zak had agreed early on that they couldn’t go back to STAR (“‘STAR’? I thought we’d agreed on ‘SWORD,’” Zak had said. Joe had explained that no, they’d decided that was a stupid name for an
agency). At least-- they couldn’t go back until they knew that they wouldn’t be bringing Hydra with them, to descend on the tattered remnants of SHIELD that still operated on Bobby’s farm. (FARM had been another early reject from the list of possible names, maybe because no one could think of a suitable backronym.)

They’d lost Muscles for good, it seemed, but Hydra was on their tail still. It hadn’t been till the border that Zak had finally stopped long enough to frisk Joe and find the tracker Muscles had somehow slapped on Joe while they’d been wrestling. They’d ditched it, but neither of them thought that made them safe. Every security camera in every shop on the east coast could be being used by Hydra, for all they knew. After all, SHIELD could have done it, and Hydra clearly gotten the better goodies out of its collapse.

General Talbot, Joe was increasingly convinced, was an asshole.

Talbot was onscreen now, on Fox News, yelling that SHIELD was dead, gone, dust, with a vehemence that convinced Joe he’d tracked the assault on his warehouse back to Hartey and her crew too.

Anyway, none of Coulson’s stories seemed to apply to a situation in which Joe was literally afraid to let go of an alien object, in case it exploded. An alien object that only his Uncle Bobby had seemed familiar with.

He said as much to Zak.

“Actually,” Zak said, frowning, “I’ve been thinking, and I think I’ve seen those symbols before.”

“You think you-- what?” Joe said, blinking. “Why didn’t-- what are-- damnit, man!”

“Well in my defense,” Zak huffed, “I was a kid. Some knick-knack at my Savta’s house, something her husband brought when they fled Argentina. Once in a while, late in the evenings, when she’d had a couple gin rickeys, you could get her to tell stories about the old days. She talked about that thing once.”

“What’d she say?” Joe asked, leaning over. Of course, Phil Coulson had been an incredible man, but even he hadn’t had a monopoly on all the useful stories in the world.

Zak shrugged.

“Dunno. I wasn’t really interested at the time.”

“Zak!”

“What?” Zak said, “I was a queer eleven year old in a new place, a place that had cable, which made it a whole other world from the kibbutz, let me tell you, and I was busy having uncomfortable personal revelations watching two guys kiss on Dawson’s Creek. It seemed a little bit more important than trying to listen to Savta droning on in Spanish, when I only half knew it, okay? Contrary to appearances I don’t always know everything, Joe!”

“And you hate it,” Joe told him, suddenly sorry he’d poked.

“I avoid it when possible,” Zak muttered. He glanced down at Joe’s hand, which they’d since stuffed in a Trader Joe’s tote to better conceal it.

“But your grandma--” Joe said. “She’d know?”
“She might,” Zak said. “Anyway, it’s a better option than anything we’ve had.”

“You want to call her? See if she recognizes the description?”

“I already did,” Zak shrugged. “While I was in the bathroom. She says to come down to her right now.” He drank down the last of his coffee, clearly ready to get up and get on his way right then. Joe boggled.

“Uh, Zak,” he said, “you can’t be serious.”

“She can help, we need help,” Zak said reasonably.

“You can’t bring Hydra down on your grandma!” Joe yelped at him.

“I tried to tell her that, yeah.” He didn’t, Joe thought bitterly, sound as if he’d tried very hard. “But she insisted. And I don’t know about you, Rollette, but I make it a practice not to argue with my elders.”

“This is a bad idea,” Joe said darkly as they left the diner.

“Yeah I know,” Zak sighed, “but I don’t have better ones, do you?”

Joe had to admit he did not.

---

They were over the Florida border before Hydra caught up to them again, this time in a considerable amount of force and with at least one helicopter. Joe thought he was flattered that they rated quite that much public exposure. He also felt like writing a sincere apology to the Florida DOT for the destruction of their perfectly nice rest stop. He and Zak had escaped that trap by the skin of their teeth, but he wasn’t quite sure what to do about this one.

They were holed up in a vacant Whataburger, staring out the door, and watching as several black SUVs peeled into the parking lot, screeching to a halt in front of the doors.

“I can hold them long enough for you to get out the back, I think,” Zak whispered next to him.

“You have to get that out of here.”

“Yeah, but--” Joe started, then shut his mouth.

This one was an old story. This one was many stories.

This was the one where you knew you weren’t going to see someone again, and the only thing you could do, Agent Coulson had said, was say thank you and pray you could make the sacrifice worthwhile.

“Thank you,” Joe sighed.

“Go now,” Zak gritted.

Joe went.

He got as far as the back door, opening it cautiously in case Hydra goons had already surrounded them, before a vehicle came barrelling into the parking lot to cut off his escape.

It was, Joe thought, after he’d cleared his eyes several times to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating, a
Winnebago. Probably.

It was a Winnebago with a larger-than-life, shirtless version of Hawkeye the Avenger painted across its back half. He was lounging on a miniature version of Dollywood, his elbow disappearing into the town, and there was some kind of halo around his head that looked like a donut. He was also winking.

After Joe spent a moment boggling at that, he realized it wasn’t the only impossible thing about the Winnebago; the border around the top edge, where golden eagles flew, looked uncannily like the etching on the object in his hand.

“ZAK!” he bellowed. “NEW PLAN! GET OVER HERE! WE GOT EXTRACTION! I think...”

By the time Zak got to Joe, the Winnebago’s door was opening.

Agent Clint Barton was hanging out of it, bow in hand, looking considerably scruffier than he did on the side panelling.

To his right, a fierce, hatchet-faced woman leaned out the window. She was brandishing a rocket launcher.

“Yitzak Aureliano Rodriguez Yadin, don’t you ever worry your Abuela like that again, you hear?” she yelled.

“Cousin Yolanda?” Zak gulped, and Joe could have sworn his voice broke.

“C’mon, kids, get in,” Barton told them, “you don’t want to be in that building when Yolanda sends a missile through it.”

Chapter End Notes

In Chapter 32, we’ll find out what Phil has been doing with his time. Starts Monday on tumblr.
Chapter Summary

While Clint is off in the Maneuelbago, Phil catches up on things at home...

Phil stood over Fitz’s holotable with his heart in his throat and his hand shaking. He remembered standing with Ward over the Bus’s holotable, trying desperately to make it work, zooming and squishing things in every way but the right way.

Ward had been just as bad as he was, that was his comfort-- except now, Phil was nearly sure Ward had been faking it, as he had so much else. Well, Ward wasn’t his concern at the moment. This was.

“Come on, AC,” Skye said, taking his hand and squeezing. “Show me.”

On his other side, Melinda May gave a small hum of agreement.

Phil closed his eyes and squeezed Skye back, aware of how much differently it all could have gone.

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He could have lost her. In the time between Trip’s text, and Clint squeezing his hand, hard, as Phil jumped off the Manuelbago (Clint’s name for their gaudy ex-camper), that was all Phil could think: that she was gone.

That Phil had let his preoccupation with everything from the state of his head to the state of his relationship get in the way of SHIELD, and he’d lost Skye. He could have, should have, been available, able to be on control for that damned op. No matter how often he and Melinda had gone over the angles, how intimately she knew his plans for Talbot’s warehouse and its treasures, when it came down to it, she should have been on the ground with them. That they’d had to go early, acting on fresh intel, shouldn’t have kept him from being there.

When Trip, piloting SHIELD’s newly-reacquired quinjet, had shimmered into view and picked him up on the side of the road in the armpit of Florida, Phil had finally started to breathe again. At least he would be able to actually do something.

“We got a ping from Skye while I was in the air,” Trip had said, and something unknotted in Phil’s stomach. “Hartley and Hunter deployed. We’ll bring her home, sir.”

Skye disappeared while the team was headed for the quinjets, he told Phil. She escaped the Army facility by motorcycle as planned, but never made her rendezvous.

“Hartley and her crew couldn’t get the 084-- but neither did Hydra,” Trip had continued. “She said some guy who knew her, who said he was SHIELD, grabbed it and took one of our SUVs. But,
silver lining, she managed to snag a second quin.”

Phil had nodded, and let himself be carried home, already on the coms with Melinda and plotting. It was barely two hours since he had woken up on the beach to find that Clint knew his secret. In those two hours, he’d gone from despair to elation and back again so quickly he’d gotten psychic whiplash. Not even the fall of SHIELD had been quite as discombobulating.

He wished Clint had been able to come with him, to help with the search-- or just to hold his hand while he worried. But Skye had people going after her already-- and entire secret base worth of people who cared about her.

Yolanda’s cousin, as she had pointed out, had no one. And Clint had promised he’d help. Phil couldn’t argue with that, so he didn’t try.

He wouldn’t have agreed to marry Clint, after all, if he thought it would make Clint stop running off to be a hero.

Standing at the holotable, with Skye feeding in the last of the pictures Clint had taken of his carvings while Phil had packed their go bags, Phil felt his heart clench again, and rubbed his thumb over his left ring-finger, trying to calm himself down. He hadn’t lost everything-- hadn’t lost anything yet. And if he was really lucky, he might finally be going to get some answers.

As Skye tapped at the table, frowning over display options, Phil let himself linger on her for one minute, before meeting Melinda’s eyes over her head. She only blinked at him, but it was a kind sort of blink.

Melinda knew the lengths he’d gone to, to get Skye back-- he hoped Skye never had to find out, but was pretty sure it was a losing battle. Someday, she’d find out that in the wee hours of the morning, desperate when Hartley and Hunter reported back that they’d lost her trail once more, Phil had slipped down to the bowels of the Playground, and visited Grant Ward.

He’d brought copies of his etchings, assuming Ward would be interested. And he’d-- this was the maybe-unforgivable part-- he’d let Ward misunderstand him, let him assume that Phil was worried Skye had started carving them as well. After all, it was still a possibility; God knew what the GH-325 might eventually do to her system, or what it might mean that her body was apparently comfortable with alien juice in its veins. But Ward would never have given up information to Phil if he’d thought Phil was only worried about himself.

So he hadn’t. He’d gotten Ward worried about Skye, then let Ward “discover” that Skye had gone missing… kidnapped. And Grant Ward had started babbling.

It was probably, Phil thought, just another way Ward thought he was fooling Phil into thinking he was less calculating than he was. Phil knew better now. But he’d also gambled that Ward would have information on who wanted Skye. And he’d been right.

He hadn’t expected it to feel quite so bitter, that Ward thought Skye might have been carried off to the arms of her biological father-- who, Ward strongly hinted, was some kind of monster.

Well, Phil wasn’t in a position to judge. But he’d give it to Ward: the guy knew where to drive the knife in.

Phil’d nearly collapsed into Melinda’s arms afterwards, exhaustion and grief preferable to the anger boiling up in him, but it had been worth the deal with the devil. Melinda being Melinda, she’d let him rest for about two minutes before asking if he needed to carve.
That had… that had been a fun conversation. In a not-fun way. Melinda’d seemed caught between relief that Clint knew and could help her, and some kind of restless frustration that Phil put down to a combination of worry that Clint would distract Phil and a general melancholy on the topic of marriage, in general.

But the carvings had at least given Phil something to distract himself with until Hartley had finally brought back word that Ward’s information had come up trumps: they’d found the ex-Centipede operative Raina in the area.

Phil hadn’t been in the mood for waiting. He and Melinda had left the Words (or possibly tinker toys) of Creation half-unfinished and gone off to help track down Skye.

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Of course, as it had turned out, Skye hadn’t waited to be rescued. Phil and Melinda had piled out of their SUV in front of a dimly-lit restaurant that Trip had tagged, only to find Skye racing out the door at them. She was dragging the woman, Raina, along, bound up with what looked like a strip torn from the hem of her own floral dress.

Trip and Hunter were trailing along behind her, wincing at whatever she was muttering under her breath.

When she saw Phil and Melinda, Skye dropped Raina, and then flung herself at them both.

“It turns out my dad sucks,” she’d muttered into Phil’s neck. “Also? Kind of a murderer.”

“I’m sorry,” Phil had said, and held her tight, pretending it was for her own benefit rather than his.

As it turned out, Skye had been detained by the Army, before being freed by Raina. Not wanting to lead pursuers straight to the Playground, she’d gone quietly as Raina suggested, waiting until she was sure they were lost before she decided to make a break for it and sending the distress signal Trip had picked up on earlier.

And then Raina had told Skye where they were going: to meet her real father, so she could find out who she really was. So he could, Raina informed her, tell her what those symbols she’d been asking about meant. And what her true destiny was.

Phil’d felt hollow all over again.

“And well?” Skye had said, “at that point I knew you guys would be on my trail, so I decided to go and see. And… I saw. I saw him standing over these bodies, blood up to his elbows… and he turned to look at me and he called me ‘Daisy’ and he sounded so wrecked and I… I ran. I don’t… I can’t… that can’t be me, right? What I’m going to be or… or whatever Raina said?”

Phil had looked at Raina, currently being stuffed in the back of Hartley’s SUV, and sighed. Clint, he was sure, would have told him, joking, that when you don’t teach your kids they go out and find their own teachers. It was obnoxious, but not wrong-- and entirely what he’d built SHIELD’s Emerging Leaders Development classes around, back when there’d been a SHIELD.

“You’re not going to be a monster,” he’d told Skye, praying he could make it true. “Not ever.” But then, honesty made him add, “but we do need to talk.”

Phil had spent the ride back to the Playground with Skye cuddled at his shoulder, while he texted Clint that he’d found his lost duckling.
Funny you should say that, Clint texted back. We got ours too. Going to go dark soon. Don’t panic if you don’t hear.

Phil wasn’t panicking about that.

He was panicking about what he needed to tell Skye when they got back to the Playground.

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Skye took the news that she suspected she might be part alien surprisingly well. As long, she said, as it didn’t mean she was destined to become a murderous asshole, she could handle some benign alien goop.

She was far less pleased with being told that Phil suspected she might be part alien because, unlike him, she had not been having long periods of disassociation during which she carved strange symbols on every available surface. In fact, she’d yelled. A lot. None of his explanations about classification and not wanting to worry her until he had answers, and it being his call as Director, had helped.

She’d stalked his office in circles, snapping things like “you can’t just not tell people these things,” and “some of us actually care what happens to you, and not because you’re Director,” and “don’t you pull that need-to-know crap on me, it’s bullshit,” and “just because you’re scared doesn’t mean you get to run away; ask Clint how well that works… oh god, please tell me you told Clint.”

“Eventually,” Phil had admitted.

“Eventually,” Skye’d repeated, her tone flat. “And what’d he do?”

“He… proposed. Actually.” Phil fought down his blush; he was trying to be stern and Director-y, and likely failing miserably. He wished he were having this conversation at any other time than right after he’d nearly lost Skye, had been forced to talk to Ward, had gotten discovered and gotten engaged.

“He proposed?” Skye’s eyes went wide. “Really? Oh man.”

Her hug was so quick, Phil nearly thought he’d dreamed it.

“I gotta tell Kate,” she said, and pulled out her phone. “We need to plan a wedding shower.”

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Of course, that hadn’t been the end of it; he wouldn’t have expected it. Skye’s questions about her own mental health only took on more urgency. What if whatever had made her react better to the serum was just delaying the madness, not stopping it? What if she’d go down hard and fast like her father? What if they never found out-- should she have stayed to talk to him after all? Should they ask Raina? Would she even know anything, or just use it as leverage against them?

“Actually,” Phil had said softly, “thanks to Clint, we may finally have some answers.” He’d explained about the drawings in the sand, Clint’s realization they were meant to have depth, the side-lit pictures, the holotable. How they might give him something to build off of, to complete the design properly.

“I want to be there when you do it,” she’d said. “You owe it to me.”

“It’s not…” Phil paused, too many words on the tip of his tongue, all of them true and none of
them really explaining his profound reluctance. It’s not exciting, it’s not dangerous, it’s not dignified, it’s not-- it’s not how I want you to see me.

Yes, that was the bitter heart of it. He didn’t want to see the look on her face when he came to; it had hurt enough when it was Melinda, her face set as stone. It hurt worse when it was Clint, so unexpected, with compassion in his glance that was sharp as a knife. Both times, Phil had held his breath, waiting to see if either the stoicism or the tenderness was followed by the disgust he had thought, had feared would be there. Had waited for either of them to leave.

But, he reminded himself, there’d been no give me your side-arm, Phil. No I’m sorry, babe, I can’t. Instead, Melinda had reminded him she’d promised to have his back. And Clint had gotten down on one knee.

Phil looked up at Skye, who was trying her best to look determined.

She was, he realized, quite correct: he owed it to her.

“Okay,” he said, then swallowed and nodded once, sharply. “Okay.”

And so here she was, her hand in his, as the holotable flickered to life with the results of his sand-carvings, inverted, turned into blue lines as if molten electricity had been poured into the grooves, hardened, then the sand had been brushed away. They flickered and streaked.

“Well?” Melinda asked. Skye shook her head.

“It doesn’t… it doesn’t feel like much to me. AC?”

Phil was barely listening; he already felt the compulsion creep up on him again. But this time, there was something right about it, something saying yes in the back of his brain, electrifying his fingers. He slipped off his jacket and went to work.

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When he awoke and gazed on his creation, a deep sense of peace came over him, a rightness so ferocious it nearly rivaled the first time he’d kissed Clint, so very many years ago. A sense of coming home almost as strong as when he’d gotten engaged, two nights ago.

“You look better,” Melinda said, her dry tone grounding him somewhat.

“It feels right this time,” Phil told her, then turned to look at Skye. She offered him a shaky grin, and he hoped that watching him hadn’t given her new nightmares.

“Good,” was all she said, “maybe that’ll stop it?”

“Yeah,” Phil nodded. “Maybe.”

Honestly, he was absolutely certain, though he couldn’t have said why. What he didn’t know, was whether a fresh hell would come to take its place.

“So, what is this?” Melinda asked, gesturing to the diagram on the holotable, which had grown several levels and cleaned up. It looked somewhat like an anthill, seen in cross-section.

Skye was squinting at it, and as Phil watched she moved up to the table and tilted the projection, zooming, poking, prodding.

“I think,” she said after a little, “I think it’s a map.”
There was wonder in her voice.

“A map to what?” Melinda, again, ever practical.

Phil took another look at his handiwork.

“More than a map, I think it may be a city,” he said. “And as for the rest… I think it’s time to bring in Raina.”
Forward the Manuelbago

Chapter by Kathar, Laura Kaye (laurakaye)

Chapter Summary

What do you get when you combine a dangerous alien artifact, a flight instructor, an Avenger, a grandma, two secret agents on the run, and a souped-up Winnebago with a mural of Hawkeye airbrushed on the side?

No, really, what do you get? Clint needs to know.

So after Yolanda blew up the Whataburger, HYDRA and all, and after they had hauled ass out of the county as fast as the Manuelbago could go—which was pretty damn fast, now that Manuel had done some aftermarket tinkering, and Clint hadn’t even known you could put NOX boosters on an RV—they settled into a leisurely 45 miles an hour on a back road, running roughly parallel to I-95 toward Daytona Beach. Fortunately, nobody who had seen them with the missile launcher had lived to tell the tale, so their distinct vehicle, though it got a fair share of honks, wasn’t actually in danger of unwarranted attention for the time being. Manuel was settled into the driver’s seat with a giant muffin and a Big Gulp full of iced coffee, and Clint and Yolanda exchanged significant looks before moving into the back to talk to their new additions.

Clint knew Agent Rollette, of course, not only from Phil’s funeral but from before; a solid agent, just mellow enough to roll with the minor punches while still maintaining the ability to go deadly serious when the shit hit the fan. The other guy was apparently Yolanda’s cousin Zach--Zak--and when he got a minute, Clint was going to have to take a moment to really feel the swooping vertigo of relief that he was okay, that Yolanda hadn’t spent all that time helping Clint rescue agents while the one that mattered most to her was in trouble elsewhere.

Anyway, Zak had never worked with Delta that Clint could remember, but he seemed to know Rollette quite well, if the way he was hovering and the anxious pinch in his forehead were any sign.

“Agent Rollette,” Clint said. “Nice to see you again under happier circumstances.”

Rollette and Cousin Zak shot him identical side-eye, then looked down at the Trader Joe’s bag that Rollette had duct-taped around his forearm.

“Happier circumstances, sir?” Cousin Zak said. “Yolanda just blew up a Whataburger. With a missile launcher. I’m afraid to ask where you saw each other last time.”

Rollette sighed. “Agent Coulson’s funeral,” he said, and Cousin Zak winced.

“Ah,” he said. “Yeah.”

Clint was filled with the conflicting intense desires to a) tell Rollette the good news or b) take him straight back to the Playground as a present for Phil, maybe with a big bow on his head. There would probably be hugging. If he texted ahead, someone would probably video it for him. Before he could decide what would be better, Yolanda broke in.
“There was nobody in the Whataburger except Hydra,” she pointed out. “And we got away and nobody got hurt. So I’d say, yeah, that’s pretty damn happy.” She fixed Cousin Zak with a gimlet stare. “So. What the fuck are you doing, getting yourself killed like that? Abuela is beside herself.”

Cousin Zak swallowed hard. “I didn’t get myself killed, Yo--”

“You were trying to,” she snapped. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that Bag-Hand here was the only one trying to sneak out the back.”

“‘Bag-Hand’?” Zak repeated, in a strangled voice. “Bag-Hand?”

“As nicknames go, it’s no ‘Jets,’” Clint murmured. Yolanda glared at him, then turned back to her cousin, who still seemed too nervy to settle. Adrenaline, or suspicion?

“So introduce us properly, then, jeez, Zak. You SHIELD types. You get so cute with the identity thing and the ghost in the system thing I wonder if you even know who you are, anymore.”

Rollette, unexpectedly, cackled at that and glanced at Zak. Clint mentally upped the odds that Yolanda’s cousin had either worked for IA or was deep cover.

“I’m Joe,” he told Yolanda, pasting on a smile so guileless he had to have learned it from Phil, “Joe Rollette… Agent of DUCK.”

Clint choked.

Zak glared at him.

“So you thought DUCK was a good one to try on my cousin and an Avenger?” Zak asked, then sighed hard, turning to Yolanda. “Joe was SHIELD, like me. We met up after the Triskelion fell, on the run from Hydra. Been laying low with his family for a while. Speaking of which--” he jerked his thumb towards the front-- “Manuel? Thought he was in OKC after he split from the Air Force? And an Avenger? In a Winnebago? I know Savta’s a force of nature, but this is a little hard to believe even from her.”

“Oh, no,” Yolanda told him, “Manuel and I just happened to be visiting when you told Abuela you were coming down. I picked up Jets here on the way. And the ‘bago comes fully-stocked.”

“With rocket launchers?” Rollette asked, sounding bemused. He’d tucked his bagged hand under his other arm, attempting nonchalance, and Clint eyed it closely. He had also noticed Zak’s not so subtle subject change after Rollette’s introduction, and decided to chase after that once the two had let their guards down a little.

“And Kalashnikovs, a harpoon gun, and a case of pepper jack beef patty MREs,” Yolanda shrugged.

“It used to be Agent Coulson’s,” Clint broke in, and Rollette stopped in the middle of whatever he was about to say.

“Ah, yeah, that explains it,” he sighed, some weird combination of amused and forlorn and, Clint thought, probably exhausted. They’d have been on the run more than long enough for the crash to be a doozy when it hit. “So… how’d you meet Zak’s cousins?”
“On the run from Hydra, same as you,” Clint told him. “I asked Yolanda to bring me back to DC, but they blew up her plane so we ended up roadtripping in this old thing.”

“Which you then let Manuel get his hands on?” Zak asked, finally calming down enough to collapse next to Rollette. Yolanda handed him a protein bar, already unwrapped.

“Well, Jets here got the Impala squashed by a chicken truck,” Yolanda said, biting into her own bar. “Seemed only fair. Don’t think I don’t notice you trying to change the subject from the one where I yell at you for trying to get yourself killed.”

“Are we engaging in family bonding, or are you actually attempting to reprimand me, here? Because you took a secret agent on the run from modern-day Nazis on a roadtrip back to Nazi central, in a recreational vehicle smuggling heavy weaponry, some of which you just used to blow up at least a dozen more Nazis. And you’re the one who said, after Parris Island, that you would, and I quote, ‘strap a buoy to my butt and rent myself out as a paddleboat’ before you got near the family business again.”

“Couldn’t find a buoy,” Yolanda shrugged. “And you ought to be grateful I know a guy who’s in the ‘saving stupid-ass ex-SHIELD agents from themselves’ line of work.”

“That you, sir?” Rollette asked Clint, turning to him nearly desperately. Clint figured he, too, was finding the family reunion a little overwhelming.

“It’s a hobby,” Clint told him, “and I owed Yolanda a favor or ten. Speaking of, while I’m sure Abuela is an amazing woman, you don’t normally find SHIELD agents headed back to the bosom of their families when Hydra’s on their tail. If you need help, you’ve got it, but you gotta tell us what it is. Otherwise, I guess we’ll drop you all quiet-like somewhere of your choosing, whether it’s Abuela’s loving arms or a train station. That is, if you can get that thing on a train unnoticed.”

He nodded his head at the bagged hand.

Rollette and Zak exchanged a look.

“C’mon,” Clint said, winding up for the low blow, “you think I could live with myself if I let one of Coulson’s ducklings down?”

Rollette closed his eyes, and heaved a big sigh.

“Oh my god,” Zak said faintly, “‘Coulson’s ducklings’? Is that why Trinh was so set on DUCK?”

“Yeah, I was gonna ask,” Clint said. “DUCK?”

Rollette sighed, a longsuffering expression on his face. “Department of Unknown and Covert Knowledge,” he said.

“Oh,” Clint said, then thought about it for a minute. “Wait. ‘Unknown Knowledge’?”

“Like SHIELD was that much better,” Rollette said. “A backronym is a backronym.”

“True.” Clint grinned at him. “Hey, if you made it ‘unaccessible’ knowledge--”

“I don’t think ‘unaccessible’ is a word,” Zak said, frowning. “Isn’t it ‘inaccessible’?”

“Forget accessibility,” Yolanda said. “We aren’t done planning. And also, what the hell is with the duck thing.”
Rollette smiled a little, but his eyes were sad. “There’s a group of us who all had the same mentor at SHIELD,” he said. “Agent--”

“Coulson,” Yolanda said gently, though she shot a sharp-eyed look at Clint, who tried to give her a version of Phil’s eloquent eyebrows to convey that he was aware of the potential complications, but probably just ended up looking like he had a gnat in his eye.

“Yeah,” Rollette said. “He was a fantastic mentor, and he encouraged us to make friends, took us on special training assignments, pulled strings so that we could observe him on ops. The other senior agents started calling us his ducklings.”

“I think Hill started it,” Clint added. “Like, she didn’t mean it in a bad way, or that you guys weren’t good agents or anything. It was more to tease Phil, because he always said he was only doing what anyone would, refused to believe it was anything special.”

“Which was bullshit,” Rollette said, his voice going unexpectedly heated. “I had friends who went through that program with other mentors, and they were lucky if they got a ridealong once. Most of them spent the whole time watching powerpoint decks about field ops because their mentors were too busy to do more than the minimum. Agent Coulson was busier than all of them, and he still took the time to--” he broke off, clearing his throat. “I mean. He did more than he had to. A lot of us wouldn’t be alive if it weren’t for him.”

“He saved your life?” Yolanda asked.

“I mean, not directly,” Rollette said. “Not in the sense you probably mean. But without the things he taught me, I don’t know that I would have made it out of DC the day that Hydra attacked.” He looked down, rubbing at his bag-covered wrist. “Trinh was running an op that day, half her team was Hydra, but she told me later that she knew exactly what to do, what Agent Coulson would have done.”

Clint felt a giant grin spread out over his face. “Aw, Agent Nguyen? You’ve talked to her? She’s okay? I’ve been keeping an eye out--for all of you, honestly--but I never heard anything. I hoped you’d just gone to ground, but…”

“Yeah, she’s fine,” Rollette said. “We all are, Sarah and Cap too.”

“Joe,” Zak said, warning in his tone.

“Seriously?” Rollette said. “Are you seriously worried about me compromising us right now? To your cousin and an Avenger?” He turned to face Yolanda. “Your cousin’s a nice guy, ma’am, but he has got to work on his trust issues.”

She snorted. “Speaking of which, I notice we still haven’t gotten around to discussing the Bag-Hand in the room.”

Clint pulled his attention back to business. “Agent Rollette--”

“Call me Joe,” Rollette said.

“--Joe. Spit it out. What’s the deal with the bag? Do you have like a murder hand under there or something? Did you put on a cursed ring like Dumbledore?”

Zak snorted. “You’re closer than you think,” he said.

“You know, if this had ended differently you would have been talking about my noble sacrifice,”
Joe told him. “Just because it didn’t actually explode--”


Zak and Joe exchanged eloquent looks, then Joe nodded. Zak turned to face them, straightening his shoulders with the unmistakeable--to Clint, anyway--air of an agent about to be debriefed.

“We were just wrapping up a mission in Reston when we received intel that Hydra was about to make a move to obtain an 084 from an Army warehouse nearby where a large amount of confiscated SHIELD property was being stored,” he said, and Clint got a sinking feeling in his gut.

“Go on,” he said.

“We don’t know what it is, but our source said that it would be disastrous to allow Hydra to take control of it, and that we should absolutely not open the case it was in.”

“Let me guess,” Clint said. “You opened the case.”

“Isabelle Hartley opened the case,” Joe said. “I have no idea why she was even there, but she wasn’t the only one; there was another guy too, some kind of powered guy. He was Hydra. So there was kind of a three-way tussle going on, and the case got knocked over, and I dove for the 084.”

“We knew it was dangerous, but not how,” Zak said. “But our contact said not to let it open--”

“--which shattering on the floor would definitely count as,” Joe finished.

“So you caught the dangerous thing, then what?” Hartley was working for Phil now, Clint knew. He was definitely going to try to connect Joe and his crew back to the Playground, once the pressing issue was resolved.

“It lit up,” Joe said. “Glowed. With these strange symbols, circles and lines.”

Clint sat forward, attention sharpening. “These symbols--”

“They looked like the ones painted on the RV,” Joe said.

“They look like the ones on Savta’s tablet,” Zak said at the same time, looking at Yolanda. “You know, the one Raoul took with him when they got out of Argentina? I’ve been trying to remember everything she said about it, but--” he waved his hands around. “I was just a kid, you know? It was all just Savta’s stories, and honestly I liked the spy ones better.”

“I would never have guessed that,” Joe muttered.

“We had to cut off communication with base,” Zak said, with an air of getting-back-to-business. “Hydra was tracking our frequency. But the last info we got from our source was that Joe shouldn’t let anyone else touch the 084 but him.”

“Hence the bag?”

“Hence the bag,” Zak said. “At least that way we didn’t have to worry about accidental contact.”

Clint nodded, conceding the point.

“So you were going to bring this thing to Abuela’s house?” Yolanda’s voice was rising, and she was looking longingly at the Kalashnikov cupboard. Clint didn’t think she wanted to shoot her
cousin, really, they just seemed to comfort her somehow. He could understand that.

“We were going to try to get to the same town, buy a burner phone, and text her a picture or something,” Zak said. “I hoped she’d know something about it, some story Raoul told maybe. If there was something I needed to see in person, we could work out a dead drop or something. I wasn’t going to put her in danger, Yolanda, give me some credit.”

“Like Abuela cares about danger,” Manuel called from the front of the RV. “Did you actually listen to any of those spy stories? That woman’s a menace, and I mean that with the greatest possible amount of love and respect.”

“Yolanda,” Clint said, trying to deflect the brewing family argument. “Your phone is secure, can you send her the message?” Yolanda’s phone had recently received a security upgrade, courtesy of joint Stark and SHIELD tech.

She heaved an exasperated sigh. “Yeah, sure,” she said. “If I don’t, she’ll somehow know what we’re doing anyway and turn up dangling off an overpass or something, so we might as well.”

“I’ll cut the tape, Joe,” Zak said.

“Yeah, then you’ll all get as far back as you can,” Joe said. “I don’t want to be responsible for what’ll happen if Manuel hits a pothole.”

“Excuse you,” Manuel called. “I completely redid the shocks on this baby, you wouldn’t even feel it.”

“Still,” Joe said. He got up and carefully moved as far back as he could, sitting on the bed in the back and shuffling until he was pressed up against the wall. Zak pulled out a pocketknife and carefully sliced through the tape, which they had intelligently wrapped on top of some paper towels so that once it was cut it could just be pulled away.

“Now get back,” Joe said. “All of you.” He glared at Zak until he got up, rolling his eyes, and moved to press himself with Clint and Yolanda against the opposite wall of the RV.

“Get your phone ready,” Joe called. “I don’t want to keep this thing exposed any longer than I have to.”

“Got it,” Yolanda said. “I’m gonna have to get closer to take the picture though.”

“Use the zoom,” Joe said.

“Fine,” she said. “I’m ready when you are.”

“All right.”

Clint could see sweat glittering at Joe’s hairline as he slowly pulled his hand out of the shopping bag, and then there was a chorus of gasps as orange-gold light filled the RV, radiating from the object he held in his hand.

“Wow,” Yolanda said, then brought up her camera and began snapping pictures, the artificial shutter the only sound besides the hum of the RV’s tires, the whir of the air conditioning, and their breathing.

Clint could see perfectly at much farther distances than that, and he felt a swoop in his guts as he looked at the blocky shape in Joe’s hand, traced all over with the glowing symbols that he’d last
seen carved into wet sand, stark in the moonlight.

He wasn’t sure if this was a good sign or a bad one, but it was undoubtedly connected to whatever had happened to Phil. Maybe, if Yolanda’s Abuela really knew about the symbols, this would be the thing that cracked the case, the last breakthrough to helping Phil, curing him, saving him.

He let himself think of it, just for a moment, while Joe turned the 084 to different angles for Yolanda to photograph. They’d get the clue, and Clint would get Joe to swing by wherever he was keeping the others, and Clint would pile them all in the Manuelbago and swing up to the Playground like Christmas morning. Look, Phil, Santa Clint brought your baby agents back, and also a cure for the alien mind-altering insanity juice! I think I’d like a June wedding, how about you?

“Sent,” Yolanda said, and Joe shoved his hand back inside the bag, tucking the whole thing against his side.

“What now?” Zak asked.

“Now we wait,” Yolanda said, “and see what--”

“COME on baby shake your body do the CONga,” her phone blared.

“--or she might call us back immediately,” Yolanda added, while her phone informed them that no, it couldn’t control itself any longer. She hit the screen and raised the phone to her ear.

“Abuela--” she started, then stopped talking, flinching a little in surprise. Clint couldn’t make out the words, but he could hear the sound of rapid-fire, old-lady Spanish. Yolanda could barely get a word in edgewise, and when she finally hung up, her expression was kind of shell-shocked.

“Abuela’s going to meet us in Daytona Beach,” she said. “She says we should go straight there, no detours. She, ah…” she looked around, obviously trying to think of a way to say something, then shrugged. “She says we have to go on a quest.”

Clint groaned. “Suddenly,” he said, “I really wish I’d brought my body armor.”

“Yeah,” Joe said, looking morosely at his bagged hand. “I feel you, Hawkeye.”

They didn’t make it as far as Daytona Beach. Manuel had been taking them down side roads, leading them through fields and housing developments and thick wooded areas where Spanish moss dripped from branches and palms both short and tall obscured the road. They were on the Old Dixie Highway somewhere a little north, Manuel had told them, of Destination Daytona (which sounded more like an Epcot ride than a suburb, in Clint’s opinion), when Clint felt Manuel brake hard.

“What the fuck?” he and Yolanda asked in unison, as they picked themselves up off the floor.

“Someone’s got car trouble,” Manuel said shortly, pointing out the windshield.

Clint came up and looked over his shoulder. They were nearly at a t-intersection with a little two-lane named, improbably, Broadway, and there was nothing for what seemed like miles around but more trees. And the other road. And a Buick Century that looked like it was from the last one. The hood was up, and a figure was leaning against it, staring right into the headlights.

As far as Clint could tell, the figure wasn’t holding anything particularly threatening, but Yolanda, looking over his shoulder, hissed.
“What?” he asked, trying to keep the anxiety out of his voice. If there were an immediate threat, Yolanda would undoubtedly have said so.

“Zak, get up here,” Yolanda snapped, instead of answering him.

“What?” Zak asked, coming around the curtain and crowding Clint even further into the small space between the front seats. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted you to see what you made your grandmother do,” Yolanda said, pointing out the windshield, “that’s all.”

“Oh god,” Zak groaned, contemplating the woman by the side of the road, who had put her hands on her hips and was, Clint was very sure, glaring at them through the gathering twilight, “Savta. I hope nothing’s actually wrong with that car, she’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

“You’re already never gonna hear the end of it,” Manuel told him.

“Um,” Clint said, “but is anyone going to go get her? Or are we waiting for her to just teleport herself in?”

“Go on, Zak,” Yolanda said, but it was too late. They all heard the side door open, and gravel crunch on the shoulder as Joe stepped out.

“Hey, there,” he called, his voice coming thin through the closed windows, “you must be Abuela?”

He was advancing on the grandmatronly apparition, his un-bagged hand held out in welcome, and his other hand stuffed behind his back.

“I’m Zak’s friend,” Joe continued, “why don’t you come in? Do you need a hand?”

Zak winced—Clint couldn’t tell if it was from being blamed, or because of the unfortunate hand connotations.

Abuela was advancing now, resolving herself into a tall woman with a short shock of salt and pepper hair and a hatchet face remarkably like Yolanda’s, and she was saying something.

Clint rolled down his window in time to hear:

“... to see one of you has some manners. I want to see my grandchildren, are they inside, by any chance?”

“Sure, sure,” Joe said, and he held the door open for her, nodding her inside. It felt like the entire RV rocked as she came in, and Clint could have sworn time stopped in the long moment before she appeared inside. Anyway, he could tell that Zak and Yolanda had frozen.

Then Abuela was inside, frowning in what Clint could only categorize as disappointment, and shaking her head.

“Did your parents teach you nothing? You’d leave an old woman by the side of the road and just sit there staring at her?”

“Sorry,” her grandchildren muttered, in a chorus.

“Well, hurry up and get out there,” she said, sounding only a little mollified, “you’ll have to tow the Buick while we talk. Manuel, you and the young man with the arms here can do that. Yolanda, there’s a box in the trunk. I didn’t think you all would have had dinner.”
“You… you didn’t cook, did you?” Yolanda asked, sounding scandalized.


Clint wrenched open the passenger-side door and slid out, with Yolanda following him. Behind him, he heard Zak ask

“What about me, Savta?”

“You,” she growled, “are going to sit here with your friend and tell me just what the hell you’ve been up to.”

As they headed for the car, Clint leaned over to Yolanda.

“She can never meet Edna,” he said.

Yolanda turned to him, her eyes wide in the gloom.

“Shut up, Jets,” she said. “Don’t tempt fate.”

By the time Clint and Manuel had gotten the Buick hitched up to the Manuelbago, Yolanda was already inside. Clint could see her at the counter, unwrapping sandwiches. She looked back at her cousin every so often, then turned back to her task, shaking her head.

“You know,” Clint said to Manuel just before he opened the side door-- which prominently featured his own torso and ass-- “here Yolanda told me she was the black sheep of the family, but the more of you I meet, the more I think she’s just typical.”

Manuel snorted behind him.

“Don’t tell her that,” he said. “She put a lot of work into her image. She’d hate to hear it’s cracking.”

“Oh no fear,” Clint agreed, and went inside.

Zak and Joe appeared to be just finishing telling Abuela their story. Joe had the 084 out of its bag and Abuela was leaning over, peering at it closely. She looked up as Clint and Manuel came in, and sniffed.

“You two took your time. Yolanda, hand your cousin a sandwich. Manuel, you better get this tub on the move. We can’t assume these Hydra people haven’t picked up your trail again.”

Manuel did as he was told, and Abuela turned back to Clint, looking him up and down with an intensity that reminded him of Melinda May at her finest.

“Well then,” she said, “who’re you, Arms?”

“Uh… I’m Clint,” Clint said, wondering if anyone in the family was ever going to bother with his real name anyway, “I’ve been working with your granddaughter.”

“Uh huh. Aren’t you the one from New York? Guy shooting aliens with a bow?”

“That’s him,” Yolanda drawled, and handed Clint a sandwich. “It’s no pepper jack beef patty, but you’ll live,” she told him, before turning back to her grandmother. “He owed me after DC, I called
in the favor to find Zak here.”

Abuela sniffed once.

“And you know our Yitzak, as well. All right. Mr. Rollette, you can put that thing away. Zak, get my purse. Yolanda, come sit. I have a lot to tell you and not a lot of time to do it in.”

Yolanda sat, Joe put the 084 back in its bag, and Clint bit into his bologna sandwich and tried to find a place to perch.

Abuela dug into her purse, pulling out lipstick, travel kleenex, sanitizer, a nail file, a plastic checkbook cover, a comb, a taser, and a packet of mints before she finally found what she was looking for.

It was, at first glance, an old letter, still in a faded lavender envelope. But when she unfolded it, Clint could see the scralling on it was a crude map.

“I was going to take a picture and send it, but on second thought I didn’t know how secure your line was,” Abuela said. “Plus, I couldn’t figure out how to get the camera to work on my phone. Jaime hasn’t been down to help me set it up; no time for her family these days.”

“Jaime’s at Quantico right now,” Yolanda whispered in Clint’s ear.

“So,” Abuela continued, giving no sign she’d heard the aside, “I had to come find you. This map was my Raoul’s. Something from his family, he said. You see, it has the same symbols, here, on the side.”

Clint leaned over, and saw them scrawled in the lower right corner, like someone had left themselves notes. The others leaned too, Zak pausing in the middle of tearing up Joe’s sandwich for him.

“Raoul never told me much about his family, and well--” here Abuela paused, looking a little misty-- “I usually put it down to how busy we were. We met hunting Nazis, you know. The ones that tried to hide in Argentina after the war.”

“We remember,” Zak said.

“Well, your young man and Arms here don’t,” Abuela told him, “so you can be polite. We were so busy with the Nazis, and then with all the coup d’états, that it didn’t occur to me until later how little he told me. But he did used to tell me that he’d got tired of waiting, you see, and left them. All waiting for a sign, he said. That they were worthy of a gift.”

“That… sounds more like a cult?” Clint ventured, and got a snort for his troubles.

“I thought so myself,” Abuela said. “Especially when he told me you found your sign, and you went to a sacred place to get your gift. But he was a good man, and I loved him, and he didn’t seem like he wanted to wander off searching for any sign, so I didn’t let it bother me.”

“Did he used to show you the map?” Yolanda asked, looking as wide-eyed as a toddler having a story read to her. “Is that how you knew?”

“No, I didn’t see that till he was dead,” Abuela told her. She turned to Clint, her eyes suddenly bleak. “We got out of Argentina barely ahead of a death squad,” she said. “We got safe all the way to Miami. And then one day, Raoul is crossing the street and he’s squashed by a taxi. Welcome to America! And suddenly all I have to remember my husband is a closed casket, a debt for funeral
expenses, some clothes, and a little locked trunk he dragged all the way from Buenos Aires.”

“Believe me,” Clint told her, the words getting stuck in his throat, “I know how that goes.”

“Hmm.” Abuela studied his face for a moment, eyes searching. “I suppose you do. It’s a bitch of a thing, isn’t it?”

Clint thought of himself and Natasha, lugging Phil’s trunk through the Marriott. He thought a letter, of crying himself hollow with *Midsomer Murders* playing in the other room. He thought of Phil, and of the sick roil of hope and dread that had lived in Clint’s guts ever since he’d come around the corner and seen Phil lost inside an alien compulsion.

“It really, really is,” he said, and she reached out with a roughened hand and patted him on the forearm.

“Anyhow,” she continued, “I cut the lock on Raoul’s trunk. I thought maybe there was money in it, or papers… things from his family, maybe. Something to live on, or something to remember him by. And there were a few things like that; a necklace, a pressed flower.” She smiled, her expression going a little distant. “A picture of us on our wedding day. But most of the things were… strange.”

“Strange how?” Zak asked. He was leaning forward too; they all were, even Joe in the back corner with his bag, hanging on Abuela’s every word.

“A few more pictures, of people I’d never met, taken somewhere I’d never been,” she said. “Mountains, but not any mountains I’d ever seen. Some of them had these notes on the back—not in his writing. Mostly they said something like ‘awaiting a sign,’ but some of them had a date on them, and then something about a gift. The gift of foresight, or the gift of flame, things like that. It didn’t make much sense.” She shook her head. “There was a carved stone tablet—you kids have all seen it.”

Zak and Yolanda nodded.

“The map and the note were at the bottom, tucked inside a notebook,” she said, and rummaged in her bag again, pulling out a small notebook, bound in stained brown leather and floppy with age and wear, scraps of torn paper bristling from the edges. “It’s Raoul’s journal. Most of it is stories from his travels, but there are a few parts near the end that I think are probably relevant to the current…” she looked over at Joe and clucked her tongue. “Well. Situation, I suppose.” She handed the book to Zak. “Read the pages I marked,” she told him.

Zak turned to the first bookmark and looked down in surprise. “It’s in English.”

“Raoul’s father was English,” Abuela said. “He could do the accent, too, make himself sound like Laurence Olivier if he wanted; it would melt a girl’s panties right off.”

“Savta!” Zak protested, his ears turning red.

She rolled her eyes. “I have seventeen grandchildren, this shouldn’t surprise you,” she said. “Now read, or we won’t be done by the time we get there.”

He cleared his throat. “July 17, 1938,” he read. “Last night we finally arrived at our destination, the home of many names, called variously Elysium, or Shangri-la, or the Summer-lands; but described to me more simply as After-life. A fitting name, for it is here that one comes to find a way into a higher kind of life, richer and more fine.” He looked up. “Are you sure this wasn’t a cult, Savta?”
“Keep reading,” she said.

He sighed, but obeyed. “J. came out to meet us despite the late hour, carrying a lantern with a blue shawl thrown over her hair, like a Madonna of the mountains. She welcomed us as though we were her long-lost children, coming home through peril and want. I have never clung particularly to religion, but I understood, upon meeting her, why R. called her a saint. There is a kindness in her eyes as deep and mysterious as the sea.”

“He never spelled out any of the names,” Abuela said. “But I think R. was his friend Ricardo. He used to speak of him, more than any of the others. J. was the leader of the group, as far as I’ve been able to tell.” She nodded at Zak. “Go on; read the next section.”

“October 3, 1939,” Zak read. “At last, I have reached the next stage. Though there have been many times since our arrival that I have struggled with J.’s rules, questioning why she has us wait and train so long before we are admitted to the inner circle, I now understand why it is so important. The Diviners are harsh lords, implacable and pure in their judgement, and to approach one too soon would be to sign one’s own death-warrant.” He turned the page, then looked up, startled. “There’s a sketch,” he said. “Joe, it’s—it’s the 084.” He held up the journal, pages facing out, and Clint could see it; one whole page taken up with a rough drawing of the item that Joe was currently holding inside of a brightly-colored shopping bag.

“What does he say about it?” Clint said.

“Hang on, let me see,” Zak said. “Um, okay. Here.” He took a deep breath. “When I am myself permitted to undergo the Rite, I can only hope that I shall come through it as well as young C. did last night. She strode to the dais unafraid, despite knowing that the penalty for the unworthy is death, and grasped the Diviner without hesitation. Immediately it came alive in her hand, the Words revealing themselves unto her in a great golden light. When the next Pilgrimage departs for the holy city, she shall be among them, her sign given and her destiny sure.” He turned the page. “It is difficult to restrain my eagerness to be among the pilgrims; although the supply of Diviners is large, it is not unending, and there is a part of me that fears, unreasonably, that they will all be gone before I am permitted to take hold of one. However, I must have trust in J. to manage our legacy, and to ensure that none embark on their journey before they are truly prepared for their Gift.”

“So the Diviners aren’t people, they’re these things,” Joe said, lifting the bag. “Does it say anything in there about people having to keep holding on to them once they got their ‘sign’? Because my hand is kind of cramped.”

“Not specifically,” Zak said. “But the way he talks about the person who held it getting to go on a pilgrimage? That sounds like it didn’t happen immediately, and surely if she had to hold on to it the entire time he would have said something, right? Wherever this Afterlife place was, it sounds pretty remote; getting anywhere would take a while.”

“Maybe you could try loosening your grip a little at a time?” Clint suggested. “And if it looks like it’s doing anything you could tighten up again?”

“Maybe,” Joe said. “I’m still kind of concerned about that ‘penalty for the unworthy’ thing. I wouldn’t want to hurt you guys just because my hand got tired.”

“You have to sleep eventually,” Zak said, brow creasing with worry. “Maybe you’d better try what Agent Barton’s suggesting.”

Joe sighed. “I hear you,” he said. “Tell you what, finish reading the journal, and then unless we
find out something else that makes us think it’s a bad idea, we can pull over somewhere with a little more space than this RV and try it.”

Zak nodded, flipping to the next marked section. “August 10, 1940,” he read. “The newest group of supplicants arrived yesterday, bringing with them disturbing news from Europe. How could it be that we did not already know there was a war? After-life is remote and isolated, true, but there are always people going in and out, not only the pilgrims and the supplicants, but J.’s lieutenants, charged with making connections and obtaining supplies. I begin to wonder if she has been keeping the state of things a secret from us; but to what purpose? I have long since been in the habit of taking long walks, to appreciate the beauties of nature and to be alone with my thoughts; I believe that I will make my way down to the village, in hopes that someone there has a radio and can provide additional news.”

“He wasn’t going to hear anything good, not in 1940,” Joe said.

“Hush,” Yolanda told him. “I want to hear the rest of this.”

Zak turned to the last marked section. “April 17, 1941. I can no longer bear to stay here doing nothing, while all of Europe writhes beneath the suffering and evil of war. The threat is real, clear and present, but even though the Gifted in our number could well turn the tide, J. refuses to hear of any plan of offering aid. I have begged her, time and again, but she maintains that the affairs of mere humans are as nothing to we who are Chosen for greater things. Enough. It is no great calling to sit idle in the mountains, contemplating our own elevation while our friends and families drown in a lake of blood. I am leaving in the morning, and those who are of like mind will accompany me. I admit that there is part of me that mourns the chance to one day take up the Diviner myself, to join a Pilgrimage to the holy city and unlock the Gift of my ancestors, but I am resolved to my course, and I shall not waver. I have in stolen moments sketched a map of the city’s location, as best I was able to glean from the stories of the pilgrims and the carvings on the temple walls; perhaps one day, when the war is won, I will be able to journey there on my own, unburdened by the knowledge that my own elevation comes at the expense of my brothers. For now, though, more pressing matters loom.”

They were all quiet for a moment, absorbing what they had heard.

“Wow,” Joe said at last.

“I see why you married him, Abuela,” Yolanda said.

Zak laughed. “I saw why she married him when I saw his picture,” he said. “But yeah, I know what you mean.”

Abuela smiled, somehow managing to look both wistful and smug. “I married him for many reasons,” she said. “All of them were good ones.”

“Mrs.--um,” Clint said, stumbling when he realized that he didn’t actually know Abuela’s name.

“Call me Mercedes, young man,” she said.

He smiled at her. “Mercedes,” he agreed. “Can I see that map?”

She handed it over. “I hope it helps,” she said. “I never could figure out where it was a map to, but then, I wasn’t the navigator in the family.”

Clint looked at the map, turning it over to squint at it from different angles. There was something familiar about it, nagging at the edges of his memory. “I feel like this is somewhere I’ve been,” he
“Sadly, that doesn’t narrow it down much,” Joe said.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Yolanda agreed.

Zak leaned over, looking at the map. “Those thick lines,” he said. Are those walls?”

“Yes!” Clint would have snapped his fingers if his hands hadn’t been full. “I knew I recognized this place. This is Old San Juan; it was throwing me off because this map doesn’t show the newer part of the city.”

“So, wait, the secret holy city is San Juan?” Joe tilted his head, puzzled. “Wouldn’t someone have, you know, heard about that, if people were taking alien artefact pilgrimages there?”

“I think the secret holy city is under San Juan,” Clint said. “There’s a spot here that he’s marked an entrance, right in the middle of Castillo San Cristóbal. That place is full of tourists; if it wasn’t well hidden, someone would know, especially given how dangerous those Diviners are.”

“Huh,” Zak said. “Actually, that makes a lot of sense.”

“How so?” Yolanda asked.

“Cisterns,” Zak said. “Castillo San Cristóbal has these enormous cisterns that were used as bomb shelters during World War Two. Easy enough to hide an entrance, and it gives you a good excuse for being there, too.”

“Well, then,” Abuela--Mercedes--said. “That’s easy enough. You’ll have to take the Diviner to San Juan.” She smiled at Joe. “And then you can receive your gift.”

“Um,” Joe said. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I suppose you could wear that bag permanently,” she said. “Although I suspect it would put a damper on your social life before long.”

“She might be right,” Zak said. “I mean, not about your social life! But if, ah, our source was correct and you’re the only person safe to touch the artifact, I’m a little concerned about our ability to store it safely. Not to mention Hydra’s still after it.”

“If there were multiple Diviners, but only a limited number, and these pilgrimages somehow… used them up,” Clint said, thinking out loud, “then maybe whatever caused the pilgrims to get their ‘gifts’ was the same thing that makes the artifacts dangerous. It’s possible that if we take this thing to San Juan, we can make it safe, keep it away from Hydra permanently.”

“I can’t say I wouldn’t be happy to see that happen, and the sooner the better,” Joe said. “Just one problem; how are we going to get there? Unless this thing is a lot more customized than it looks, we can’t exactly drive an RV to Puerto Rico, and Hydra will be watching the ports.”

“Aha, now that we can handle,” Yolanda said. “We’ve got a plane in Daytona, if you can call it that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that plane,” Clint protested. “It’s a perfectly good plane.”

“Sure, if you’re a middle-aged orthodontist.”

“...I think that’s actually the cover we used for the registration,” Clint admitted.
“Why am I not surprised?”

“So, wait,” Zak said. “Are you saying you can fly us there? Quietly?”

“Should be able to, if Jets here uses his connections on the flight plans,” Yolanda said.

“I mean, there’s a lot of doctors in Florida with planes,” Clint said. “A lot. We needed something that blended in.”

“Archery-themed transportation, for the love of god,” Yolanda mused. “I suppose I should be happy we didn’t end up with a Dodge Dart instead of the Winnebago. Or, what was that other one, a Plymouth?”

“Plymouth Arrow,” Mercedes suggested.

“Right, that piece of shit.”

“There were good cars named for arrows,” Clint said, stung.

“Name one,” Yolanda countered.

“1933 Pierce Silver Arrow,” Manuel called.

“Ooooh,” Zak said.

“Point,” Yolanda said.

“We couldn’t have all fit in one of those, though, so it’s just as well,” Mercedes said.

“Anyway, it’s a good thing we have the Archer and not something smaller,” Clint pointed out, “seeing as how we’ve got to get at least four people to San Juan.”

“Four?”

“Two pilots to switch off, so we can fly through without stopping overnight,” Clint said, pointing to himself and Yolanda. “Joe, for obvious reasons of, you know, pilgrimage-slash-not-dying. And your cousin, because I’m pretty sure that if we tried to leave him he’d, like, duct-tape himself to the tail of the plane or something.”

Zak raised his eyebrows. “Hey, man, you’re the one in the middle of our op,” he pointed out. “Joe and I started out together, we’ll finish it together.”

“As I was saying,” Clint said, “I’ve worked with SHIELD for too many years not to respect a man’s field partner. Zak comes with.”

Mercedes nodded. “You four can take my car to the airport,” she said. “Me and Manuel will take the RV over to Clearwater. If anyone looks, it’s just a nice young man and his old grandmother having a little vacation, and while they’re trying to figure out where they lost you, you’ll be halfway there.”

“I don’t like to think of you putting yourself in danger like that, Savta,” Zak protested.

She scoffed. “If you think I wasn’t doing much worse when I was younger than you are now, you didn’t listen very well to my stories,” she said. “I fooled Nazis just fine then, and I promise, I haven’t lost my touch since.”
“I really want to hear more of your stores, Mercedes,” Clint said.

“Once you get this situation settled, get my Yolanda to bring you by for a visit,” she said. “I’ll tell you about the time I met Peggy Carter.”

“Oh, man, Ph--” Clint caught himself. “I mean, I have a friend who would love to hear about that.”

“That’s right, you run with Captain America now, don’t you? Bring him with you when you come. I’d like to see if the stories were true. I’ve heard some things,” she said, her dark eyes twinkling, and Clint resolved that he was going to bring both Cap and Phil to see her at the earliest reasonable opportunity.

An idea struck him, and he rummaged around in his pockets until he found a receipt from a Piggly Wiggly that they’d stopped at for snacks just inside the South Carolina border. Grabbing a Sharpie from his pocket (he always kept one on him, they had a surprising number of uses), he scribbled on it “IOU one visit with Captain America and Hawkeye,” signed his name with a flourish, and handed it to Mercedes.

Yolanda rolled her eyes, but he could see a little grin hiding at the corner of her mouth.

“What?” he said. “It’s about time I did one of my own.” And maybe by then, he didn’t add, Phil would have had a chance to reveal himself to more people, and Clint could bring him around to meet Mercedes and whatever other family members happened to be present without worrying about giving away secrets that weren’t his to reveal. Maybe by then, they would have been able to tell the other Avengers, and he could give Phil the great gift of watching a tiny Argentinian grandmother run rings around Captain America.

Phil would get better, Clint thought to himself again. They were close, he could feel it. They would figure it out, and then Phil would get better, and find Skye and get his ducklings back, and maybe recruit some more of Yolanda’s family to SHIELD, and Natasha would help them break the news to the rest of the team.

And then they’d all go to Taco Tuesday, hashtag familydinner, and let Kate and Skye get excited about planning their wedding shower and Basil get excited about tiny sandwiches for their reception, and they would get married and they’d rebuild SHIELD and they’d save the world; together, together, always together.

Everything was going to be fine, better than fine. Everything was going to be amazing.

Just as soon as they dealt with the 084. And Hydra. And possibly the US Army.

Everything was going to be fine.
Phil knocked at the door, then squeezed his eyes shut, rocked back and forth on his heels, and tried to breathe.

He had really hoped it wouldn’t come to this.

After he and Melinda and Skye had figured out that his carvings were the schematic of a city, their next step had been to talk to Raina. She’d been eager to talk, insinuated she could help, and Phil had taken a chance and brought her to see the map. He’d watched her hands tremble over the blue light of the holotable.

“See, Daisy,” she’d breathed, “this is it, this is our destiny.”

Skye’d shuffled behind Phil, but her voice had come out even when she spoke.

“Yeah, but where is it?” she’d growled at Raina.

“I don’t know,” Raina had replied, sounding rather put out about it. “Your father might have, or maybe he knew someone who did. He promised me, anyway. Promised me that once we had you…” she’d shrugged. “Well, you and the Obelisk. We would go and I would have my gift.”

“What is the Obelisk, and what does that have to do with it?” Skye’d asked.

The look on Raina’s face as she turned, Phil thought later, should have been enough to warn him. It was his own damn fault; he was still too exhausted from the carving he’d done with Clint, the scramble to find Skye. And still too drained and relieved from the release seeing the map had given him. He hadn’t been paying attention. It had been a rookie error.

“Whatever you call it,” Raina had sighed. “The 084 that SHIELD retrieved from the Army warehouse, when I took you.”

“We didn’t get the object,” Skye told her. “Our people tried, but someone else swooped in.”

“No--” Raina faltered, looking confused. “That doesn’t make sense. My information--” she stopped, shaking her head. “You had three teams. Two escaped in quinjets, and one escaped in your SUV. They had the 084. And I knew if I took you,” she pointed at Skye, “to see your father, one way or another you’d lead us back to SHIELD and we’d have access to everything we needed. I admit the manhandling wasn’t my first choice, but then your father…” she sighed. “He loses control at the least convenient moments.”
“But we don’t have the 084,” Phil had told Raina. “Someone hijacked the SUV. They told our operatives they were SHIELD, but they weren’t ours. We suspect independent operatives.”

“But…” Raina had turned back to the map, looking drained. “But… Hydra was following them. A man named Carl Creel, who can--”

“We know,” Phil had said.

“Well, then. If they were on their own, then it may be too late. Hydra probably found them.”

“Maybe,” Phil said. “Or maybe not.”

Her shoulders had squared, and Phil should have known then.

---

“All right, then I need to contact Daisy’s father again. He’ll come. He’ll know how to find it, to find the city. He can help.”

If he’d only paid attention to the way her eyes had lingered on the map, Phil thought, they might not be here.

But while Phil had been checking in with his contacts within Hydra-- while he’d been having a nice steak dinner with one of them, as a matter of fact-- Raina had managed to slip away from her SHIELD keepers. They’d been escorting her to a spot she’d planned to meet up with Daisy’s father, when they’d been waylaid. The last they’d seen Raina, she’d been stepping into the back of a black van.

He had to assume she was on her way to Hydra. She must have thought they had the Obelisk.

As best Phil could tell from his contacts, that wasn’t-- yet-- the case. But Phil they might be on the track of whoever’d stolen the 084 out from underneath everyone’s noses. And until he knew what it did, he couldn’t risk them getting it first. Raina thought it was a gift, but Raina had odd ideas about gifts, and Phil’d managed to find some of the few files on the 084 that had been buried deep in the Playground’s vaults. The one thing they all agreed on was not to touch the damned thing.

Put that way, he felt sorry for whoever had grabbed it from Hartley.

So, Phil had planned, if Raina couldn’t help, on co-opting a satellite station and do some searches using ground-penetrating imaging, looking for anything that might match the honeycomb structure of the map. He’d had a station all picked out, one in Australia that should be easy to infiltrate if he did everything right.

But he didn’t think he could wait that long. He needed access-- or access to someone with access-- right now, if he wanted to stay ahead of Hydra.

So Phil waited at the door, swallowing hard. Skye stood next to him, and he felt the back of her hand brush his. He didn’t want to do this.

Eventually, yes, it’d have to be done, but some place more controlled, some time of his own choosing, someplace with back-up. He shouldn’t have brought Skye along either, in case there was fall out, but they’d had no other options. He could only hope that he could talk his way out of trouble and into what they wanted quickly enough.

“You’ve got to have been in worse places than this before, boss,” she said.
“Not… many.”

“You know,” Skye sighed, “Clint’s right.”

“It happens a lot,” Phil agreed. “What’s he right about this time?”

“You can be a real drama queen,” Skye said.

Phil was still sputtering when the door opened, and he was grabbed by the lapels.

“BRO,” Basil cried, hugging him tight. “You’re late for dinner.”

---

“Urk!” Phil managed, reaching around to pat Basil on his massive back. He felt too stunned to do anything else.

“Hey Basil,” Skye said, tapping on his elbow, “I think you better lighten up. We need him alive.”

Basil lightened up, suitably apologetic, and then pulled away, holding Phil at arm’s length and beaming.

“Look at you, bro, look at you,” he said, sounding as proud at if he was seeing Phil all dressed up for his junior prom. “So happy for you, bro, seriously.”

Phil boggled at him. It’d been a long time since he’d seen Basil in the flesh, and apparently he’d lost the knack of interacting with him.

“Thanks?” he tried. Basil patted him on the shoulder.

“Welcome,” he said, and started backing up to let Phil and Skye in the door. Behind him, Phil thought he caught a glimpse of garlands made of cut-out paper, draped over a china hutch. “Hey, you nervous, bro?”

Yes, Phil was nervous, and not too proud to admit it. He nodded.

“Aw, it’ll be good, bro, seriously. Made for each other, bro, that’s you two. Peas in a pod.” He made a gesture like his fingers pinching each other, which Phil thought was likely meant to refer to the peas in question. “Maybe not same peas, no. One french pea and one… other pea. But in a pod, bro. In a pod.”

Skye, Phil felt certain, was snickering. He couldn’t see her, and he couldn’t hear her, but he knew. Also, apparently, the Skye-to-Kate gossip connection worked lightning fast.

As Phil followed Basil through the living room like the living room of at least half the little old ladies in Passaic, complete with a set of those collectible plates with soft-focus images of deer and ducks and tigers, he admired Edna’s sense of irony-- or dedication to her cover. Ahead of them the door to the kitchen loomed. Skye was already sneaking through, and he could see someone presenting her with what looked like a brandy snifter full of margarita.

“I can’t,” she was saying, “gotta keep my head in the game. We’re only here on a pit stop. Fuel and info.”

“Giving or receiving?” Edna asked, and Phil’s heart clutched. It was still recognizably her, but more cracked than it used to be. How many years had it been, anyway?
“Receiving, we hope,” Skye said, and glanced back out the doorway. Phil knew he was walking slowly. And she knew he was hoping she’d do the hard part for him.

She raised an eyebrow.

Right. Right.

Time to face the music.

“Clint left that little book here last time he came,” Skye told Edna, “at least as far as I remember. We need a number.”

“Clint can’t look it up in his Palm thingy all of a sudden?” asked someone who was out of Phil’s line of vision on the right. It took him a moment to place that voice, too-- Kate Bishop had grown up.

Phil knew his cue when he heard it.

“He could,” Phil said, coming into the doorway at last and looking over at her, leaving Edna in the blind spot to his left. “But he and Yolanda went dark twenty-four hours ago.”

Then he stepped quickly to the right, on the assumption that Edna might attack him. It wouldn’t be the first time.

---

Even with that preparation, the widening of Kate’s eyes was the only warning he got before Edna reached him.

He didn’t stand a chance; he’d been thoroughly kissed by a septugenarian with margarita breath before he could even dream of reacting. Phil blinked as Edna pulled away, patting his cheek as she went.

“That’s what you get for dodging, young man. I would have just gone for the cheek if you’d stayed still and taken it like a man.”

“I’m sorry it took so long,” Phil told her, taking a moment to look her over, relieved to find her looking mostly spry still.

“You better be,” Kate said from his right, far closer than he expected. And then she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. “Because I’m still mad at you, but I can’t punch you when you just got engaged.”

“Duly noted,” Phil said, lifting a hand to his cheek and coming away with orchid lipstick. “And another night, I really do want to stay and catch up. But tonight we need to see Clint’s book and then head out again.”

He looked pointedly at Skye, who gave him two thumbs up. The tail end of a taco was still in her mouth, dribbling shredded iceberg.

“It’s in the junk drawer somewhere,” Edna said, jerking her thumb over her shoulder in the general direction of her cabinets. “Basil probably knows.”

On the whole, Phil decided that Edna’s junk drawer was probably a somewhat safer and less obvious location than, say, Fort Knox, and moved aside to allow Basil to squeeze into the room.
“Get yourself a plate while you wait,” Edna told Phil, shoving one into his midsection and letting it go. He caught it reflexively and did as he was told, noting idly that Skye was already coming back for seconds. They’d been running from crisis to crisis for days, he reflected, and decided that maybe he could make his call from Edna’s back room.

Basil rummaged in the background, removing extraneous items from the drawer to aid in his search. As Phil watched, he jimmed free a ballpeen hammer and set it on top of a pile of twist ties, a tire gauge, two sets of broken bonsai shears, and a wallet calendar from the mid-90s. It might, Phil thought, be time to see about a back-up plan, just in case the little black book had disappeared into an alternate universe.

“It’s Edgar I’m trying to reach,” Phil told Edna as he sat down next to her. Kate and Skye were whispering on the other side of the table, both of them bent over Kate’s phone, and Phil hoped they weren’t researching wedding venues… or projectile weaponry. Either seemed likely.

Or wedding venues at which they could use projectile weaponry.

“Edgar?” Edna asked, looking blank for a moment, before her face abruptly smoothed into what could only be called lascivious nostalgia. “Whatever for?”

“We need access to satellite telemetry-- well, no. We need to search for something, we don’t know where in the world it is-- literally-- and we need access to a satellite that has an infrared camera on board. Last I heard, Edgar had access to one for those Mediterranean ruins?”

“Edgar retired from UCLA last year,” Edna told him.

“Damn.”

There went Plan B. Plan C… well Plan C involved a fake moustache and someone distracting a few Space X techs at the right time, and also the backup of a small team. Phil groaned, and took a forlorn bite of taco.

“It’s really that urgent?” Kate asked, and Phil nodded.

“We’ve got to find a lost underground city before Hydra does,” Skye explained, “and the woman who kidnapped me and tried to set me up with Crazy Dad, she’s seen the map, and she’s escaped and we’ve heard she went to Hydra. Plus, we think maybe someone else is taking some kind of WWII alien tech there, so we need to get there before Hydra does for sure.”

“Why don’t you ask ‘Zeg, bro?” Basil asked, lumbering up. The entire contents of Edna’s junk drawer was spread over the counter, and he held a slim black book pinched between two fat fingers. Phil took it from him.

“That… is not the worst idea,” Phil told him. “Presumably, the Fortune Teller would have contacts with satellites. I’ll call.”

“No need to call, bro,” Basil said. “They’re on their way anyway.”

“Huh?” Phil said.

“Taco Tuesday, bro,” Basil shrugged. “They were in town. Seemed rude not to invite ‘em.”

As Phil blinked up at him, the doorbell rang.

---
An hour later, everyone was seated around Edna’s big table, poking at the remains of their tacos, and Phil was still trying to digest the latest change of plans.

Waarzegster had come sweeping into Edna’s kitchen, multi-colored scarves billowing behind them, taken one look at Phil, and kissed him on both cheeks.

“Congratulations on your engagement, Director Coulson,” they’d said, and Phil had reflected that the Skye-Kate gossip connection was ten times faster than his usual intelligence network. “We’re to pass along Marcus’s congratulations as well.”

“Oh, good,” Phil said faintly, and Waarzegster swept on, just as nonchalant as if they hadn’t just met Phil in the flesh for the first time, nor ever mistaken Clint Barton for him. (The first time Phil had seen Waarzegster-- seen ‘Zeg, the full name was too long for Phil to think every time-- it had been over an exceptionally laggy FaceTime connection, with Nick Fury doing most of the talking. It hadn’t prepared Phil at all for the reality of ‘Zeg in person.)

“And you must be Agent Skye! How wonderful,” ‘Zeg said, taking both her hands and squeezing them. “We’ve heard so many good things about you. Well! Basil hadn’t said you’d be here.”

“They weren’t gonna be, bro,” Basil muttered, sounding a little chagrined. “But they need a satellite, bro, seriously.”

“A satellite?” Zeg had asked, and Phil had let Skye explain as he concentrated on eating. It seemed like the best way to make sure he didn’t end up explaining how they’d found a map to a buried city, or why Phil’d been carving on things in the first place…. He could feel ‘Zeg’s eyes on him, and assumed that the information would come out sooner or later.

Just so long as it wasn’t in present company. He could hash that out with ‘Zeg and Nick whenever Nick next felt like making an appearance.

As it turned out, Zeg did indeed have someone who owed them, and who had access to a satellite ground station. In fact, Zeg had someone who owed them badly enough that they were willing to link Skye in to their system so that she could provide direction from her laptop. She was currently munching on nachos with one hand while tapping at the laptop with her other. Zeg was sitting next to her, murmuring from time to time as they watched the laptop screen.

(“And what will this cost us?” Phil had muttered to ‘Zeg as Skye had gotten set up.

‘Zeg had looked over at him and given him a coy little grin.

“Consider it a wedding present, if it works out well. If it doesn’t-- our price is that you come back alive. We don’t want Marcus to feel compelled to come out of retirement.”)

While they’d worked, at Kate’s request, Phil had filled them in on the non-redacted parts of Clint’s proposal. Kate had grudgingly decided that on a beach under the starlight was a suitably romantic gesture, and that Clint hadn’t “let the Hawkeyes down”-- even if he’d been missing things like rings and a video of the event. She’d also been thawing towards Phil slowly, and he hoped that eventually she’d forgive him for the state he’d left Clint in, when he died.

“Well, wherever him and Yolanda are, I hope they’re safe,” Kate sighed as Phil brought his story to a close. “And get back soon.”

Phil was about to nod in fervent agreement, when she continued:

“Because I’ve got America’s Moms’ catering schedule for spring already, and they book fast. So I
“I-- are you planning our wedding for us?” Phil asked. “Already?”

“Coulson.” Kate’s eyes were bleak, like she’d seen things that she couldn’t erase. “Do you have any idea how long it takes to plan a wedding?”

Phil’s response, thankfully, was cut off by Skye exclaiming

“Got it!” while Zeg sat back with a satisfied sigh.

Skye flipped the laptop around so everyone could see.

“San Juan. Puerto Rico,” Skye said. “The imagery is a perfect match, give or take a few offshoots of the sewage system. Looks like it’s under some old fort there.”

“The Castillo San Cristobal,” Zeg said, leaning forward. “We have contacts in San Juan who can provide you with more information. But we wonder… San Juan is jogging a memory. Please give us a moment.”

They pulled out their own cell phone and began to scroll and poke, their face growing more and more concerned as they went.

“We’ve had several of our sources providing information from suspected Hydra associates,” they explained, “as we know you have as well, Director Coulson. Tell us, do you know the name Dr. Daniel Whitehall?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Phil said, leaning forward as well. “We’ve suspected he’s very high up in Hydra’s new command structure.” In fact, he’d only learned the name a few days previous from a dead drop message from Bobbi Morse. He’d have to thank her-- the next time he was able to see her in person and not pretending to by Hydra herself.

“Then it concerns us greatly that he and several of his staff have decided on an unscheduled visit to San Juan,” Zeg told him. “In fact, by now they may already be there.”

Of course, Phil thought to himself. Of course. Life couldn’t let up even long enough for him to finish his barbacoa.

“Ah,” Zeg continued, “our sources have been able to send us a picture of some of Whitehall’s guests. Do you recognize this man?”

Skye got the first look, and paled.

“Agent Skye?” Zeg asked gently.

“That’s the man who says he’s my father.”

There wasn’t much to be done after that except toss a few tacos in a tupperware, grab their coats, and leave immediately. Phil was already on the line with Melinda as they walked out Edna’s door, telling her to scramble the other quin and whoever she could find and join them in San Juan. Alphonso Mackenzie was coming along for tech, and bringing Leo Fitz with him, and the thought hurt Phil’s heart. Fitz’s speech was still intermittent, and Phil had no idea if he’d be able to interpret any of the readings Skye was sending. But they had no one else-- Jemma was still undercover and he’d sent half his engineers to... other areas where they were needed.
It would take them a little while to scramble, Phil knew. Meanwhile, he and Skye and their pilot could head south and see if they could head Hydra off at the pass.

At the fort.

Whatever.

“Hey,” Phil said as he banged onto the quinjet, which was parked and cloaked in the vacant lot across the street from Edna’s, “we brought you dinner. Eat it on the fly.”

Agent Triplett pulled his boots off the dash and took the tupperware, eyeing it greedily.

“Thank you sir. Wheels up when? Now?”

“Now,” Phil agreed.

“And our guest?”

Phil turned. Kate Bishop was standing on the quinjet’s ramp looking mutinous, and she had one of Clint’s go-bags and his spare collapsible bow-case, with her.

“Clint would kill me if you get yourself killed before he can put a ring on you,” she told him. “And I’ll kill you if you make him sad again. And you don’t have enough back-up. You need a Hawkeye.”

Phil thought about arguing. He thought long and hard about arguing.

Then he remembered Clint telling him about the clown pants, and about Skye’s start with SHIELD, where he’d dragged her off mostly against her will. He shrugged.

“You come with, you’re following my command,” he told her, and she glared at him, but nodded.

“All right. Strap in. Trip, get us out of here.”

Trip did.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience with these later chapters! We're slowing down to about a post every other day on tumblr, sometimes a little less, just because real life doesn't have a "pause" option.

It really should.
“Well, okay,” Rollette said, looking down at the floor, which had suddenly opened at his feet, “that was unexpected.”

Clint had to agree. Even by the standards they’d been keeping to, this latest turn of events seemed a tad too Indiana Jones for belief. They’d landed and found the Castillo San Cristobal easily enough and followed Raoul’s notes to la Garita del Diabolo, one of the sentry towers (with a name that was not at all concerning, not even a little.) From there, they’d wended their way into the vaulted catacombs beneath the fort. Once there, however, the journal had abruptly stopped being helpful, saying only “in ancient times, the seas were lower, but today the seeker must descend through the hole and enter the city from above.”

How one found the hole, or created it, he didn’t say. They’d been searching long enough that Yolanda had begun to mutter about going up to find a jackhammer. Clint had refrained from mentioning that he didn’t think they had time-- Hydra was on their tails. Manuel and Mercedes had sent warning from Florida that Hydra’d picked up their scent at the Daytona airport. From there, Clint knew, it wouldn’t take them long to figure out where the Piper Archer was headed.

While Clint was busily attempting to hold back his comments, Zak had given up trying to pry up flagstones and wandered over to a column to beat his head gently against it.

Which, of course, was when a decorative relief on the column fell away, and the section of flagstone at Joe’s feet split, dropped, and ground backwards.

They all moved up and gazed down into the darkness.

“Well,” Yolanda sighed after a while, “damn good thing I brought that grappling line, huh?”

In the end, and not without substantial argument, they sent Zak down first and Joe down second. Well-- technically they sent cold lights down first, but Zak shortly after, when the dim blue lights revealed nothing extraordinary at the bottom. Both Joe and Yolanda frowned as Zak descended slowly, but neither of them said anything.
Clint didn’t know what they could say-- Zak had been entirely accurate when he’d pointed out that Joe would need to have one hand for the 084, so he wouldn’t be able to deal with unexpected obstacles. And of the two of them, Zak was both smaller and better trained in this kind of work than Yolanda.

“Your own fault, going Marines, Yo,” he’d told her. She’d glared at him, then stuffed another handful of protein bars in his pockets.

“Just in case you get lost, baby cousin. Like that time when you were eleven, and Abuelo had to pick you up from the Piggly Wiggly in--”

“Okay, lower me!” Zak’d yelped at Clint.

Clint had taken pity on him and started lowering.

Joe slipped down into the shaft after Zak had given a quick confirmation that all was well. Yolanda still looked faintly mutinous as he disappeared into the darkness. She wasn’t any better than Clint was at staying behind, he knew, and he poked her to distract her before she could do something stupid like jump in.

“Marines, really?” he asked her. “Or was that just Zak’s idea of funny?”

“Well it certainly wasn’t the Marines’ idea of funny,” Yolanda sighed. “You can probably guess why it didn’t work out.”

“I--” Clint paused, trying to decide what response would stand him the least chance of being punched hard in the arm. “Um, they never--”

At that moment, Zak saved him.

Of course, he did it by screaming in agony, which wasn’t the route Clint would have preferred he take.

---

As he descended on the makeshift harness Yolanda’d created, Joe had focused his attention equally on his firm grip on the line and on Zak’s upturned face. He’d been mouthing something too soft for Joe to hear, but it looked a little like “gently, gently.”

Midway down, one of Joe’s extra cold lights had dropped out of his pocket, nearly hitting Zak on its descent. Zak’d scrambled after it as it went rolling off, disappearing from view. Joe tried not to let it worry him, or to tug on the line to get Yolanda to lower it faster. Still, he was relieved when he got down and found his footing, to see Zak hunched in a corner, curled over a cold light.

“Hey,” he started, unlatching himself, “how are--”

And then Zak turned to him, and Joe could see he was clutching his hand, and staring down at it in horror. Symbols marched over his palm, glowing faintly, exactly like the ones on the 084 still wrapped in its Trader Joe’s bag.

“Zak,” Joe whispered. “Zak, what--”

Zak’s only answer was a scream.

While Joe watched he fell to the ground, still clutching one hand with the other, and started
rocking, screaming, while those damned symbols flitted over his hand, crawled up his arm and disappeared. For one fleeting moment, Joe thought maybe he’d somehow managed to touch the 084. But it was bagged, and Joe’d been hanging midair.

As Zak shifted, he saw the symbols etched on the stone floor, gathering the faint blue light.

What the hell had he gotten them all into? And why hadn’t he argued when Zak had wanted to come down? Just because he was stupid enough to want company in the dark?

“ZAK!” That was Yolanda, screaming a hundred feet above them. Joe looked up, to find her and Clint staring down at them. “Zak! What’s wrong? Are you-- Joe, get him to the harness!”

“Come on!” Clint yelled, joining her. “Or I’ll come down!”

Joe looked at them, then back at Zak, who was still writhing.

“You can’t!” he yelled. “What if happens to you too? Stay there! I’ve… I’ve got him. He’s… I’ve got him.”

He dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around Zak, trying to keep the bag over his hand from dislodging. Zak shuddered beneath him, screams turning to whimpers, most of them soundless but a few of them Joe’s name. He was helpless to do anything but hold on and hope he wasn’t watching Zak die in his arms.

Zak stilled, at last, after one final nearly incoherent “Joe-- go.”

He was, Joe noted, breathing-- if shallowly.

“Hey Zak,” Joe said, “give… give me a status, okay?”

Zak turned to look at him, and Joe pulled away in shock. His eyes were pure black.

“Fuck-- fuck !” Joe scrambled backwards as best he could one-handed.

He wasn’t fast enough to avoid Zak’s attack.

Zak came on hard and fast, knocking Joe back against the floor with a strength Joe hadn’t known he possessed. As his hands closed around Joe’s neck, Joe reached up to pull him off. Zak flailed blindly out to intercept him-- and pulled the bag off of the 084.

He heard Clint yell from high above him, and looked over.

The 084 was gleaming, all its tracery glowing from within. And if he really tried, Joe could reach Zak with it, and maybe save himself before he passed out.

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“Please,” Joe choked, and couldn’t end the sentence-- even if he’d had breath he wouldn’t have known how. Please let me live? Please don’t make me kill you?

Zak stared back at him, eyes blank. Then, after what seemed like the longest moment of Joe’s life, Zak slumped backwards, releasing his grip. Joe scrambled away, still holding the 084 high, and saw Zak’s gaze follow it.

Zak was otherwise motionless as Joe got to his feet, stock still and settled as if he was just another pillar among the many Zak could see dimly in the darkness. A passage in Raoul’s diary floated
into his mind: of them, one may become guardian and guide to the seeker. But what of the others, I asked? Of them, I would say nothing.

“Zak,” Joe whispered, “will you take me to the temple?”

Zak looked down at the 084 again, and then turned, ponderously slowly, facing into the gloom, in a clear demand for Joe to follow him. The movement was so unlike Zak’s normal movements, which always seemed somehow too intense for his small frame, that it killed Joe to see. He’d leapt into the underworld for Joe (or SHIELD, or the adventure of it-- Zak was capable of them all), and he’d lost himself.

“What the hell is going on down there?” Yolanda called, her voice shaking. “Is Zak… is he alive?”

“Um,” Joe said, looking at Zak then up at her. “I really hope so.”

He explained what had happened, or at least the best he could figure, and Clint and Yolanda cursed.

“I better come down,” Clint said, and started pulling on the line.

“So’d I,” Yolanda added. Joe sucked in a breath.

He wanted them down there-- well, he didn’t want Yolanda to see her cousin this way, but he’d have been real grateful for her at his back. And Hawkeye, well, that went without saying. This was just the kind of mission he thrived best in, or so Agent Coulson had always said.

“Best man to have at your back,” was how Coulson’d put it. Joe rubbed his WWACD bracelet with his thumb.

Too bad he wouldn’t get to test that.

“You can’t,” he yelled back up. “It might happen to you too.”

“I’ll take that chance.”

“No, you can’t--” Joe bit his lip and started again. “Sir. Agent Barton. I can’t beat you, if you attack me. And I don’t know… we can’t lose Hawkeye. You’re not replaceable. You need to stay up there. And… so does Yolanda. Or else I don’t know how I’m gonna face Savta.”

There was silence above for a long moment, and then Clint growled

“That is such bullshit, Rolette.”

Joe waited.

“But it’s your mission, agent.” Clint sounded exhausted; Joe knew he felt that way himself. “And it’s your call. We’ll stick with the plan. You just try and bring Rodriguez back with you so we can fix him.”

“I’ll do my best,” Joe said. He reached out to lay his free hand on Zak’s back, letting it fall when he got no reaction. “I’ll do my best.”

Zak started forward then and Joe followed, letting himself be led into the darkness of the ancient city.

---
“Why are we still up here, Jets?” Yolanda asked after fifteen minutes.

Clint forced himself to stop staring down into the darkness of the shaft and turn towards her. His neck cracked as he straightened.

Yolanda looked as frustrated as he felt to be left behind, waiting for possibly no good reason. And she had more reason, since they had no way of knowing what had happened to Zak.

“‘Cause we’re both hopefully less stupid than we used to be, and Rolette was right,” Clint sighed.

“Was he? ’Cause I’ve got to explain this one to Abeula, and right now I’m not liking the way that conversation’s gonna go.”

Clint ran his hands over his face and thought about his answer-- he didn’t think she was asking for logical arguments.

“He’s wearing a damn bracelet asking what Coulson would do,” Clint finally told her. “And Phil didn’t train idiots. If I’d trust my own assessment, or Phil’s, I’ve got to trust his.”

“You understand that the Coulson I met is the one who let you believe he was dead for a couple years.”

It was probably a good thing she didn’t know about the creepy carving, Clint decided.

“He was scared--”

“I know. And he could’ve used back-up but went without. So-- how sure’re you Rolette’s not just doing what Agent Coulson would do, huh?”

“Maybe,” Clint allowed. “Phil always did like the stupid self-sacrificing types; reminded him of himself. But while Phil can be a self-sacrificing asshole, he never let that get in the way of his mission or his team. Or let anyone he trained get away with that kind of shit.”

Now was probably not the time to mention that it was frequently Clint himself that Phil had to reprimand on that count most frequently. Yolanda probably took that as read.

“We’ve got to trust Rolette’s assessed the situation correctly. And he’ll get your cousin back to you, if anyone can. But if Hydra does find us, if they get down there--” Clint shrugged. “All bets are off. Ten years ago I’d have ignored him and jumped down that hole, but I am trying to learn a little in my old age.”

Yolanda glowered at him, as if he’d just offered her another pepper jack beef patty MRI (Yolanda had no taste) but she did nod, reluctantly.

“I hate being sensible,” she grumped. “And I hate waiting for shit to happen, instead of just going to find it.”

“Well, that explains why you’ve been hanging out with me,” Clint said.

It earned him a dry cackle and the offer of a protein bar-- one of the primo peanut butter ones. Clint accepted it gratefully.

“Of course, when it comes to staying behind, Phil was always worse than me,” Clint mused, taking a bite. “He’d probably have agreed completely with Rolette’s analysis, waited until they’d started off, then jumped in anyway.”
“So in this case, it’s ‘WWACND’?”

“ND-- oh,” Clint laughed. “Yeah, it’s do exactly what he wouldn’t do. Everyone thinks that man is patient, but it’s all a damned act. He just has a longer view than most anyone else. I mean-- you saw the Winnebago. But if he doesn’t have an end in mind, he’s horrible. Me, if I can get into sniper brain I’m okay for ages. But it narrow my focus a bit.”

He thought about that for a little, how Phil had been patient for so many years, waiting for Clint to get his head on straight, or so Clint had thought, only to find out Phil’d been dealing with the nerves the whole time by building a cache about the size of a dragon hoard. Clint, meanwhile, had narrowed his focus so far to get through the not having Phil yet bit that the only target he could see was them both retired.

“From where I’m sitting, Jets, you’re both as bad as the other,” Yolanda cackled.

“Uh. Probably,” Clint sighed. “But trying to get better. Speaking of which, do you think we should go for a June wedding, or is that too cliched? Because Kate said--”

At that moment a canister grenade came rolling down the stairs, and ‘what Kate said’ was just going to have to wait.

“Oh thank god,” Yolanda groaned as she grabbed the canister and flung it behind her straight down the open shaft, “Hydra. Fucking perfect timing.” She caught the next canister that came down the stairs, and flung it back up.

“So I take it you don’t want to hear about wedding colors either,” Clint said, as he sent a couple explosive arrows up the stairs, caroming off the walls before detonating somewhere in the smoke above.

“It’s purple and purple,” Yolanda griped. “And I assume more purple. And is there another way in? Because I think I hear them behind us.”

“Arg,” Clint said, “I do too. I’ll get them-- hold us off there.” At least the waiting was over.

Five extremely action-packed minutes later, as the smoke cleared, they took stock. At least ten bodies lay scattered over the stone floor, all in various shades of ops black, and another several were still caught in the stairs. It’d been the kind of fight Clint most hated; no option for anyone to retreat, all close-quarters, and anyone you left functional might just become a problem in the future so you didn’t.

He looked over at Yolanda, who was twisting a bandage around her bicep and trying not to look sick. She’d overcompensated and gone into scarily stern-- if he were Hydra and still here he’d be shitting his pants.

“You gonna be okay?” he asked, and she nodded, briefly.

“Me, yeah, but Jets-- look at the shaft.”

He looked. The line was gone from the side of the shaft, but it wasn’t cut-- it looked like it’d been pulled out of its moorings from below.

“Goddamnit, they’re down the rabbit hole,” Clint sighed.
“Seems that way,” Yolanda replied. They both stared down the shaft a little longer.

“I got another grappling line,” she said after a while.

“Never doubted you,” Clint replied. “I’ll strip the bodies; anything you want me to get?”

Yolanda stared at him.

“How about some more lights?”

“Lights. Check.”

“And batons. Knives. Machetes. We can’t all be you; I shouldn’t be shooting in that damned dark.”

“The Marines don’t know what they missed,” Clint said, and went to do as he was told.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter won't post on tumblr till at least Monday.
“All right, stay back and wait for my signal,” Coulson said, as he peeked down the hallway, gun held out. “There may be hostiles.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Kate sighed. “Just like the last three hallways.”

Coulson frowned at her. He didn’t turn, but she could see his face reflected in the windowpane to their right.

“I could send you back to the quinjet,” he told her.

“Assuming I could find the quinjet or didn’t run into another Hydra patrol,” Kate snarked back.

He shrugged in a kind of “valid point” way.

She was pretty sure she could find the quinjet-- return to the roof, stumble around until something invisible broke your nose-- but not running into Hydra patrols was what he was trying to prevent, so ….

Kate’d felt so proud, too, when Coulson’d paired up with her as they infiltrated the Theater Didn’t Catch The Name, where Zeg’s information had put Hydra’s ops center. Zeg couldn’t fully explain why Hydra was congregating here in ever greater numbers, but Coulson and Skye had figured out that the Theater stood above the hidden city. They’d muttered some SHIELD-y things at each other that had seemed to mean, in the end, that they thought Hydra was planning on just cutting its way through bedrock to the city below, which was both cool and a little terrifying.

So here they were, just her and Coulson, trying to neutralize as many Hydra operatives as possible while finding out just who was running this whole shebang. Zeg had mentioned some guy named Whitehall was maybe gonna be around, and that had seemed to please Coulson far too much.

Meanwhile, Skye and Trip were supposed to be finding and destroying whatever James Bond device Hydra was using to cut into the earth.

Kate’d felt proud up until it’d become clear that either Clint had somehow failed to convey to
Coulson her extreme level of badassery, or else Coulson was set on ignoring it.

Three Hydra patrols so far, and he’d taken all of them out and left not a one for her.

She was starting to feel coddled.

“I’m starting to feel coddled,” she told Coulson. “You wouldn’t treat the other Hawkeye this way.”

“The other Hawkeye,” Coulson sighed, “was trained as an assassin, as well as a sniper, a field agent, and a circus performer. You’re amazing, Kate, but you’re still a talented amateur and I’m fairly sure Clint will end our engagement if I get you killed.”

Kate was fairly sure it was either her, or himself, that Clint would be mad at in the event, but didn’t think it would help.

“Well I’m not doing you any good back here, Coulson,” she sighed. “And you’re just lucky neither that gun nor the goons have attracted attention yet. By the way?”

“Hmm?” Coulson prompted when she paused.

Kate waited a moment longer, still watching the shadows on the window.

“Duck,” she snapped.

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Coulson did just that, probably out of reflex.

Kate leaned back and shot, sending two arrows pinging off the column of the gallery in front of them, then back at two more Hydra goons who’d been sneaking up on them around the corner.

Coulson looked out at them, then back up at Kate— and behind her at the window.

She saw the moment he realized that Kate had been watching the Hydra team’s reflections as she shot, because his jaw dropped just the teensiest bit.

“Glad I came?” she asked him, when the silence became too tense.

“Rifle that one’s pockets,” he said, pointing at one guard, while leaning over to pull the other one towards him. “See if he’s got anything useful. Then we’ll head down the next level-- if Whitehall’s here, I’m guessing he’ll be set up down there.”

“Okay,” Kate said, rifling as requested. “What would count as useful, anyway?”

She tugged on something hard and kind of rectangular, trying to lever it out. Mace? Some kind of lightweight canister? Some nefarious new…

“Pez dispenser,” Kate said aloud, blinking down at the item as it came free.

Coulson looked over.

“Huh, a Sgt. Muttley head. Believe it or not, that’s worth something.”

“Great,” Kate sighed. “We’ll call this one a win for SHIELD.” She pocketed it and was getting ready to stand when Coulson froze. A moment later, she did, too.
Voices were coming from the floor below, floating upwards through the gallery.

They crept forward on their hands and knees.

“Yes, she’s here,” voice one was saying, all cultured, refined, and scary as shit. “A squad has just intercepted them; they’re being taken to the kitchens. Would you like to come? Family reunion time. Oh… did you think I didn’t know she was your daughter?”

Kate watched Coulson pale.

“What?” she whispered.

“Skye,” he said. “Her father… it couldn’t be. Why would he be here?”

“You don’t know what you’re dealing with,” a second voice said from below, sounding hearty in a way that set off alarm bells in Kate’s head. It was like her dad after too many martinis. “Or who.”

“Isn’t that what we’re here to find out, Dr. Zabo?” said the first voice. “Come, come, you don’t want to miss this.”

Coulson, Kate noticed dimly, was up, slinking around the gallery to the broad stairs. She slid over to the railing, and risked a quick glance down before backing away.

Two men were facing each other on the floor below, one white haired, one dark haired. She hated them both on sight.

“I won’t miss this,” Dr. Zabo-- Skye’s dad, apparently-- said. His voice had gone even silkier. “But I think you will, Whitehall. I don’t need you anymore.”

“Need me?” Whitehall asked, sounding more amused than anything. “The other way around, I think. You’ve served your purpose, Zabo. You brought me Raina, you helped me find this place, and here, here is your daughter, the final piece I need. Just like her mother, do you think?”

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“No-- you won’t. You can’t.”

“Well,” Whitehall purred. “We can find out. We have her, we’ll be in this temple, or whatever you think it is soon, and we’ll see just what kind of power it takes to create people like her mother… and how best to deploy it. Hopefully she survives it. I have plans for her. If you want to see her before I… get started… I wouldn’t delay.”

“Get started?” Zabo said, and somehow Kate thought he must be smiling through it. “Weren’t you paying attention? She’s here, the city is here, and from what your people say, the obelisk is here, along with the fools who took it. You’re not useful to me anymore. Or didn’t you realize that this is the part where I kill you?”

“Is it?” Whitehall didn’t sound at all worried. “Are you su--”

His sentence cut off with a quick gurgle, and Kate only registered she’d heard a faint “pop” after. Something heavy hit the floor.

“What… what did you do ?” Zabo wailed-- or maybe screeched, or some horrible combination of the two. (Weeched?)
“You’re welcome?” Coulson said, sounding a little wary-- as well he should, Kate thought. She scooted back to the railing just in time to see Coulson coming down the stairs, gun still held before him.

“But he was mine, you don’t get to kill him, you don’t get to take away my revenge, who the hell are you anyway?”

“SHIELD,” Coulson said quietly. “And given the number of Hydra squads in this building, it would be helpful if you could moderate your voice a little.”

“SHIELD. I should have known. SHIELD. As if you’re any better than them. You took my daughter from me. My baby. My Daisy. Took her and hid her… and now… now look what you’ve done! He. Was. Mine!”

He launched himself at Coulson, faster than thought, toppling them both to the floor as Coulson struggled to throw him off. His gun was gone; Kate’d watched it fly free and land somewhere beneath the gallery.

“Shit,” she breathed, “shit shit shit, oh shit.”

Coulson’d gotten Zabo off, but Zabo’d come right back at him, and they were fighting in earnest now. Or, Coulson was fighting, using all kinds of scary moves, efficient and destructive and strongly suggesting he’d earned his place on Strike Team Delta back in the day. To call what Zabo was doing fighting would’ve suggested strategy-- Zabo was just straight up trying to murder Coulson.

And he had the strength to do it, Kate thought, no matter how hard Coulson fought. She tried to go backwards for her bow, but quickly realized she couldn’t get the right angle to do anything with it. Still, there had to be something she could use to distract Zabo long enough for Phil to grab his gun.

She looked around her, but the hall was depressingly bare of projectiles, at least in the immediate vicinity.

“Die!” Zabo yelled, “die, die, die!” and something meaty thwacked against something else meaty.

Kate flung herself back to the rail and looked over. Zabo had Coulson on the ground and was pummelling him. Coulson was trying to get up, but a hit to the face like that--

She had to do something to get Zabo off. And she had to do it now.

Kate pushed her hand in her pocket, and came up with the Sgt. Muttley pez dispenser.

She flipped it over in her hand, and rattled it. It was full.

“What would Hawkeye do?” she whispered to herself.

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Probably Hawkeye would do something completely absurd but more effective than it had any right to be. She had absurd down; hopefully she could make it the rest, too. She took aim, flipped Sgt Muttley’s head back, and flicked the dispenser, ejecting a pez at high speed.

It hit Zabo in the back of the neck, just behind the ear, and bounced off.

He made a weird noise, and shook, and she flung another pez before he could go back to beating on
Coulson. This one caught him just behind the other ear-- and then Coulson’s forehead caught him on the nose, really hard.

While Zabo was crouched over, clutching his probably-broken nose, Coulson scooted away, already looking for his lost gun before he’d even gotten off his back. Kate didn’t stop to see if he got it. She riffled through her quiver looking for the arrow she was pretty sure Clint’d left in it and- yes, two lines of tape, and a little dot.

She pulled the arrow, shot, and grabbed the rope it ejected as it flew. The arrow embedded itself in a pillar on the far side of the gallery, and Kate slung her bow, grabbed the rope in both hands, and stepped up to the balcony rail.

She looked before she leapt, of course, and saw Zabo straightening up.

He went down again, when her feet connected with his back. Of course, Kate went down, too, somersaulting over his head and trying to roll far enough away that he wouldn’t be able to recover and grab her before she could get up.

“Who are you-- look at you!” Zabo yelled at her, staggering to his feet. “Look at her!” he told Coulson. “Does SHIELD brainwash every impressionable girl it comes across? How can you live with yourself, stealing children away like that to corrupt?”

“I’m not SHIELD,” Kate snapped, “and I’m not a child. And no one corrupted me, I made my own choices, clown pants and all. Which he’d do well to remember. But from where I’m standing, he’s a hell of a lot better option than you are for a role model.”

Zabo’s face did a weird thing, a kind of now, now young lady thing that looked uncomfortably like a face her own father would make.

“I’m not going to kill you,” Zabo said, firmly, pointing at her as if he’d disposed of her argument. “And I need to get back to what I was doing.”

“Oh, no, that’s fine,” Coulson said, sounding considerably less casual than normal, “I think we can be done with the attempted murder portion of events.” He’d done exactly what Kate’d hoped he’d do, and used the distraction to retrieve his gun and point it at Zabo.

“Oh go on, then, shoot me,” Zabo grinned at him-- and Kate took it back, he was actually worse than her father, when he was smiling-- “give it your best shot. That always amuses me.”

Coulson shrugged-- and shot Zabo in the kneecap.

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Skye heard the gunshot when she was still two corners away, and she gave up any attempt at silence and ran.

As she rounded the corner just before what she thought would be the gallery, a Hydra goon-- a kid-- Hydra goon-- ran into her side-wise, and she iced him nearly as an afterthought.

“Oh, seriously?” someone whined as she stopped just short of the last corner, trying to prepare herself. “That’s just pathetic. You can’t just try to disable me, that never works. See?”

“I can shoot you in the other knee, if that would help.” Coulson said in response, and Skye’s breath caught. He sounded nonchalant, in charge, careless-- so much so that she immediately decided he was in some kind of pain.
Shit. She shouldn’t have left him and Kate alone. Not that there’d been a choice-- with no clear picture of what was going on the building, they had to split up to make sure that one team would get through if the other failed. Hell, she and Trip had operated on that same principle a few minutes earlier, and she could only hope he really was on his way down to the drilling team, following Raina.

And hopefully not walking into a trap.

Skye’d been following a Hydra goon who was supposed to report to Whitehall-- only she’d had to take him out when he spotted her, and so now she was largely following gut instinct.

From where she was crouched, she could just see the lower half of a suit-clad body laid out on the ground. And Kate’s booted feet were standing over it.

She wasn’t shooting, and she wasn’t moving.

“It’d only delay the inevitable slightly. I’m guessing you’re Director Coulson,” the other man said, and Skye heard scuffling sounds, like someone getting up from carpet. “In which case, I have another bone to pick with you. Where is my daughter?”

“I wouldn’t put that much weight on-- oh, all right then, I guess you can-- Coulson said, his voice growing slightly fainter like he was backing away, “but do you honestly want her to see you like this?”

“Like this?” The man wailed, “this is good. This is even. I want my daughter! I know she’s here, I know she is. And it’ll be too late if she doesn’t go soon-- she can’t miss it. Her mother-- she can’t miss it.”

“Miss what?” Coulson asked, his voice even.

“Miss everything,” her father wailed-- and apparently pounced, judging by the “oomph” Coulson let out, and the yelp from Kate.

Skye flung herself around the last corner, to find Coulson on the floor, trying to fend off the blows of a man she’d last seen covered in blood and surrounded by dead bodies.

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He was less bloody now, but his face was desperate, and Skye found herself nearly nauseous. This was her flesh and blood? This was her daughter? She didn’t need Raina telling her she was a monster, with genetic evidence like this in front of her.

Kate had an arrow on her string, but was clearly reluctant to loose it, with Coulson so tangled up with Skye’s father.

“Hey!” Skye yelled, “hey get off him, stop! Stop!”

Coulson looked over, spotted her-- she watched his eyes go wide. But her father wasn’t listening.

“Goddamnit, look at me, turn and look,” Skye shouted, trying not to think too hard about it. “You wanted me, well I’m here, let him go and look at me.”

Kate was looking, anyway. That was something. Her face was filled with fear, and with something Skye thought might be compassion but didn’t have time to examine closely.
Skye gulped. She’d been trained by May to suck it up and make the hard choice. Trained by Coulson to sacrifice when it was called for.

Trained by Clint and Kate and their friends to use any weapon at her disposal. And she had to save Coulson, who was apparently planning on distracting her father by being a punching bag or some shit.

“Come on, look at me, leave him and look at me -- Dad.”

Her father stopped, one hand still grabbing Coulson’s shirt collar.

“Daisy?” he said, his voice high and heartbreaking. He dropped Coulson, who laid back and groaned, as Kate unfroze and began making her cautious way to him.

“It’s Skye,” Skye said, squaring her stance and tightening her grip on her icer.

“It’s Daisy,” her father insisted. “Like the song. Oh… oh look at you….”

“What did you mean I was going to miss things,” Skye asked, trying to keep him distracted.

“You look so much like your mother,” her father said, as if she hadn’t spoken. “So much… oh my baby, you’ve grown up so big.”

Behind him, Coulson was on his feet, gingerly checking his jaw, while watching her father. He whispered something in Kate’s ear.

“What did you mean, miss things?” Skye repeated. “Do you mean the drilling? The temple? Raina is here, I know she worked with you. Do you mean her?”

“Didn’t she tell you?” her father asked, “didn’t anyone tell you? Daisy, baby, it’s here. The Diviner is here… your destiny. Just like your mother… we can be a family, Daisy.”

There was blood on his knuckles, on his cheek, under his pleading eyes. Blood on the floor….

Behind him, Coulson looked at her, steady despite his pummeling, his eyes clear. He’d lied to her, said he was fine when all the time he was dying-- but that was kind of what he did, she knew, tuck himself away and try to spare everyone else pain.

Clint could have told her.

It wasn’t like going with her father was a choice, honestly. Not for vague promises about destiny and hints about her mother. But Skye was amazed how bitter it felt to hear him say it, anyway.

She cast one last glance at Coulson, and at Kate.

“I have a family,” she said, and she shot her father.

With the icer.

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He went down in a heap, and as he did, Skye belatedly registered Kate’s arrow sticking out of his behind and felt a moment of fear.

She hadn’t meant for him to die.
“It’s a taser arrow,” Kate reassured her, “a Clint special. The way he was going, nothing but a double dose was going to knock him out.”

“Uh huh,” Skye said faintly.

She went to kneel by his side, but only after checking Coulson over for damage. He gave her one of those sweet smiles he handed out at unexpected times. The ones that made you want to commit all kinds of crimes just to keep getting them. The ones that you always seemed to earn without doing much special.

“I have no faith that he’ll stay here if we tie him up,” Coulson sighed, “but I don’t see what else to do. Skye---”

“I don’t want him coming back with us,” she said, staring down at the man. He seemed peaceful now, but every upward breath made her twitch backwards.

“We can put you in different planes, but I think...” Coulson paused, looking up at her. “I think we need answers. I think he has answers. Skye-- we’re only just out of the woods with my brain, and I’m still not satisfied you’re safe. If he can give us anything...”

“... that can help us with the symbols?” Skye asked, trying to decide how she felt about it.

“That can help us keep you safe,” Coulson told her. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“He’s insane,” she protested, feeling tears come to her eyes.

“We’ll put him next to Ward; he’ll be in good company,” Coulson sighed.

“Dude,” Kate interjected, coming over with curtain cords to use as bonds, “how many psychos do you have room for in your dungeon. Or basement. I’m starting to rethink letting Clint hang around with you.”

Coulson cocked his head, and gave her a sad smile.

“That’s what I told him; just try stopping him.”

They bound her father’s wrists and ankles, then propped him against a pillar to tie up.

“That was sweet, by the way,” Coulson said, so low it was almost a mumble, “about family.”

“Yeah well,” Skye sniffled, “you know it’s true. Anyway, we’ve got a wedding to plan you guys, I can’t very well be gone for that.”

“You really don’t--” Coulson started, then stopped. Something was crackling in the pocket of the other dead guy. He reached over and pulled out a walkie.

“Yes,” he said, his voice turning crisp in what Skye assumed was an imitation of the dead guy’s voice.

“The drill is done. I’m sorry, sir, when we couldn’t raise you, we pulled back to wait. We tried to stop the girl, but she went in-- and we think someone else did, too. I sent a squad in after them.”

“Good work,” Coulson said evenly, which was impressive considering his face had gone chalk white.

“We have no more, I can’t get anyone to respond, sir,” the man continued. “But our second wave
lands in two minutes. Shall we have them meet us?"

“No,” Coulson snapped, “I’ll come.”

He tossed the radio away and looked up at Skye and Kate, closing his eyes briefly in pain.

“I hate to say this,” he started, “but--"

“We’ve got to go down to the city,” Skye finished for him. “‘Cause we can’t fight off the reinforcements.”

“Right,” Coulson sighed, grimacing. “Plus, Agent Triplett is evidently down there.”

Skye looked back at her unconscious father.

Her destiny, oh great. She was so damned tired of fated futures, they just seemed to mess you up. Look, again, at Coulson and Clint.

“Well hey,” Kate said beside her, “look on the bright side: alien city. That’ll be a good story for the next Taco Tuesday. We’ll beat Edna and Clint, for sure.”

Coulson looked over at her, semi-scandalized.

“I cannot imagine why I ever wanted you and Clint to meet,” he said. “Come on.”

They went.
Chapter Summary

As Joe and Zak head towards Joe's Destiny far beneath the streets of San Juan, the other Agents of DUCK are preparing for a rescue....

Chapter Notes

We know, it's been an awful long time-- but here's a pretty long chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Meanwhile, Back at the Farm

“ Anything? ”

Darrell sighed. “ Nothing so far. I’ve got scripts monitoring all the online drop locations, the minute they try to make contact I’ll know. ” He leaned back from his monitor bank, his spine popping as he stretched. He’d been working nearly constantly since Joe and Zak had gone dark, sustaining himself on caffeine and protein bars.

Erisa sighed. “ It would help if you could tell us how you knew someone was trying to hack the comms, ” she told Bobby.

“I’ll tell Joe when he gets back, ” Bobby said. “ It’s a family matter. ”

“But if we could use your— contacts, your methods, we might be able to help. ” Erisa’s hands flexed restlessly. She hated this sort of thing, hated it when her people were in danger and she couldn’t do anything.

“It’d be no good to you outside the farm, ” Bobby said. He cocked his head, looking at her with kindness in his dark eyes. “ Joe always speaks highly of you, ” he said.

Erisa blinked. “ I, ah. Thank you? ”

“He says you’re the best type of leader, because you care about your men— pardon. Your people, ” Bobby continued. “ I know well enough how fast things go wrong when things aren’t that way. ”

She cleared her throat. “ I’m just doing my duty, ” she said.

“You do more than that, ” Darrell said. She couldn’t hold back a tiny flinch; he’d been so quiet she’d forgotten he was there. “ Trinh’s the same way. It’s a lot less common than it ought to be. ”

“What I’m saying is, I know you’re worrying, ” Bobby said. “ But those boys’ll be fine, you’ll see. I’ve got a good feeling. ”
Erisa pinched her lips closed, not willing to insult their host by doubting the predictive accuracy of his feelings.

“I appreciate that,” she started, and then one of Darrell’s computers pinged loudly.

“Hah!” he cried. “Finally! Okay, come to papa.” He typed furiously, windows popping open on his bank of screens. “We’ve got Zak’s ident code on one of the anonymized e-drops. Let’s see what he’s got to say.” With a final triumphant keystroke, he brought up a web site and maximized it to fill three-quarters of his bank of displays.

“Huh,” Erisa said, blinking. “Well.”

“Hey guys, Michel brought back some chicken from town,” Trinh said, sticking her head through the door. “Wait, why are we looking at some dude’s poorly-lit mirror selfie?” She turned her head, squinting. “Hm. I don’t think that tattoo means what he thinks it means.”

“It’s an info drop,” Darrell said, in the overly-patient tone of a man who’d explained this many times before. “Coded.”

“Well, at least it wasn’t a dick pic.” Trinh shrugged. “So what’s it say?”

“It’s a phone number,” Darrell said. He looked up at Erisa questioningly.

“Do it,” she said, crossing her arms to keep herself from fidgeting.

They crowded around the monitors, the room filling up as agents somehow figured out what was going on. Darrell flipped the speakers on and dialed.

The phone rang, and rang, and rang, and with each ring the tension in the room rose.

“Hello?”

The voice was neither Zak nor Joe, but a woman; elderly, from the sound of it, with a faint musicality of tone that spoke of a mother tongue other than English.

Darrell blinked, then visibly gathered his wits. “Hello, ma’am,” he said, launching into the verification code. “This is Shawn from Farmer’s Friend Cruises. I’m calling today to offer you a great price on one of our all-inclusive vacation packages.”

“Oh, I don’t need a vacation, dear,” the woman said. “I just got back from a lovely trip with my grandson.”

“How nice, Mrs…”

“Call me Mercedes,” the woman said.

“Mercedes,” Darrell said obediently. “Where did you go on your trip, Mercedes?”

“Well, first we took a road trip in our RV with my grandchildren and some friends of theirs,” she said. “Very nice, all of them, especially Jimmy and Chris. Stuck together like glue, those two are.”

Erisa let out a long breath when she heard Zak and Joe’s codenames and the phrases that meant they were still together and healthy.

“Unfortunately, we got a flat tire in the RV,” Mercedes continued, “but we were close enough to the airport that it didn’t matter. My grandson surprised me with a trip, you see. Back to Puerto Rico
Out of the corner of her eye, Erisa could see Trinh pulling out a tablet and sending orders to prep the quinjet for a trip to San Juan. Erisa herself concentrated on the conversation. She didn’t know who Mercedes was, but she was either a natural talent at spycraft or had been carefully briefed. She was chatting easily with Darrell, who was doing a very convincing impression of a man trying to get off the phone but too polite to hang up. Nearly every sentence of her conversation contained a code phrase, though, the information piling up. Joe and Zak were in San Juan, with the passcode that meant an emergent priority mission requiring immediate action, and another that meant that Hydra—at least Erisa assumed that was what the calamari reference meant—was in hot pursuit.

“Well, Mercedes,” Darrell was saying. “If I ever make it out to San Juan, I’ll be sure to visit the Castillo san Cristobal.”

“See that you do,” she said. “And sooner, rather than later. This time of year, it’s not to be missed. Oh! I’m terribly sorry, but I’m going to have to let you go. I’ve got my salsa class in half an hour.” She hung up with a sharp, decided click, and the room was silent.

“We can leave for San Juan in twenty minutes,” Trinh said.

“Get a team together,” Erisa told her. “Heavy weapons and cave gear, apparently.”

“Oooh, Sarah’s been wanting to use her new carabiners,” Trinh said, a feral smile spreading over her face. “And I’ve been working on my pistols. I’ve got the reload time down another three-tenths of a second.” She spun on her heel, striding out of the tech room towards the hangar. “Takeoff in 19 minutes!” she called back over her shoulder.

Erisa turned to Bobby. “We’ve still got some teams out,” she said. “I need Darrell running ops. Can you make sure are signals are secure?”

“Happy to.” Bobby clapped her on the shoulder, his leathery face creasing in a smile. “You see?” he said. “I told you I had a good feeling.”

“You did, at that,” Erisa said.

“Now go on,” he said. “We’ll hold the fort here; you worry about getting the boys home.”

She nodded, smiling at him, and hurried off to get her field kit on.

They were taking off in 17 minutes.

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**Underneath Old San Juan**

The cold light gave Joe a radius of about a foot and half. Mostly it illuminated dust and blank walls, and occasionally pillars or shadowed openings. Everything was deathly quiet, even Zak. The further they went, the more Joe’s heart dropped.

“Hey Zak?” he whispered, though it wasn’t like anyone was around to hear him. It just felt necessary, in the hush of the empty halls.

Zak turned blank eyes on him.

“Are you still in there?”
Zak stared at him a minute, before turning away. Joe sighed.

“You better still be in there,” he muttered, adjusting his grip on the 084 where it was growing slick in his hand. “I don’t want to face your cousins or your Savta if you’re not. Or... or Sarah. She’d remind me she dragged you halfway off a mountain, with Hydra chasing you both. Through chest-high snowdrifts. And I... I couldn’t even keep you safe for two minutes in a nice, dry, abandoned alien city.”

His voice broke, but it wasn’t like there was anyone around to care.

“I wish we hadn’t come,” Joe said as they kept walking. “I wish we hadn’t gotten Trinh’s message, or... well... or we’d got away faster somehow, or maybe joined up with Hartley or... or gotten Hawkeye to take us to Tony Stark instead to keep this stupid thing safe, and I hate, I hate that I didn’t think of that at the time, didn’t think of any of it.”

Zak turned them down another corridor, and they passed darkened doorways and still more columns. Joe realized he’d lost track of time, as well as everything else.

“I wish I knew what the hell Uncle Bobby meant-- and how the hell he was talking to us. I wish I knew what your Savta’s Raoul meant. I wish we were home-- I mean, on the farm. And you were out playing with the bloodhounds and trying to pretend it wasn’t the best part of your day.”

They walked on.

“But man, Zak,” Joe sighed, “most of all I wish you were either back up safe with Hawkeye and Yolanda, or that you were really here with me. I can’t take this. Can’t take you standing next to me when you’re gone. I want-- I don’t want this. If I get a gift, or a blessing or whatever the hell this stupid thing is supposed to get me, I just want you back.”

He only realized he’d been shouting when he heard the echo.

“Shit,” he whispered, as Zak’s head came up. “Sorry. Not like there’s anyone to hear though.”

Anyway, it was equally useless to wish, whether he whispered or screamed it. They were here now. Might as well wish for SHIELD intact again or Phil Coulson alive. Either were just as impossible as turning back the clock to the moment before Zak... left.

Zak paused, listening, and Joe felt his stomach clench.

“What--” he started, and got no further. Zak threw himself at Joe, knocking them both to the ground.

Bullets peppered the column behind Joe, just at the height his head had been at.


They must have gotten in another way-- or gotten past Hawkeye and Yolanda. Joe didn’t even like to think about how many of them there must be, if they’d managed that.

And all he had was Zombie Zak at his back.

Joe got to his knees and hand, tucking the 084 against his chest, and prepared to run for the shadows. As he did, a form came out of the darkness, leaping for Zak, cold light flashing off a long knife.
Joe was too far away to do more than watch.

Zak batted the knife aside like he was swatting a fly, then tipped the man--a Hydra agent, in full fatigues, and twice as big as Zak himself--over his shoulder and onto the ground. Joe had no time for relief; another two men were rushing them, one going for Zak, one for him.

Joe considered his options, or rather lack thereof, and brained the first one with the 084.

He wasn’t sure what he’d expected, but having the guy crumble into dust hadn’t been anywhere near the top of the list.

“Holy shit,” he breathed, at nearly the same time as the remaining Hydra goon.

When he turned, Hydra guy and Zak were grappling, and he couldn’t get a clear line to use the 084 on the right person. Zak might be a zombie, but he was still Zak. Joe couldn’t risk disintegrating him.

Zak was a really strong zombie, actually, and Hydra guy finally shoved him off, and went for his gun. He was too far away, Joe was moving but he already knew he wouldn’t reach the guy in time. He was sure he saw the guy’s finger tighten on the trigger and he had half an instant to consider throwing the 084 at him--

And an arrow came out of the darkness and pierced the guy through the throat.

“What--” Joe began, looking wildly around him. It was no good--he had no idea where the arrow’d come from.

“Keep going,” Hawkeye called, his voice more distant than Joe would have expected. “We’ll keep ‘em off your back. Just--don’t stop moving.”

Joe looked forlornly into the murk.


Zak turned those blank eyes on him again, not even breathing hard after his fight.

“Come on, Zak,” Joe said again, “let’s go. Show me the way.”

Zak turned, and walked on.

Joe followed.

He had no idea how long they walked on through the dark, before he saw the pale light ahead of him, wavering, bobbing.

As he watched, it stopped.

“Hello?” someone called. Someone young-sounding, with a light voice.

“Hello?” Joe replied, falling back a little, letting Zak go ahead as much as it hurt him to do so.

He had the 084, he couldn’t afford to be heroic. Not when the price of meeting it was so high.

“Are…are you the guardian?” the voice asked, and the light started to come closer.

“I’m not sure,” Joe said, “how would I know?”
“I don’t know.” The voice resolved itself into the silhouette of a woman holding a cold light. He thought she might even be wearing a dress; something softened her shape along about knee-height. “They never said. But there’s supposed to be a guardian.”

She came closer yet, holding up the light, and Joe could see her face. It was, he supposed, lovely. He hadn’t expected anything like that—like her—down in this hell hole.

She held her cold light up to Zak’s face.

“Oh,” she breathed. “He’s the guardian, huh?”

Joe waited for Zak to attack her, but he just stood there. Some guardian.

“It’s either him or me,” Joe told her, “and I don’t think it’s me.”

“No,” she frowned at him, then looked down at his hand, and saw the 084. Her eyes widened.

“Oh!” she cried, as overwhelmed as if he’d just gotten down on one knee and popped the question. “Oh, oh, it is here. I knew it. I knew it would bring you here. How beautiful.”

She reached out to touch it.

“Hey, no—what, no!” Joe pulled back, keeping her off with his other hand.

“I’m not going to take it from you,” she laughed. “Do you honestly think I could?”

It wasn’t, Joe reflected, a very nice laugh.

“I’m not worried about you stealing it, I’m worried about you crumbling into little bits, like the last person who touched it.”

“But you’re touching it, and you haven’t crumbled into dust,” she said, reasonably.

“You have a point,” he conceded, “but how much do you want to bet you’re like me?”

“Oh, quite a bit,” she said. “Do you know what you are?”

“I—” Joe paused, looking at the 084, and then back at her.

It was admission enough. No, he had no idea what he was, apart from the damn fool who’d caught the thing before it dropped on the floor.

“Let me touch it,” she said, “and I’ll tell you.”

“If you live,” he muttered.

“If I don’t, you’re not who I thought you were, and I’m not what I thought I am,” she said. “But I know what that is, and I know it’s our destiny, yours and mine. Please.”

She held her hands out.

She’d called Zak a guardian, Joe remembered. She’d known something about him. Raoul’s diary had said there were others… maybe she was one of them.

If nothing else, she hadn’t attempted to kill him yet, and that was a bonus.

And he had warned her.
Joe held out the 084.

She reached out, her hands trembling, and cupped it.

The moment her palms flattened on it, the 084 lit up, like it had done for him, tracing lines and symbols in golden light.

“Oh,” she said, only it came out a little like a sob. “Oh, I knew it.”

“I’m supposed to take it to the temple,” Joe told her, before he could think better of it.

“To get a gift,” she finished for him, and looked up. “What kind of gift do you expect?”

“I have no idea,” he confessed, and nearly told her that right now, he just wanted Zak back and to be able to go back to Trinh and Sarah and Erisa and the rest of DUCK, and for everyone to be safe. That would be more than enough gift-- and more than he thought possible.

“Well,” she said, “I have enough ideas for us both. My name is Raina; take me with you.”

As if, Joe thought to himself, he had much choice. He cast a last glance at Zak, who was still staring sightlessly ahead.

“C’mon then,” he said, and Raina moved to take his elbow. “No. Other one. There’s… there are bad guys down here. I need that one free.”

Raina moved to the side with the 084 and slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, smiling up at him to show she was humoring him.

The smile dropped off her face a hundred yards later when another Hydra agent found them, only to get flung across the subterranean street and into a column by Zak. Joe hadn’t even had time to draw a weapon.

“Is he always like that?” Raina asked, sounding rather shocked.

Joe’s only response was a stifled sob.

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_Somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean_

“Can’t this thing go any faster, Trinh?”

“Yes,” Trinh said, voice clipped, “but breaking the sound barrier isn’t exactly compatible with our ‘not-revealing-the-existence-of-our-invisible-stealth-plane’ mission goal.”

Erisa sighed, scrubbing her face with her palms. “No, you’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry. I just--”

“You’re worried, I know,” Trinh said, gentler. “We’re all worried, Cap. But Joe and Zak are smart guys, I’m sure they’ll be okay.”

“I wish Bobby’d been able to give us something more concrete to go on,” Erisa said.

“Have you _met_ Bobby?” Trinh snorted. “Honestly, if Joe wasn’t involved, I think he’d have probably taken his bong out to the back forty and left us all to muddle through on our own.”

“He’s been very generous,” Erisa said, but she knew she didn’t sound terribly convincing. Bobby
had been very generous, but he also alternated between taciturn and esoteric, which was very frustrating when one was trying to lead a covert independent intelligence organization out of his farm.

“Seriously, though,” Trinh said. “What do you think Bobby’s deal is? Emily thinks he’s got some kind of comms screen all around the Farm, but Joaquin thinks maybe the military experimented on him during the war and now he has, like, ESP.”

“There’s no such thing as ESP,” Erisa said automatically.

“Call it what you want,” Trinh said, banking the plane into a neat curve. “I know about the Index, you can’t tell me there weren’t some people on there with ESP.”

“I wish I had ESP.” Erisa looked over to see Sarah leaning on the doorframe, her fair hair brushing the top of it. “It would have made the last year a lot easier.”

“Truer words were never spoken,” Erisa agreed. “But unfortunately, we mere mortals are left to muddle along as best we can.”

“Oh, I think we do all right,” Trinh said. “We certainly put a hurting on Hydra whenever we find them.”

Erisa hummed in agreement, but her attention had wandered from the conversation. Trinh made a good point; SHIELD had mostly used the Index to monitor for threats, Avengers Initiative notwithstanding, but was that really the best way? It seemed that there were more and more Gifted people showing up each year, and the world’s scientists didn’t seem likely to stop the pace of unfortunate experimentation. And that wasn’t even taking into account the aliens.

People were paranoid bastards, of course, always ready to be frightened by what they didn’t understand. And Gifted people often had very good reasons to fear being widely known; just look at what had happened to Dr. Banner, the poor bastard.

Still, though. There had to be some way to make it work.

Erisa got out of the co-pilot’s seat and slipped past Sarah, belting herself in the rear of the jet and losing herself in thought until Trinh sounded the ten minute warning. The team had run so many missions since the Triskelion fell that they moved into position without a word, pulling together their equipment and tightening their body armor and holsters, ready for anything.

“We’re running quiet,” Trinh said over the comms. “Sensor sweep engaged. There’s a lot of activity on the ground, looks like…. yeah, that’s Hydra. A lot of Hydra. I don’t know what Joe and Zak found, but they want it bad.” She threw the sensor feed to the central display, and Erisa studied the images.

“Everyone on the surface is centered around that hole,” she said. “They probably sent troops in after our guys, but we’ll deal with that once we’ve got the backup out of the way. Trinh, we’ll want to start with a strafing run, take out as much of their vehicles and equipment as we can from the air, then swing low to drop us. We’ll target any of the large equipment still standing first, then try to mop up as best we can using our standard grid assignments. Normal high-risk engagement protocols for Hydra. Any questions?”

The team shook their heads, already studying the scans of the area, noting down landmarks and points of strategic interest and talking within their grid teams. They looked intense and focused, and Erisa’s heart clenched a little with pride. They’d come so far in the short time they’d been at
the Farm, growing from a pack of scattered, traumatized strangers to a tight-knit field team to rival any she’d known at SHIELD.

“Approach vector engaged,” Trinh said.

“Fire when ready,” Erisa told her, and the team braced themselves as the jet sped up, diving into a tight spiral. Trinh whooped in delight as she hit Hydra vehicles and equipment with pinpoint-accurate bursts of fire; Hawkeye had originated the maneuver, and she was one of the only pilots at SHIELD who’d successfully learned it from him.

“Coming around for the drop,” Trinh said, her voice triumphant. “Get ready to bail, people!”

She slewed the jet in a long shallow curve, coming around behind the mass of the Hydra forces, currently split between firing wildly into the sky and trying to extinguish the series of fires that had once been their transport vehicles. “Everybody ready?”

“Ready,” Erisa confirmed, and Trinh hit the hatch release. As soon as the opening was wide enough, the team rushed down the ramp, jumping the remaining few feet to the ground and fanning out to find cover. The confusion gave them a few priceless seconds for the first agents off the jet to get into position before Hydra noticed them landing; a few shots pinged off the hull as the last agents disembarked, but the team set up covering fire until Trinh could re-cloak and pull the jet back. Erisa stayed on board, where she would use the jet’s sensors to coordinate the op teams. With this many agents in play, she would do more good here than on the ground.

“Alpha, three bogies at your 7,” she said into the comm, and then everything that wasn’t tactical data fell away as she devoted her entire attention to making sure her people would come home.

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Still Underneath Old San Juan

As it turned out, the Hydra goon was the last person they saw before they reached the temple. At least, Joe assumed it was the temple, since Zak stopped short and gazed at it. In the dim light, all Joe could tell was that it had deep, unlit openings between large, curved portions of wall.

And that a girl was standing in front of it.

He checked that first impression; she didn’t look younger than Trinh, and she didn’t look less deadly either. In fact, in stance and in tac suit she reminded him bizarrely of Agent Melinda May, the one time he’d seen her outside of a set of cube walls.

“Raina,” the young woman said, glaring at Joe’s companion.

“Aren’t you supposed to be attacking her?” Raina asked Zak, who failed to respond in the same way that he’d been failing to respond the entire time they were in the city. “No,” Raina sighed after a moment, “I suppose not.”

“Who’s your friend with the 084?” the woman asked Raina, rocking back on her feet like she expected an attack at any moment. “One of Whitehall’s friends?”

“Who?” Joe asked, tilting his head.
“Whitehall. You know, creepy Hydra leader? Lying dead upstairs right now?”

“Hydra? What?” Joe asked. Raina started next to him, her hand clamping down on his elbow.

“Did your father finally kill him?” she asked. She was trying to be smooth about it, but Joe felt the tension in her.

“Don’t think so,” the woman said. “Pretty sure it would have been messier. Why the hell would you run to Hydra with this, Raina? Was it that? Did you know they’d gotten their hands on the 084?”

Joe had always wondered what it would be like to feel the blood freeze in his veins. Somehow, even when Hydra had come out of the woodwork, it hadn’t happened. But this-- Joe yanked his arm free and stepped back, putting Zak between himself and Raina.

“You were what?” he demanded. “You’re Hydra?”

“I am not,” Raina said. “I find them distasteful… but in this case, Skye, they were more accommodating than you and the Director were. I already knew you wouldn’t let me come with you to the temple. And no, Hydra never had the 084. Unless I am greatly mistaken, Joe here is the one who stole it from the Army, right before I, ah, encouraged you to come with me.”

For the first and only time, Joe was grateful that Zak was silent at the moment; otherwise he knew he’d never hear the end of it, for picking Raina up without considering how weirdly convenient it was that she was down here, now, waiting.

“You’re the one who stole it from Hartley? She’s not happy,” Skye said, turning to Joe.

“She should be ecstatic-- if she’d touched it she’d be dead,” Joe told her. “Were you with her?”

“Yeah. You called yourself SHIELD, she said.” Skye was still sizing him up, and still keeping a healthy distance from Raina. Joe figured he’d better do the same.

“Force of habit,” he replied, because going into the whole FARM DUCK SWORD song and dance seemed pointless at the moment. “Never felt a reason to break it. Were you SHIELD?”

Skye gave him a deliberate nod, then paused.

“I still am,” she said finally.

“I…” Joe paused. Shook his head. Pieces started to slot into place in his brain, like a Tetris grid of clues and non sequiturs, turned and rearranged until they formed a seamless whole. Hartley and Triplett had to get their intel and their support somewhere, after all. They’d had bits of intel over the past few months of rogue operations against Hydra, or former SHIELD agents. Maybe not so former? Maybe someone else had the same idea they had? Maybe-- “has Hawkeye been recruiting for you?” he asked abruptly.

It was a wild guess.

“How d--” Skye paused, and her eyes went wide. “Oh. Oh shit. Yolanda’s cousin was in trouble; that’s what AC said. Are-- no. You’re not Zak. Is that Zak? Is… is he all right ?”

“I have no idea,” Joe said miserably. “And how the hell do you know Yolanda? I know for a fact she’s not SHIELD.”
“She’s not SHIELD yet. Give it time,” Skye said. “So, okay, you’re not working with Raina.”

“No,” Joe told her. “We met a few minutes ago.” He turned to Raina. “You knew we’d be here. Or you thought we would.”

“All I want,” Raina said, sounding achingly sincere, “is to finally find out who I really am. Who we really are. To find my destiny.”

“And you need the 084?” Skye asked. “It kills people. How do you know it won’t just kill us another way? Or… or blow up? It’s not in our intel, and I don’t think Whitehall would’ve given a crap about it if he didn’t think he could use it to commit mass destruction. So why should we do what you want with it?”

Joe opened his mouth, and then paused, wondering if now was a good time to mention Uncle Bobby and Raoul or not. He never got a chance.

“Skye!” someone called, “where are you?”

“Trip!” Skye shouted, just as Agent Triplett rounded a corner.

“Hey, girl,” Triplett started.

And then he was bowled over by Zak, who’d leapt at him before Joe could register him moving.

“No--” Skye and Joe cried in unison, starting towards the two of them.

“Yes!” Raina cried, and wrested the 084 from Joe’s grasp so swiftly his hand stung.

Before they could stop her, she was running into the temple.

Zak was still down, wrestling with Triplett.

In the distance, Joe could hear more yelling, faint as echoes from the past. Friends, he hoped. He didn’t have time to pause, for them or for Zak. He looked up at Skye, saw the same wild fear in her eyes as his-- and as one they turned and ran after Raina, into the underground temple.

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, we find out just what’s inside that 084. Expect posting to continue on a somewhat slow pace, and thank you for your patience as we try to balance real life with cliffhangers.
The team experiences Hydra, hypervigilance, and hugging. One of these things is not like the other.

The temple was unexpectedly well-lit, a kind of sickly pale glow that came from some dim ambient source Joe couldn’t pinpoint. Not that he was trying to, except in the back of his brain that always catalogued every detail in the field. The forefront of his brain was taken up with the question of what the hell Raina thought she was doing.

As Joe and Skye arrived, Raina turned away from the big, broken plinth or altar or whatever it was in the middle of the circle. She unwrapped her fingers from the 084-- or diviner or obelisk or whatever it was-- as she faced them.

“There,” she breathed, turning to watch it, eyes glowing with hope.

Joe and Skye braced themselves-- though for what, Joe couldn’t have said.

After a moment, they relaxed… and then started to shuffle. Raina’s face dropped.

“What are we waiting for again?” Joe asked. Raina frowned at the 084, then turned to answer him. As she did, Skye lunged for the thing.

“No!” Raina and Joe cried together, for probably very different reasons. But Skye didn’t turn to stone and crumble when she touched it.

She didn’t take it off the altar either; instead, she backed away slowly. The 084 had started to glow.

“No… is it supposed to open?” Skye asked in a shaky voice.

“Yeah, we both saw the symbols,” Joe told her. “Not sure if it’s a good thing or a bad thing, but it’s better than being dead.”

“No… is it supposed to open?”

Joe blinked, and looked again-- yes, the 084 was starting to crack at the seams, opening like a weird geometric flower.

“Shit, that’s not good.” He noticed Raina and Skye both staring at him in confusion, and elaborated. “Uncle Bobby told me not to let anyone else touch it-- because they mostly die. And except for you two, they have. He also told me not, on any account, to let it open.”

Skye winced.

“Oh, but if touching it was safe enough for us, surely this will be too,” Raina said, starting towards the 084 again.
As she did, Joe heard Clint calling his name in the distance, followed by a thin “oof,” presumably as he met Zak. And then another voice, calling for Skye-- two voices, both distractingly familiar.

“It’s not us I’m worried about,” Joe told Raina. “We don’t know what this thing does, or if it has a blast radius if the thing it does is explosive.”

“Rollette!” That was Yolanda, her voice getting closer. The 084 continued to open, giving off a blue glow and a thin plume of smoke.

“Skye!” Very close now, that was Agent Triplett.

“We’ve gotta stop that,” Joe told Skye. She wrenched her gaze away from the 084 long enough to nod at him.

“No!” Raina said again. “No, you can’t.”

The walls around them began to shake and groan as the 084 opened further. Inside, Joe could see three stubby crystal bars poking up. The light was coming from within them.


The walls began to move. Joe wasted half a moment watching them, before turning back with a nod.

And then Skye went for Raina, and Joe went for the 084, trying to grab it off the altar.

“Skye!” cried that voice again, the one Joe half-knew. It was so close. “Skye, I’m coming in--”

Raina crashed into him, and the 084 flew from his hands and hit the floor, scattering at least a dozen rods of blue.

“Shit,” Joe said.

The walls closed with a sharp snick.

“Oh--” Raina started, sounding bereft.

“No,” Skye whispered.

And then the crystals exploded and the vapors surrounded them, sudden as the pyroclastic flow from a volcano.

They were gone in an instant. Vanished as suddenly as they appeared.

They left behind them burning, cracking, crawling over every inch of skin at once. It lasted the split of a second, before the cold air froze every follicle on his body, turned him to stone on the outside.

Inside, Joe boiled.

Inside, Joe was a volcano, molten and churning.

Inside, Joe was goo, like the caterpillar inside the cocoon.

There was a story Joe had heard from his mother, about the windigo that was killed when the people heated it till its stone heart burst and its fragments became mosquitos.
There was a story Joe had heard on the tv, about Pompeii, about people who turned to stone and were still lying arrested in mid-story more than a millennium later.

There was a story Joe had heard from his teacher, about the man who wanted so badly to protect his people that he went into a coffin and had medicine poured in his veins and came out a supersoldier who carried a mighty shield.

Which one,

Joe wondered,

Was Joe?

From outside came vibration.

From outside came a terrible shaking, a thing a shaking a thing determined determined determined to break Joe apart to make him the mosquizzzzzzzzzz.

Joe didn’t much want to be the mosquitos.

He hardened his skin, till nothing could shake him.

From outside came no air.

From outside came no air at all, he’d closed off his pores he was suffocating he’d burnt out all the oxygen within him he was only ash he was turning to stone where he stood.

Joe didn’t much want to be a Roman.

He opened his lungs, till his ribs cracked open his airless shell.

From outside came a cry.

From outside came a cry, a sob, like a new baby furious with its first tastes of air, with the cold, bereft and alone, burning through him and demanding action, protection, defense.

Joe didn’t much want to be a super soldier.

He didn’t want to be a super soldier, even though he’d carried a shield all his adult life, right there on his chest. Right over his heart.

Right there where Trinh carried hers, where Sarah carried hers, where Cap carried hers, where Coulson carried his, where Zak.

Where Zak.

Where Skye.

Were here, and he needed to protect them.

Joe didn’t much want to be the super soldier.

He wanted to be the mighty shield.
He opened his arms and his chest, and felt himself expand.

All was silent.

He was within himself, again, human and small. He was, also, outside himself, surrounding himself, rocks beating down on and deflecting off his outside self, his shield.

Raina was a little ball of spikes, curled up on the floor.

Skye was pointed upwards, outwards, like Joe, sobbing and shaking as something moved through her. Everywhere her palms pointed, debris rained down.

Joe took a breath, and could hear again. The roar of the earthquake inundated him but in the distance, he heard yelling.

“Skye,” he shouted, “can you stop?”

Skye didn’t hear him, so Joe walked over to Raina, stood over her. The shaking continued.

“Skye!” someone cried from outside, voice high and frightened. “Skye!”

If the shaking didn’t stop, Joe realized, they’d all be buried. Him, Skye, Raina—Zak. Zak and Yolanda and Agent Triplett and Hawkeye and whoever else was out there. Hydra, maybe. The people wandering the rounds of their daily business on the streets above, perhaps. No way to be certain.

Joe closed his eyes again, drew a deep breath in and blew it out, like expanding a balloon.

The shield grew, breath by breath, until it crept over Skye.

The debris stopped.

Inside the shield, Joe felt the shockwave hit him, and screamed.

What happens when you trap an earthquake inside a bubble?

The waves rattled Joe’s bones, inside out.

“Skye, you need to stop,” he said, trying to be calm. She opened her eyes, brought them up to meet his, and he saw the fear in them. How desperately she was trying to stop.

Joe thought of Uncle Bobby bringing him out to the creek in the early mornings, summers he’d spend on the farm as a child. Sitting him down and making him concentrate on a single tree root, a single leaf, a riffle in the stream where trout were starting to run. Narrowing his world until he was focused and intent.

Bobby’d been training him.

Goddamnit.

Had Skye had training like that?

“You need to focus,” he tried, “you need to focus on… on anything… on….” He couldn’t think of a single thing. Skye was staring at him, desperate, clearly ready to focus if he could just find a damn object for her.
Raina stirred, sat up.

“Skye,” she said, “we don’t die here.”

Skye looked down at her.

Raina stared up with yellow eyes, set in skin with sleek curving spines.

“We don’t die here,” she repeated, sounding almost sad.

Skye watched her eyes, narrowed her vision, and took a deep breath.

Slowly, her arms lowered.

Slowly, the shaking stopped.

“Thank you,” Joe said.

It only seemed polite.

Skye laughed, a sad, helpless little laugh.

And then she collapsed, taking Raina down with her.

Joe went with them.

—

Erisa looked around at the piles of dead and/or bloodied, bandaged and zip-tied Hydra agents, trying not to frown. The team had done well, but it was always so messy trying to capture Hydra to get intel; anyone high enough to know anything useful tended to have a kill-switch of some kind. It was a pity that tranquilizer guns only worked in fiction; an instantaneous knockout gun would be tremendously useful. She’d heard rumors that R&D were working on it, back at S.H.I.E.L.D., but she imagined that work had gone the way of the Triskelion.

Ah, well. At least Hydra didn’t seem to have it. Small mercies.

The team was running through standard triage protocol, stabilizing the wounded (and wedging their jaws open with foam blocks to prevent any cyanide-toothing) and searching the dead. They didn’t bring prisoners back to the Farm—there wasn’t the security infrastructure to do it safely or humanely—but there were a lot of S.H.I.E.L.D. hidey-holes scattered about, and a judicious combination of hacking and undercover work had secured them a few to use for interrogation before dumping their prisoners somewhere convenient to an Army base and tipping off General Talbot to look for them.

He hated when they did that, if the furious quivering of his moustache was any indicator, but he always took the prisoners regardless, which was all Erisa really concerned herself with.

“Any clue as to why they were here?” she sent on the open channel. “Any mention of our people?”

“It’s definitely something to do with the 0-8-4,” Sarah said, straightening up from where she’d been crouching over a pile of debris that had once been a Hydra supply crate. Erisa headed over to her; she was holding a tablet with one of Agent Day’s clever little wormsticks sticking out of the USB port. “They’d been after Joe and Zak since DC. Lost them in Florida—hah, I knew that ‘gas explosion’ had to be them—but picked them up again on the way here. There are teams already
down there going after them.”

“They’re underground?”

“Well, Hydra seems to think so. Good thing we brought those crampons.”

Erisa sighed. She hated caves. “Yeah,” she said. “Good thing. Trinh, can you find a place to land the--” and then the ground beneath her rolled, knocking her flat, and that’s when she heard it; a growing, horrible grind that seemed to grate against her bones, while the ground beneath her shook and flexed, throwing agents off their feet and starting the edges of Hydra’s pit crumbling.

“Shit!” She scrambled onto her knees, hunching down and looking frantically around for cover.

“Cap! Here!” Sarah was behind her—thrown by the first wave of the quake—and was taking cover next to the smoking remains of some kind of crane. Erisa crawled to her as fast as she could, ducking into the safety position.

“Everyone stay down, cover your heads and take cover if you can!” she yelled into the general comm line. “Trinh, what the hell—there was nothing on the seismology!”

“That’s because this isn’t an earthquake!” Trinh said, her voice tight. “It’s not even aligned with a fault line! This is… something else.”

“What?”

“I don’t know! The wave forms aren’t like anything on record, it—hang on, something’s changing,” Trinh said, and then… it stopped. It didn’t taper off naturally, but stopped dead in the middle of a shake like someone turning off a television. Everything was deathly quiet for a moment as the agents looked around, eyes wide and wild in their dirty faces, bodies poised for the quake to begin again.

The air was hazed with dust. Small pieces of debris were still rattling down, shuffling and settling, and the tinks and rattles were loud in the sudden silence.

“Is it just me,” Trinh muttered, “or is this a bad sign?”

When he came to, everything was pitch black. Underneath him, something soft shifted.

“Ugh,” Skye said, and Joe found himself laughing weakly, his ribs protesting each chuckle.

“Yeah, that… that about sums it up.”

He heaved himself off of her, freezing halfway up as something in the darkness moved, and stone skittered against stone.

Skye lit a cold light, then looked up and gasped.

Following her gaze, Joe looked up and realized they were half entombed. Several of the slabs that made up the sides of the temple had fallen against each other, overlapping like the roof of a tent above them. Rubble lay thickly in a circle between the slabs, the radius a little larger than the room it took to hold the three of them.
On the miraculously rock-free ground next to Joe, Raina was lying, still unconscious. Skye poked at her gently, drawing her hand back when it came away bloody from a hidden spike on Raina’s shoulder.

“We’re alive,” Skye said, sounding uncertain.

“Just about,” Joe agreed. “But—” he gestured at the slabs around them, feeling his heart fall. But the temple had come down around their ears. He remembered the voices calling to them as the walls had closed: Clint, Yolanda, Triplett, whoever Skye’s friends were—Zak. Silent Zak, out there in the darkness wrestling with Triplett, unless Triplett had already taken him out in self-defense. He was suddenly certain they must all have been killed.

How could he tell that to Skye?

“We need to get out of here,” Skye said, standing on wobbly legs. Joe put a hand out to steady her, and she half-collapsed in his arms.

Joe didn’t want to go. Didn’t want to see the confirmation sticking out of the rubble in mangled limbs and broken bows. Didn’t want to hear Skye’s anguish when she realized what had happened.

“We have to get Raina,” he said, hoping to stall just a few moments. Just long enough to stop feeling so damned weary. “But I’m not sure how. Don’t want to impale us.”

“Her belly’s safe, I think,” Skye told him. She pushed herself away from him. “Get her first, I can… I can walk on my…” she reeled backwards and started to flail, “own.”

Stumbling, she hit… something… just before she would have run into the rubble pile. She bounced off it and slid to the ground.

“Ow?” she said. “There’s. There’s… a thing. Here. Must have saved us from the earthquake.”

Joe was already picking up Raina, carefully avoiding her spikes. He draped her belly-first over his right shoulder, then reached out to Skye with his left hand. She grabbed it and came when he heaved, draping herself over his shoulder.

“How do we get out though?” Joe asked. Skye gave him an unexpectedly sharp look, then glanced around them at the rubble.

“This is gonna sound weird but, just, try to walk? And pretend you’re a bulldozer or something? Just walk and don’t stop. That way. It’s mostly just rubble.”

“That… you’re right, that sounds weird.” Joe looked around them, at the rubble that was rising against the side of something invisible surrounding them. His skin prickled. “But not as weird as whatever just happened. Okay.”

He wasn’t sure what he expected to happen when he started to walk, but that first step felt like he was encased in quicksand. He could barely move. He pushed harder, straining, and the rubble two feet in front of him started to shake. One step, and the rubble skidded backwards, bits sliding down off the top of the pile and out of sight.

Another, then another, and the fallen slabs ground ominously above him. Joe closed his eyes briefly in a fervent wish, then kept stepping. It wasn’t getting easier, and Skye and Raina were
mostly dead weight against his shoulders. Skye’d half-collapsed again, breathing shallow, and he worried that maybe she’d been injured somewhere hard to spot. The cold light still dangled from her wrist, illuminating the ground in front of them but not much more.

One more step, and then he heard the slabs crack, spun around to find them sliding downwards, one collapsing under the other like dominos. They hit the ground with a deafening smash.

In front of him, the rubble was starting to clear, the piles to the side of him becoming higher as the one in front finally broke. Joe huffed in relief as the path in front became mostly-bare ground, and just concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

As long as he didn’t look in the piles to either side, he might not see the bodies. Like that story about parting the Red Sea, the one he’d always been horrified by. Who wanted to look up at a wall of water and see leviathans swimming by, knowing the deeps could come crashing in any moment?

He shuddered, and rubble shifted around them.

Joe kept stepping, until the rubble started to abate. The world seemed muffled, and there was ringing in his ears, and he was so tired, so awfully tired, but there wasn’t time to stop. If only Raina and Skye were left, then he’d get them safely out. He’d think about Zak later, when he could afford the pain.

After a little, he must have started hallucinating, because Yolanda appeared in front of him, reaching out, but didn’t touch him. Her hands slid away from him in the open air.

“Joe,” she said, and “Rollette.”

Trip was there, too, asking him to hand over Skye, but Joe couldn’t stop. He had to get her out, he had to see her safe. He had to see them all safe. Skye muttered something against his shoulder, but he couldn’t understand it.

A little further on, he saw Hawkeye, who was telling him over and over that it was all right, he was all right, he just needed to let them help him. Open up and let them help. He was standing in front of Zak, who was on the ground, with a young woman bending over him. She wouldn’t, Joe thought, do that if Zak were dead. Would she?

Skye stirred, shifting herself and looking up.

“Oh, sir,” she whimpered, trying to stand straight. It sounded like a plea.

Joe looked up to find Agent Coulson standing in front of him, his arms held out.

It wasn’t anything like Joe had imagined it would be, the times his mind had revolted and tried to pretend that Coulson wasn’t dead, that he was going to come up to their table at a bar one day, smile down at him and Trinh and Sarah and Cap, and say “now let’s talk about deep cover operations.”

For one thing, there wasn’t a bar. For another, Coulson wasn’t going away. And he wasn’t smiling or contained. He looked tired, scrapes and scratches all over his forearms where his rolled sleeves revealed them and on his forehead, blood still trickling sluggishly from it. Underneath the blood, though, his face was so, so kind. And he wasn’t in a suit, tac or two-piece. He was wearing a bulletproof vest covered with dust.
He wouldn’t be wearing a bulletproof vest if he didn’t have a beating heart to keep safe.

Joe stumbled to a halt.

“Joe,” Coulson was saying, “it’s okay. It’s all okay. You’re safe, now. You’re safe, and you’ve kept them safe. You can rest.”

Joe took a breath, really hearing the words-- and felt a skin, a self he hadn’t known he was wearing, collapse. Something changed in the air around him, sharpening sounds and bringing the smell of dust. Even Coulson seemed extra-real.

Coulson hesitated, then stepped forward, arms still open. Skye heaved herself off Joe’s shoulder and stumbled towards him. Coulson caught her in his arms, pulling her into a tight, tight hug, and the look on his face was something Joe’d never thought he’d see there.

He didn’t even notice when Triplett removed Raina from his arms. He just stood, like time was paused, until Hawkeye whispered something in Coulson’s ear, touched Skye lightly on her shoulder, and she transferred herself to him, sobbing into his shoulder once.

Coulson’s arms were empty again, and Joe walked straight into them and fell on him. As he fought against the ringing in his ears, the pounding in his head, he clung to Coulson’s startled “oof,” to the arms heaving him upright, like the only real things in a world gone batshit.

“Sir,” he said, hearing his voice crack. “Sir.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say, any way to express his bewilderment.

“I’m here, I’m here. I’m alright.” Coulson said, then shifted at something Hawkeye muttered. “And Clint says to tell you Agent Rodriguez is alright, too.”

“Zak?” Joe asked, looking over Coulson’s shoulder, and finding Zak sitting up, his head in his hands. Zak looked up to meet his glance, and gave him a weak smile. “We did it.”

“Yes,” Coulson told him, sounding so proud it hurt to hear, “yes you did.”

Erisa took a last look around at her team, unable to hold back the impulse to check them over, looking for equipment damage or unreported injuries or simply for that certain look an agent got when they were past the end of their rope and needed to be pulled out of the field for everyone’s safety. The team looked good, their eyes focused and clear in their dusty faces.

There had been no question that they would follow Hydra down the pit; their people were down there, no matter what else was, and they weren’t about to come all that way just to pull back at the eleventh hour. They were concerned about stability after the quake, of course, but what readings they’d managed to get from the jet seemed to show that the cavern was now stable, and the almost certain risks that Joe and Zak were facing inside it had to outweigh the possibility of another scientifically baffling seismic event.

They’d left a small group topside to guard their exit. Trinh, who was the smallest of them by a significant margin, had pulled her backup into the jet and was wearing an experimental harness designed to give extra protection in the event that she needed to wriggle through any narrow gaps in the stone.
The tunnel loomed wide and dark before them, its stone floor scattered with debris but still passable. In the beams of their head lamps, the air was thick with stone dust, glittering as it drifted down from above. Erisa ran a hand over her holster, making sure her draw was unobstructed.

“Nguyen and Reade will take point,” she said. “Straczynski, Wilkes, keep your eyes on the scanners. If there’s so much as a blip, I want to know. The rest of you, stay in pairs; we don’t need anyone else getting lost or captured.” She paused a moment, looking around. “Any questions?”

“No, ma’am,” Wilkes said, and the others murmured their agreement.

“Then head out.”

Their footsteps echoed unnervingly on the stone as they made their way into the tunnel--or rather, the corridor; they were obviously inside a structure of some kind.

“This feels like the part of the movie right before a trap door opens and almost drops Indiana Jones into a pit of spikes,” Trinh muttered.

“Maybe that’s where Hydra went,” Ishimura said.

“That would certainly make for a pleasant change,” Erisa agreed, a wry twist in her voice. “Now stay quiet, please. There’s too much echo here for chatter. No need to warn them we’re coming any sooner than we must.”

They walked on in silence for a little longer, then Sarah stopped abruptly, signalling for silence. A moment later, Erisa heard it too; the unmistakeable sounds of a largish group of people moving toward them.

The passage turned a corner about ten meters ahead; their best chance was to take position here and take advantage of the element of surprise. There weren’t any side passages or much cover, just a few toppled stone pillars that Erisa hoped hadn’t been vital to the ceiling staying up. They made the best of it, setting themselves up with weapons drawn, waiting as the sounds of movement drew closer.

The tension mounted unbearably for a moment, and then it didn’t snap so much as fizzle. The first person around the corner was a teenage girl wearing a purple tank top, with a bow slung over her back and one arm slung around the waist of an indistinct figure mostly swathed in an oversized purple hoodie, who was swaying with every step. They were paying more attention to their footing than their surroundings; so much so, in fact, that they got within a few meters of Trinh and Sarah before Purple Bow Girl looked up and squeaked, pushing her companion behind her and drawing the bow.

Erisa hadn’t heard of Hawkeye having an apprentice, but there was something unmistakably familiar in the challenging tilt of her chin as she sighted down the shaft of an arrow at them.

“Guys!” the girl called. “Company!”

There was a muffled curse and the sound of running feet, and then--

“Oh, Agent Barton, thank God,” Erisa said, quite in spite of herself.

Hawkeye skidded to a halt, his bow already poised to fire, and stared at them all for a moment before grinning ear to ear, his teeth gleaming in the light of their lamps.

“Aw, yeah, awesome,” he said happily. “Gang’s all here.” He turned to the girl. “All clear, Katie-
Kate,” he said. “They’re friendlies.” He raised his voice. “It’s all good, guys, they’re on our side!”

“About fucking time,” an unfamiliar voice said, and then a tall, broad-shouldered woman came around the bend, someone slung over her shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

“Oh!” Sarah said. “Um. I’m sorry, but--aren’t you Zak’s cousin?”

“That’s her,” said a shaky voice. The person she was carrying waved from behind her back. “Hi, Sarah.”

Zak’s cousin sighed. “At least let me put you down, first, you look ridiculous,” she said, and lowered him carefully onto one of the collapsed pillars. His face was blotchy and covered in scrapes, his clothes torn and filthy, but he looked more or less okay, and Erisa felt herself start to relax.

“Is Rolette--” she started, but Hawkeye jumped in.

“He’s, ah, good,” he said. “He’s just behind--” he stopped as Joe came around the corner, leaning on one side of a man she vaguely recognized from SHIELD--Triplett, she thought--while another girl leaned on the other.

“What on earth--” Erisa started to ask, and then words deserted her entirely when Agent Phillip J. Coulson walked around the corner.

Someone sobbed; someone else cursed; lots of someones gasped in surprise. Before Erisa could even begin to sort out who (or pinch herself to make sure she hadn’t fallen down a well and started hallucinating), Trinh and Sarah had covered the distance between them and were hugging Coulson. Between the two of them--Trinh going low and Sarah going high, the way they did in sparring and field ops-- all she could see of Coulson was his arms, which flailed around uncertainly for a moment before settling, featherlight and tentative, one on Sarah’s back and one on Trinh’s shoulder.

Trinh was talking a mile a minute, her pink hair bright against Coulson’s bulletproof vest, saying things like “I knew you couldn’t be dead really,” and “did Joe tell you about the bracelets?” and “we saved the dogs, sir, I know how much you like them. You know, the Actually Howling Commandos?”

Sarah was…

Sarah was crying, bent over to hide her face in Coulson’s shoulder, her back heaving with barely audible sobs while Coulson patted her back softly, whispering into her ear.

Sarah never cried. Erisa felt uneasily like she was seeing things that she oughtn’t.

The tableau didn’t last; they pulled away reluctantly after a moment, Sarah going pink when she remembered the audience and scrubbing roughly at her tear-streaked face with the back of her hand.

“Here,” Coulson said quietly, and pushed a clean handkerchief into her hand; she took it, visibly shaking, and looked as though she might cry again.

“So,” Erisa said, her voice somehow coming out sounding quite ordinary. “Here you are, then.”

Coulson looked over, a smile creasing his face. “Erisa!”
They met in the middle and shook hands, the same way they had done when they’d met, the same way they had done when he congratulated her on her promotion, the last time they’d spoken.

“You’ve got a firm handshake for a dead man,” she said, and couldn’t help squeezing his hand a little.

“That’s not the only thing he’s got that--” Hawkeye started, only to cut off with an oof when Purple Bow Girl--Kate?--elbowed him in the kidney.

“You might as well hug him too, Erisa,” Joe said, from where he was sitting next to Zak on the fallen pillar. “All the rest of us have.”

She raised an eyebrow at Coulson, and he shrugged, expression rueful.

“Yeah, pretty much,” he said, and she rolled her eyes and pulled him in for a hug. He was reassuringly solid in her arms, damp with sweat and gritty with dust, smelling like cordite and copper and exertion, not pleasant, exactly, but real.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she murmured as they parted. “You’ve been sorely missed.”

He looked surprised at that, the ridiculous man. “You seem to be doing just fine,” he said.

“We’re saving SHIELD,” Trinh said, grinning. “We’ve got a base and everything. We’ve been rescuing agents and fighting Hydra ever since the Triskelion.”

“Trinh retook the Harbor from Hydra,” Sarah said.

“Sarah and Zak took out an entire evil STRIKE team in the mountains in a blizzard!” Trinh said.

“Erisa and Joe rescued everyone who wasn’t Hydra from O’Thirsty’s and got them out of DC,” Zak added.

Coulson looked around at them, going a little misty around the eyes. “I knew you could do it,” he said, with so much sincerity that Erisa couldn’t meet his eyes. “I never doubted it.”

Hawkeye slung an arm around Coulson’s neck and pressed a lingering kiss to his scraped cheekbone. Huh. That was new.

Wasn’t that new?

“I was gonna save them for an engagement present,” he said, his voice rumbly and warm as Coulson leaned into his side. Erisa blinked. Had he said--she looked around at the others. Joe and Zak weren’t even paying attention, their heads tipped close as they talked quietly to one another. Mysterious Hoodie Person was leaning hunched against one of the walls, while Kate was watching Coulson and Hawkeye with an indulgent smile more suited to puppies or babies than grown men. Trinh looked to be holding back a delighted shriek by main force, clutching Sarah’s arm; Sarah looked like she might be about to start crying again; Zak’s cousin was rolling her eyes affectionately at them over a half-eaten protein bar. The other agents were divided between gormless staring and middlingly successful attempts to look like they weren’t gormlessly staring.

It probably said something negative about her choices that she found it more surprising that Coulson was engaged than that he was alive.

“But then, hey,” Hawkeye was saying, looking pleased and smug, “I guess it worked out after all.”
Coulson slid an arm around Hawkeye’s waist and squeezed hard for a moment before pulling back a little and straightening up, looking around the tunnel at the motley group surrounding him. “I suppose it did, at that,” he said, and his voice was different than Erisa had ever heard it, soft and full of wonder. “I suppose it did.”
“How is Zak doing?” Phil asked, sticking his head inside the Piper Archer where Yolanda was rummaging around. Zak was laid out, unconscious mostly through sheer exhaustion, across one of the rear sets of seats. It was quieter than in the quin, Yolanda had explained as she and Kate had helped him along.

“He sounded fine, just tired,” Yolanda said grudgingly. “Guess we won't know the rest till you guys get your scientists working on him.”

Phil caught the skepticism in her voice.

“They're mostly harmless,” he reassured her. He climbed in the plane and leaned over to look. Zak’s face was calm, his breathing even, and he didn't look like a man who'd just had his will over taken by some kind of alien force. Had Clint looked like that, after Natasha had bonked him over the head and knocked him out of Loki’s control?

Had it been peaceful for him, for those moments before he woke to the reality of what he'd done, and to a world Phil had left?

“Are you all right?” Yolanda asked, and Phil realized he must have been making some signs of distress.

“I'll get there,” he sighed.

And he would. Now that the shock and adrenaline of the last 24 or so hours was wearing off he was falling, but it wouldn't last. Underneath the creeping exhaustion he realized elation was rising.

The symbols were gone. His head was his own again.

More than that, his future was his own, and he was going to have a husband in it. A husband who had promised himself when they'd both thought Phil's future might be running out. A husband who'd been waiting as long for Phil as Phil had for him.

“And now you're thinking about Clint again,” Yolanda sighed, watching him.
Phil laughed.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Look, you and Jets deserve all the happiness you can get; I just don't want it distracting you from getting us all safe out of here. We have a lot of battered people here and I still don't know what happened to Rollette or your Skye.”

“I know,” Phil sobered. “I haven't forgotten. But Erisa and her crew are seeing to clean up now, and Clint has Skye and Joe in hand. I needed…”

“A break? The ducklings overwhelming you right now?”

Yes.

It was bewildering to be so loved. Clint was one thing, Natasha another-- they were friends of years, so much blood between them. But he'd never dreamed he'd have had such an effect on his mentees. He'd always thought the secret to a good mentoring relationship was that you got as much out of it as the junior agents, but this… this was compound interest.

“You need help with anything?” Phil asked, beginning to back out and nearly tripping over Clint's open duffle as he did so, spilling the detritus of their headlong flight from Miami. He bent down to shove things back into it.

“Not really,” Yolanda said. “Just grabbing my gear and checking on Zak. This thing doesn't fly near as fast as that superspy jet so I figure we'll need to abandon it when we go.”

“More than likely,” Phil agreed. “And it won't be long now. We'll need to wake Zak up, I'm afraid.”

“I'm already awake,” Zak muttered from the back seat. “You guys weren't quiet. I can help haul.”

“No you can't,” Yolanda and Phil said in unison.

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As they walked over to where the DUCK quin was waiting, cloaked, Yolanda grew quiet. She looked back at the Archer and sighed.

“Too damn bad,” she said, mostly to herself.

“It wasn't exactly the most glamorous plane,” Phil said. “I thought it would do okay for retirement, plus it was part of an IOU. But I'm not going to lose sleep over losing it.”

“Yeah, but you got a bunch of fancy jets to get you over the loss,” Yolanda replied. “That was my last set of wings, and even it really belonged to your man. Now I gotta figure out something else to do, unless you had another one waiting in the wings somewhere.”

Phil cocked his head, pretended to think about it, and decided there was no time like the present to tackle the issue.

“You could come fly one of our fancy jets, if you wanted.”

Yolanda stopped short, staring at him.

“You're not giving me a damn spy jet, I know that. Are you saying… what, like a contractor type
deal? That doesn't make sense. Specially since I don't fly jets.”

“You’d pick it up quick.”

“Coulson, if this is your weird idea of payback for saving Jet’s ass, stop it. Him and me, we worked that out ages ago.”

“No,” Phil said, trying to keep his voice light, “this is more along the lines of a job offer.”

“A job offer,” Yolanda said flatly. “You think you want me to be a SHIELD agent.”

“I think at this point it’d mostly be a matter of formality and getting you paid and trained,” Phil said, stuffing his hands in his pockets and rocking back on his heels, trying to look both persuasive and harmless. He’d expected her to be skeptical, but this was bordering on either hurt or angry-- he couldn’t tell. Maybe he should have left this for later. Maybe he should have left this for Clint. But they’d just managed to defeat a significant Hydra faction, survive a minor earthquake, and neutralize an alien artifact while sustaining no losses. Moreover he’d just been reunited with so many people he’d thought were lost, and Yolanda had been instrumental to all of it.

If he had to, he could make her a contractor like Isabelle Hartley. But she’d just lost everything, again, in helping SHIELD, and he figured when a person kept flinging themselves into your fights often enough, it was a sign.

Plus, she’d already proven pretty immune to Phil’s charms, and he was already realizing how much he was going to need that within SHIELD.

“You’re nuts,” Yolanda said, when she decided he’d been stared at sufficiently.

“Not at the moment,” Phil told her. “Look, you don’t have to stay on base, and I’m not talking about making you a field agent like Skye or Melinda-- unless you want that. I mean yes, we’re small, to an extent we all multi-task, but I need agents based remotely as well, facilities, transport specialists-- and pilots, obviously. To an extent, we could write you a job description. It’s not glamorous, it doesn’t pay well, but it’s a great way to see the world. Hell if you want, you could just drive the Bus.”

“It’s not--” Yolanda huffed, muttered to herself, and turned away from him. “I’m not objecting to any of that. And I know you’re desperate for bodies, Coulson, but-- you’re mistaking me for the rest of my family, all right? I’m not like them. I tried and it didn’t take. I’m not a G-man and I swore off military after the Marines kicked me out. I don’t fit. You don’t know what my record was like.”

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It was not, Phil noted, a “no, I don’t want to.” It was more of a “no, you don’t want me.”

“Well, I could point out that I’m not asking you to be a G-anything, since the government still thinks SHIELD’s full of terrorists,” Phil said. “And we’re definitely not military-- thank god. We are, however, a rogue covert intelligence agency and you were flying my fiance hither and yon, so it’s safe to say I made it my business to know what your service record was like. And if the Marines objected so much to your choice of pronouns that they gave you a dishonorable, that’s their loss. It’s not on my list of qualifications. You fit the only criteria I really care about: you want to protect people.”

“I didn’t think you would care,” Yolanda said, though Phil noted that some of the hurt started to leave her face. He fought to keep from taking it personally: yes, intellectually she’d probably
realized that wasn’t going to factor in; it didn’t mean the scars from old battle wounds didn’t still
twinge. “But I’m not some knight in fucking armor, either. I’m not sure what makes you think I
join desperate causes, Coulson.”

“Well for starters, when Clint needed you, you helped him, sacrificed your job and your plane,
drove across country, risked your life for him, and you barely knew him.”

“He paid me. And he owed me an RV,” she pointed out.

“You could have taken an IOU,” Phil told her, “I’m sure you’ve noticed he’s good with them.
Anyway, the company you keep gives you away: you willingly stayed friends with him, with Edna
Reznick, with Kate Bishop, with Basil-- I mean, you’ve got a type.”

“I needed to find Zak.”

“Right, because you needed to make sure the cousin you hadn’t seen in years was safe. You, not
any of your better-positioned family members.”

“I was the one who had the time,” Yolanda told him. “And family is family, that’s just what you
do, it’s not some big heroic… thing. I was just… doing what needed to be done.”

“Exactly,” Phil said. “That’s why we’re all here. You know you’d be doing something stupid
anyway, you might as well get paid for it.”

Yolanda glared at him, then folded her arms and looked into the distance, where Zak had reached
the cloaked quin and was being helped on board by Clint.

“Yeah well maybe I’ll hold out and see what those DUCK guys have on offer. After all, if I need to
keep an eye on Zak….”

“You could certainly do that,” Phil said. “I wouldn’t discourage you.” They were nearly at the jet
themselves now, and he left her to get in.

Speaking of his ducklings, there was something he wanted to discuss with Erisa before the jet left
the ground and needed a destination.

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“We’ve cleared the Archer,” Phil said as he walked up to Erisa, who was leaning over into the
cockpit, talking with Trinh. “No word from May and my team yet, so as far as I know we’re still
dependent on you for a ride out of here.”

Erisa nodded, looking most of the way back at him. He noticed she met his eyes for only a moment
before drifting just a little to stare at his eyebrows. It gave him a momentary stab of nostalgia-- the
first time he’d seen that had been years ago, when she’d asked him to sponsor her for an exchange
seminar in Bolivia and she’d been trying to hide just how badly she wanted it. Then, as now, he
found it a little sad, even though he approved of her effort. There’d never been much he wouldn’t
have given her if he could-- or any of them.

“Trinh was just asking for a destination,” Erisa said. “Where can we dr-- where can we take you,
sir?”

Take , not drop . Phil tucked his smile away-- and then reconsidered and let it out. He couldn’t see
any advantage in hiding his interest, not now, and not from a group of people who wore WWACD
bracelets on their wrists, of all things. (Clint had already gotten Trinh to promise him one,
“Good question,” he said. “I’m torn. Maybe you can help me out.”

“Sir?”

“I really want to see your Farm— if you’ll let me,” he added, as Erisa blinked. “I would never want to compromise your opsec.” From the safety of the pilot’s chair, he heard Trinh give a muffled squeal.

“We’d be… you’d be welcome,” Erisa told him. “Of course you would. It would get Agents Rollette and Rodriguez home quickly, and after all Mr. Whitefeather-- Joe’s uncle-- is there, and right now he seems to be the only person who could tell us what happened in that temple, which would be beneficial for Agent Skye as well. But… I understand that you have a duty to get back to your… your people.”

“I do,” Phil said gently, “and drop off the civilians as well. So my other thought, if your operations permit, was to stop at the Playground first.”

“The Playground?” Erisa asked, looking confused. Trinh stopped pretending not to listen in, and peered around the bulkhead dividing the cockpit from the rest of the jet.

“Fury’s name,” Phil grimaced. “It’s our base of operations. It was an SSR bunker, originally. One of a network of bases Fury kept off the grid-- anyway.” He stopped, aware he was beginning to babble, and a little startled to find out how much he had riding on the answer.

“You’d want to take us home?”

That was Sarah Reade, who’d come up behind him while he was talking. Her voice broke just a little on “home.”

Erisa glanced at her quickly, then back to Phil.

“We wouldn’t want to compromise your opsec,” she said. Trinh glared at her.

“I’m not worried about anyone you vouch for,” Phil told her. “And I would like you to see our resources and connect with Melinda and the others. See if I can convince you that we’re worth coordinating with.”

“Convince me?” Erisa’s voice finally cracked. “Sir, all due respect, you… you’re… you don’t have to convince us of anything. I’ve been going crazy looking for more resources without being able to trust, well, anyone. Yes, yes of course. We’d be pleased to coordinate. Hell, we’re all SHIELD anyway, it’s just like….” She trailed off.

Just like old times, Phil assumed. Except it wasn’t, and he knew it.

“I know the feeling,” Phil told her, meaning both the constant drain of recruiting in a world where they had to remain secret to be safe, and the loss of SHIELD. “And I’m honored. I’d like to visit the Farm, once we’ve had a chance to make sure everything’s safe at the Playground. I want to meet Mr. Whitefeather myself.”

And he also wanted to see their base of operations. The beginnings of a plan-- of several plans, actually-- were beginning to thread their way through Phil’s brain. Collaboration was a start, but oh, they could do so much more. He could solve so many problems at once, both operational and interpersonal.
“We’d love to have you,” Erisa repeated.

“Good,” Phil smiled at her. “Then let’s--”

The whine of an alarm shut him up.

“Shit,” Trinh said, spinning back into her cockpit and mashing at buttons. “Something’s on the radar. Not a normal plane. I don’t—why didn’t I see this before? I’d say it’s decloaking but it’s not a quin, it’s too big, it’s… what the?”

Phil looked out the cockpit window. There was a shimmer in the air not two hundred yards of the nose of the quinjet. Slowly, it took on the form of a sleek, black, very large, plane.

Clearly, Alphonso Mackenzie and Fitz had finally figured out their cloaking problems.

“Don’t worry,” Phil told Trinh. “They’re friendly. Agent May’s always had impeccable timing. That’s just the Bus.”

Behind him, he heard Yolanda exclaim

“ That’s the Bus? Damnit, Handsy, that changes everything.”

Phil chuckled. Yes, for once, everything might actually be all right.

---

“If it were anyone but you, Phil, I’d be more surprised,” Melinda May said, as they leaned against the side of the cargo bay a couple hours later.

“I have no idea what you mean,” Phil told her, then leaned over and smoothed down the end of her butterfly bandage, which had started to curl off her forehead. Melinda snorted at him.

“You do,” she said, and waved her hand at the collection of battered SHIELD and DUCK agents who were currently mopping up the remains of the Hydra reinforcements that had appeared on the radar just as they had nearly finished transferring Skye, Trip and others from the quinjet to the Bus. Erisa and Phil had taken about a half-moment and a glance between them to formulate a plan. Most of a plan.

**Enough** of a plan.

It had taken fifteen minutes of effort, including some rather spectacular marksmanship from Kate Bishop, hanging off the invisible wing of the Bus, for them to deal with Hydra. They’d left them mostly tied up on the tarmac, waiting for Colonel Talbot’s inevitable arrival. Phil didn’t envy them their fate. He’d have liked to leave a team to explore the temple, but his recruitment hadn’t yet built them that kind of manpower, not even with Erisa’s DUCKs helping out. The brief battle had pretty much cemented his determination to bring them on board, however.

Phil watched Erisa giving orders a moment longer, then turned back to Melinda.

“Did we ever really define a title for you?” he asked her.

“What?” she said, glancing over at him like he’d hit his head. Which he had, but that was beside the point.

“A title. You’ve been second in command how long now? In addition to that, sometimes you’re my
body man, sometimes you’re my… handler, shall we say--”

“Not any more, unless you’ve developed a new, disturbing resurrection-related effect,” she cut in.

“I haven’t,” Phil said, and noted the sag of her shoulders. He sympathized; he’d hated burdening her with the secret of his crumbling sanity. She wasn’t built for that kind of labor, and she’d had enough horrors heaped on her in the past anyway. Melinda being Melinda, she’d seen it as a job that needed to be done, and done it. Or perhaps seen it as a thing Phil needed, and so done it—either way, it hadn’t been fair to her, even if he’d thought it was necessary.

“I’d prefer to be your friend, Phil,” Melinda told him, seeing him struggle for words.

It cut off his breath for a moment; she used sincerity so seldom that it cut when she did.

“You are,” he said. “I mean at SHIELD.”

“We haven’t been big enough that I got to define a role.”

“I’m hoping we’re about to be,” he said, nodding at Erisa. Melinda followed his glance and watched the DUCKs a moment. She’d betrayed very little surprise when she’d walked off the Bus after meeting them, but he knew she could see the potential as well as he could. “So, if we’re defining roles, do you want to be deputy Director?”

He watched her stiffen in shock.

“Absolutely not. Don’t you dare, Coulson,” she said. “I will quit first. I may have been behind a desk for years but I refuse to be administration.”

“I figured,” he told her. “But I need someone. Let’s face it, if anyone else at SHIELD had found out about my little side-hobby in etchings before I got it under control, how would that have looked? Who trusts the crazy guy as a leader? I know you would have stepped in, and I know it’s the worst thing I could have done to you. But I need someone who can.”

They both turned to look at Erisa now.

“You always were the luckiest man I ever met,” Melinda said as they watched her. “I’ll go offer her my condolences.”

“You think she’s a good choice?”

“She’ll do.”

It was, from Melinda, a high compliment. Phil didn’t disagree. The hardest part, he thought, would be convincing Erisa herself. But now, while he was still freshly dead in their memories and everyone was uncertain, was about the best opportunity he was going to get.

Anyway, he thought, he ought to have a deputy in place before he went on his honeymoon.

---

Phil watched long enough to see Melinda tap Erisa on the shoulder, then figured he’d better not be seen staring. He turned back to the open cargo bay to see Clint directing traffic as easily as if this weren’t the first time he’d been on the Bus. Even in his exhausted, battered state, he was a joy to watch.

He jollied along the shocked and wary agents Melinda and Erisa had brought with them, who’d
helped deal with the Hydra reinforcements and the carnage in the tunnel below. Several of the dead Hydra agents had been SHIELD-- even after months, that truth still hurt.

Clint, Phil supposed, had more experience than most at recognizing the faces of SHIELD agents he’d killed. And with far less good reason. That Phil hadn’t been there to help Clint through the aftermath still rankled. What hurt worse, though, was the realization that without his death and their separation, Phil might have remained idiot enough to try and give Clint space in the aftermath of the Battle of New York.

He licked his lips, trying to wipe away the bitter aftertaste of that thought.

“I’d have been there,” he muttered to himself, trying to argue it away.

It was no good. He’d dropped himself right into the middle of that miserable morning when Clint had said he had to leave. That he couldn’t do it, couldn’t be Phil’s lover while Phil-- while both of them-- were trying to get themselves killed on a daily basis. That he couldn’t stand to compromise them in the field.

And Phil… had listened, had been understanding, had focused all his empathy on Clint, had agreed so very quickly when Clint had tentatively suggested that, later, after retirement, if they both wanted…. Oh, he’d been so good, Phil had. Because it had meant he hadn’t had to face the truth himself:

He had been utterly undone by the strength of Clint’s feelings for him. It had panicked him to realize that Clint, his brave, brilliant, ferocious Clint, could be brought low by Phil being hurt. That Phil himself was putting Clint in danger by loving him, by letting himself be loved.

And that who cracked first had been a matter of accident-- that if Clint had been the one lying on the floor, seemingly dead, Phil was just as likely to have compromised them all out of grief and rage. Only he wouldn’t have had the strength Clint had, to suggest breaking apart after that. No, he would have clung and clung till he’d dragged them both over the edge.

Clint had provided the opportunity for an honorable retreat, so retreat Phil had, into daydreams, into his vault-- the wiser course of action.

Or so it had seemed at the time.

With the hindsight of death and rebirth, of a rebuilt brain, the fall of SHIELD, and the return of the man he’d loved so long, Phil could admit that he had long been a complete, absolute, dunderhead.

The Clint who had survived the fall of SHIELD in an old RV with expired plates, who’d redeemed Phil’s IOUs and made all Phil’s friends his own, who’d survived the Battle of New York and Loki making his brain a playground, that Clint had always been stronger than he’d thought. And stronger than Phil had allowed. They could have made it. They could very probably have worked it out together and set their boundaries and learned how to make a relationship work.

And if Phil hadn’t died, he might never have realized that. He might have stood off and on, hovering, waiting for calmer moments, while Clint went through hell recovering from Loki. In leaving Clint his IOUs, he might have been more helpful than he would have been in person.

“Hey,” Tripp said, breaking Phil out of his reverie. He looked around, realizing that he was the only one left in the cargo bay door. Everyone else was buttoned up, ready to take off for the Playground, where Erisa’s team would follow the Bus. “You okay, sir?”

“Fine,” Phil said, “just one thing to do before we go. Where’s Clint?”
“Hawkeye, sir? He’s, um… there.” Trip pointed to the tarmac, where Clint was loping along, silhouetted against the clear blue sky. He was carrying the remnants of Kate’s bow, which had broken in the last assault by Hydra; it had last been seen high in a tree. Apparently he hadn’t wanted to leave it behind.

Phil’s heart expanded so fast it forced all the air out of his lungs.

The past, he decided, was the past. However stupid they’d been then, they couldn’t change any of it. Now was Clint, turning toward him with a blazing smile. Now was Clint, who had proposed to Phil when he’d known Phil was dying, who’d pledged to stay by his side even if he’d had to watch Phil depart bit by bit while his body remained.

Phil shoved his hands in his pockets, so Tripp wouldn’t see them shake, and fidgeted with their contents.

“Give us one minute before we go,” he told Tripp, and started down the ramp.

“Sir,” Tripp said, sounding somewhat shocked. Later, Phil would realize dimly he’d used his Director voice, or something in it had tipped Tripp off.

Right now, Phil concentrated on putting one foot in front of another, meeting Clint at the bottom of the ramp. Clint watched him come, amusement and fondness riding in his eyes.

“You look like you’re on a mission,” he said. “Need help?”

Phil laughed, because that was his Clint, to the very core. That was the Clint he’d never lost, no matter what else had come between them.

Clint laughed with him, looking battered and worn, half his gear-- and clothing-- gone in the fight, and bandages all over his incredible arms. It was terribly familiar, and terribly dear.

“Maybe,” Phil told him. “I’ve got an IOU to redeem.”

“Oh?” Clint sharpened, looking around. “Here? Now?”

“Here,” Phil said. “Now.” And he got down on one knee.

Clint did an actual double take, his eyes widening.

“You’re calling in a… a wedding?” he asked.

“Phil-- what the hell?”

“Clint Barton,” he said, then stopped to clear his throat. “I know you… I know you already did this. But. I think the circumstances have changed a little since you asked, what with me being not insane anymore. So I feel like I need to do this, too. Anyway, I don’t think it’s official without a ring. So.” Phil took his hand out of his pocket, bringing with him the rings he’d found in Clint’s go-bag. “I, ah, I owe you my hand in marriage. You asked and I promised. You promised. So… I’m calling it in.”

Clint stared at the rings, then back at Phil, searching his face intently, then back at the rings.

“You’re calling in a… a wedding?” he asked.

“No, more like the rest of our lives. Together.” Phil added, just to make sure everything was clear. “But we can certainly start with the wedding. I just… you have done so much for me, Clint, been here for me, stayed with me-- promised yourself to me-- when I thought there might be nothing of
me left for you."

"Phil," Clint said helplessly, then stopped, shaking his head.

Phil shook his head back, knowing what Clint was trying to do, that he was trying to say he didn’t need anything more from Phil, hadn’t done anything special. Clint could, Phil mused, be an idiot sometimes.

"You deserve... so much, really. But for a start, you deserve to hear me make the same promises to you that you made to me. I owe you that-- I owe, God, Clint, I owe you more than I can ever repay you. But if you want, I can start with a ring."

"Phil," Clint said again, like it was the only word he had left.

"Come on," Phil waved the ring just a little. "Before everyone wonders what’s kept us so long and comes out to see what the fuss is about."

That broke Clint’s stare. He doubled over, shoulders shaking, and when he straightened up there were tears of laughter in his eyes.

"You jerk," he said, "you absolute jerk. On a tarmac, after a running Hydra battle, and after I’ve already proposed once. Your sense of timing is outrageous. Give me that damn ring."

Phil started to, but Clint snatched it from his hand before he could finish, and waved at him, still shaking with laughter.

"By rights this is mine anyway, Mister. You bequeathed it to me."

"So put it on already," Phil told him, laughing himself. He couldn’t seem to stop; his entire body seemed to have converted to bubbles and he was fizzing away one chuckle at a time.

"I can honestly say I never imagined it happening like this," Clint said as he put the ring on.

"Neither did I, but hey-- at least I managed to surprise you."

"You always do," Clint said, then pulled Phil upwards into a kiss.

Behind them, a cheer rose up from the cargo bay of the Bus.

"Goddamnit," Phil muttered against Clint’s lips, "I told you."

Clint just laughed again, and kissed him harder.

"You all finished in Puerto Rico?" he asked Phil after they broke apart.

Phil looked around at the empty tarmac, the abandoned Piper, the crowd gathered at the top of the cargo bay ramp, and then back at his fiance.

"Yes, definitely."

"Then let’s get out of here. We’ve got a wedding to plan."
Coming up in Chapter 40: a wedding, of course! THE wedding, not some other, random, wedding inserted to fake you out. Also: the end.

It will start on tumblr... when it starts. Life seems to happen all at once these days.
“Hey Barton,” Tony Stark said, his voice barely making it over the roar of the quinjet’s engines, “I have a radical idea.”

Clint closed his eyes briefly, then opened them, since he was the pilot. He didn’t much want to deal with one of Tony’s radical ideas at the moment. They’d just come off the tail end of a mission that had gone way longer than it should have, involved more brick dust than any one person could reasonably be expected to breathe in, and were probably being chased by several governments who’d want to know who was going to pay for the damages.

Also, he had an agenda of his own, thank you very much. One that included places he very much needed to be and things-- people-- he desperately needed to do. He didn’t have time for Tony’s radical ideas.

Still, Tony’d called him “Barton,” not some vaguely-archery-related nickname. His radical idea was likely to be at least somewhat serious.

“Oh yeah?” Clint asked, yelling it over the shoulder into the hold. His shoulder twinged as he turned. Ugh, if only Yolanda were here to take over flying the quin so he could go get some rest.

“It’s a brilliant idea. You’re gonna love it. I say we don’t head back to the Tower.”

“Well, that’s definitely not what I was expecting you to say,” Clint replied.

“We need to rest,” Steve protested, from wherever he was in the hold of the quin. “We need to get patched up-- well, some of us do, anyway.”

“And we should probably let Hill know what happened with the bathhouse,” Bruce added.

Natasha, Clint noticed, didn’t bother to interject. She already knew his plans. Thor did interject, but it was a loud snore-- lucky damned bastard. Clint would’ve given anything to have been able to take a nap, especially given all the activity ahead.
“So where do we go instead?” he asked Tony.

“I dunno. Somewhere that’s not the Tower. Anywhere that’s not the Tower. Preferably somewhere hard for the media to find, and nice and quiet. Maybe with showers and a bed. Beds. It’s probably better if Hill doesn’t have all the details while she’s trying to wrangle governments, really. Buys her time if she can’t find us. And then we don’t have to deal with cameras.”

“... It’s not that you don’t have a point,” Steve started, then paused for a yawn. “A damn good point. But I’m not sure-- Natasha, what’s this?”

“From Clint,” Natasha said. Clint listened, waiting for the rustling of envelopes opening to start before speaking.

“Don’t worry, Tony, I’ve got you covered,” he said, hoping his voice was coming out normal and nonchalant. “We’re already headed to a nice, quiet, out of the way spot I know. Off the grid.”

“Huh,” Tony sounded distracted, hopefully because he was reading his card. “It’s like you read my-- what the fuck, Barton?”

Yes, he’d definitely read the card. Clint wiped his suddenly-sweaty palms on his pants and waited for the others to chime in.

Chime they did, even Thor, who’d woken up in time to receive his own envelope. Clint had no hope of catching all the various objections, so he waited until they’d died down a little bit, finally ending in Steve’s half-plaintive, half-harsh

“Clint? What?”

“I thought the invitation was pretty self-explanatory,” he replied. “I’m getting married.”

“To a dead man,” Tony said flatly. “Unless I really need reading glasses. And I’m guessing Mr. Supersoldier over here has twenty-twenty vision, and he seems a bit confused too.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Steve said.

“Also, I can’t fail to notice the wedding is set for tomo-- sorry, for later today,” Bruce put in.

Natasha slipped back into the co-pilot’s seat in the quin and sent Clint a supportive eyebrow. He reached over and grabbed her hand, squeezing hard just the once, for luck. This hadn’t been how he’d wanted to spring the news on his team, but time and the bad guys had managed to mess up his and Phil’s plans. And they weren’t about to postpone the wedding for, well, anything. It had been long enough coming.

“It is, yeah. And Phil was dead, yeah, but he’s alive again,” Clint said, staring determinedly forward into the black night beyond the windshield. “Has been for a while. Sorry, we meant to tell you earlier but the mission got in the way. Surprise?”

“Surprise,” Tony muttered.

“Indeed, a most wonderful surprise,” Thor said, sounding like he might be menacing the other Avengers a little. “To hear that the Son of Coul is back on the earth-- and also your wedding. I will look forward to hearing the full tale of his survival from his lips.”

And that last line held a little menace for Clint, too. Clint winced.
“It’s not really a wedding-appropriate story,” he said, “but we’ve got a few hours, I can tell you on the way.”

“Does it involve the SHIELD and nefarious secret projects of Fury’s?” Tony asked, sounding a bit waspish. “And Hydra?”

“Yes, yes, and kind of in the sense that Phil and his team are the reason we even knew that Hydra base we just obliterated existed.”

“Surprise again,” Steve murmured. “It’s almost like SHIELD never fell.”

Clint closed his eyes briefly, seeing a smoking helicarrier hit the Triskelion again in his memory.

“Funny you should mention that, too,” he said, trying to shake the image out of his head. “Given where we’re going.”

“Which is?”

“To my wedding,” Clint said, deciding not to try and explain the secret history of the new SHIELD just at this juncture. “I thought that was obvious. Should be there in time to grab a few hours of sleep before preparations start.”

“All of a sudden I’m less interested in sleep than in finding out exactly what the hell Coulson’s been doing all this time,” Tony muttered, still sounding vaguely mutinous.

Clint frowned.

“You know, I realize this isn’t exactly the kind of thing you just roll with, but you’re also not allowed to yell at my fiance on the morning of our wedding. If you can’t be nice, you can just drop out the hatch right now and fly home.”

“Oh no, are you kidding me? And miss you tying the knot with a dead guy? Which, by the way, I gotta ask, was this a sudden whim or did you have more of a thing with Coulson than you let on?”

“It’s… been building for a while,” Clint said, “but I don’t think I fully realized I wanted to marry him till I saw his Winnebago.”

That brought him a moment of silence, blessedly. He fought the urge to peek back and see how the others looked; largely because he couldn’t do much about it if they were drastically unhappy. They were in for it now-- and despite how absent he’d been from time to time, he didn’t doubt that they had his back. Not even in this.

“What worries me most,” Steve said after a little while, and then paused. He was silent long enough to let Clint get good and wound up with nerves-- which was probably deliberate, and Clint couldn’t even blame him. Much.

“What worries you?” he asked.

“Well, what worries me is we’re coming in off the tail end of a mission, and I don’t have a suit. Unless… unless you and Coulson would prefer I attend in my Captain America uniform.”

Not for the first time, Clint realized that Steve Rogers could be an absolute asshole when he wanted to be. Also, there was no way in hell he was letting Steve do that; Phil didn’t deserve to fanboy painfully at his own nuptials.
“Don’t worry,” Natasha, Clint’s savior, the light of his life, told Steve., “While we were on the mission, Phil told Pepper. She’ll be there, with your suit-- with everyone’s.”

“Wait wait wait,” Tony broke in. “Coulson told Pepper. Coulson told Pepper-- my Pepper-- that he’s alive. And getting married. To Barton. Today. And that we’re invited.”

“Yeah,” Clint said.

“Wow, I hope JARVIS recorded that,” Tony said, with what sounded like way too much anticipation. “She’s got a mean right hook.”

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“What do you think, with or without the bows?” Skye asked, standing back. Joe looked thoughtfully at the bloodhound, whose floppy purple bow was nearly lost behind his huge jowls.

“I think the drool is going to end up giving those a different effect than you wanted,” he said finally. As he spoke, a long string of it dropped onto the end of the bow, dampening it before falling to the ground.

Skye winced.

“You may be right,” she said, and reached out to unwind the bow, stopping just short as the dog in question dampened it further. “But too late now.”

“You’re an agent of SHIELD,” Joe mused, watching her wipe her hand on her pants, “you survived the aftermath of the Triskelion, you trained with Melinda May, you have weird earthquake powers--”

“We aren’t talking about that,” Skye hissed at him.

“-- and you can’t handle a little dog drool.”

“The dog drool isn’t threatening to annihilate anyone.” Skye crossed her arms and looked fractious, or as fractious as she could look in a sparkly purple dress. (Hawkeye’s teenage protege had apparently dressed Skye-- and Melinda May and Yolanda, scarily enough.)

“True enough,” Joe agreed, and turned to finish setting up his row of chairs before he started speaking again. “And why aren’t we talking about the earthquake powers? I mean us, here, now? It’s not like there’s anyone else around to hear us.”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Uncle Bobby said, from directly behind Joe.

Joe jumped. The chair in front of him fell down. As did the one behind him, and a few to either side.

“Goddamnit,” he said, watching his shield ripple in front of him.

“Pack it in, boy,” Bobby told him. “Deep breaths, and center yourself. Like we talked about.”

Joe did as he was told, frowning as the shield rippled and refused to go, at first.

“That’s why we’re not talking about it right now,” Skye told him. “I don’t want to think about it, because if I think about it, I might worry about it, and if I get to worried, I’ll do something like that
in the middle of the ceremony.”

Joe grunted, and tried to tune her out long enough to get himself under control. After a few deep breaths and an internal struggle, he managed to pop the shield like a human-sized bubble.

“-- those not working for you?” Uncle Bobby was asking. Joe looked over to find him pointing at the gauntlets on Skye’s arms, which were nearly covered with bangles for the wedding.

“They help,” Skye said. “I just… don’t trust me. Them. Arg, either of us. And I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Control will come with time,” Bobby told her, as he finished straightening the chairs Joe had dropped. “For you both. You’re coming along faster than I remember doing, myself. Huh. Which is funny, since I had the benefit of trained transitioners. There’s another one in Jiaying’s eye.”

“Whose?” Joe asked, leaning forward when Bobby winced and shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter. Just someone from Afterlife.”

“C’mom,” Skye said, “That’s what you’re going to stop at? Sometimes I think you just like being mysterious just to piss us off. You told us we’re half alien, you told us about Afterlife, you told us a whole bunch of stuff I’m not even sure isn’t a crock of-- anyway. Why not this too?”

“You talked to your daddy yet?” Bobby asked her instead of answering. Skye glared at him, and shook her head. Then shrugged, and kind of bobbed it side to side.

“I’ve sat in front of his cell and stared at him a bit, does that count?”

“When he’s awake?”

“Mostly… not,” Skye allowed. She’d told Joe why, when they were in the middle of training, told him how much it scared her to have met him for the first time with blood on his hands. How much he scared her still.

“You need to talk to him sometime,” Bobby told her. “Better to know, it’s always better to know. Once you have, you come back to me if you want to hear about Jiaying. Now. stop worrying about your shaking and your shield, you’ll both be fine when the crowd gets here. Anyway, it’s a good place to practice passing.”

“Passing,” Joe said flatly, trying not to wince. “Passing for human. Well, I can add it to the list.”

“You are human,” Bobby snapped at him.


“You’re human enough, don’t start thinking like those assholes in Afterlife. Jeez Louise, you two, you think humans can’t do wacky shit? I thought you all were SHIELD. Hell, we’re not even the only humans with Kree running through our veins, if you believe your Director Coulson. Lots of humans can do wacky shit, and scary shit-- and I’ve seen plain old garden-variety humans do things that would turn your hair white, and all with just the help of a gun, a torch, some real bad orders, and a lot of fear. So just do your breathing, calm the fuck down, and when we finally kick all of your SHIELD friends off my farm, we can get down to the real business of training you.”

“You’re not kicking all us SHIELD types off your farm” Joe protested. “I heard you negotiating to keep the dogs.”
Bobby sniffed.

“Dogs don’t create shit-tons of noise on the electromagnetic spectrum. What with all the electronic devices your guests’ve brought and your jets and your command center it’s getting so a man can’t hear himself think around here. I’ve been glad to have you, but it’ll be quieter when you’re gone.”

“You’ll miss us,” Joe told him. “Well-- them, anyway. C’mon. You think I don’t know you and Darrell are fly-fishing buddies? Or that you’ve been trying to set Trinh and Sarah up since they got here?”

“Huh,” Bobby grunted, “doesn’t take much setting up. Speaking of, Zak was looking for you.”

“He’s trying to set Trinh and Sarah up, too?” Joe asked, and got a truly disgusted look for his trouble. Which wasn’t, he thought, entirely fair. It was the most logical way to read that segue, right? He appealed to Skye for assistance.

“Oh my god,” she said, rolling her eyes, “don’t even try to pretend. I’ll stay here with Bobby, you help Zak, uh, with whatever he needs.”

“I’m not-- pretend about what?” Joe asked.

Bobby looked at him for a while before sighing.

“It’s a wedding, you’ll figure it out by the end of the night. Word to the wise, the pasture by the creek’s got the best cover and fewest ant hills. Ms Skye, I think your Director’s just commed Agent May, looking for you. Something about saving him from Tony Stark?”

“Tony Stark?” Skye asked, then her eyes widened. “Oh shit, Clint and the quin must’ve got here. C’mon, Joe, if we don’t rescue the Director, there might not be a wedding.”

“What the hell would Tony Stark do to him?” Joe asked, setting off behind her as she ran for the back door of the farmhouse.

“No idea,” Skye said, “and I don’t want to find out.”

They left Bobby laughing behind them on the lawn, surrounded by folding chairs and lavender crepe.

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“I can do it, I swear I can,” Clint said, batting away Natasha’s hands. “I’ve done it before. SHIELD training.”

He pulled at the side of his bow tie, only to have the whole thing tighten on him suddenly, causing him to choke. Natasha picked apart the knot while he gasped for air.

“SHIELD training didn’t cover your own wedding,” she told him gently.

“I’m fine,” Clint said, even though his hands had started shaking at the word “wedding.”

Natasha, because she was in every way perfect, didn’t say a word. She just smoothed down his tie and started on it again. Why, Clint wondered, had he even agreed to a bow tie? Why had he agreed to a ceremony at all? Why hadn’t he and Phil just kidnapped a judge, dragged them to a remote beach in the Manuelbago, and eloped?

“Because Kate would never forgive you,” Natasha said, “and also this was a very convenient way
to tell a lot of people about Phil’s existence at a moment when they would feel unable to yell at him.”

“Much,” Clint corrected her, because he’d heard Tony’s yelp from the room down the hall about a half hour ago. It had been cut oddly short. Ten minutes later, Tony had appeared in the doorway to Clint’s room, where Clint was busily fussing with his suspenders, looking pale. Skye was hovering behind him, trying to hide either a grin or a fangirl swoon.

“He hugged me,” Tony had said, sounding like he’d just found out the world was flat after all. “I started to yell and he just walked right up and hugged me.”

“Phil always thought the best defense was a good offense,” Clint had told him. “What did you do?”

“What do you mean ‘what did I do’? I hugged him back, jeez, what was I supposed to do? I don’t know how this stuff works. You look unexpectedly decent. Who picked out your suit?”

It had taken Clint and Skye another five minutes to get Tony back out of Clint’s room-- Skye’d finally muttered something about a tractor he could tinker with until the ceremony. Clint wondered whether she’d just sit there and watch him do it, too.

“Hey,” Natasha said, stepping back. Clint blinked, and realized she’d finished his tie, and was just standing in front of him with her palms on his chest. “You’re miles away. Wedding jitters?”

“No, thinking about Tony,” Clint said, smiling at her. “Him seeing Phil again just… it makes it real somehow? I mean, not that I still had doubts Phil was alive-- had lots of time to, uh, prove he’s all there, if you know what I mean. But still, it’s-- it’s different somehow than Skye or Edna or even you knowing Phil’s alive. I can’t explain it?”

“Now everyone in your world knows about Phil?” Natasha suggested. Clint nodded.

“That. And. You remember when Phil came back from California after Stark was found. When he first started going on and on about this initiative Nick was planning. Something changed, didn’t it? I could feel it. It was the start of something way bigger than we thought at the time. It meant so much to Phil. And Tony, clearly. They got bound together a little somehow. So I guess everything just feels… it feels right, now. The time feels right.”

“Well it had better, cause all your guests are here. Too late to back out now.” Yolanda said from the doorway. Clint looked up to find her leaning against the doorframe, looking completely out of place for a farm wedding in an asymmetrical hem dress in a kind of sparkly striped fabric. She looked like something out of a high-class nightclub.

“Nice work,” he said to Kate as she came up behind Yolanda in the doorway, while pointing at Yolanda’s dress. Kate beamed at him and slipped under Yolanda’s arm. Her huge lavender sunhat nearly didn’t make the passage with her; Yolanda caught it as it slipped off her hair.

“Least I could do,” Kate said, as she came up and hugged him. “Taco Tuesday’s got to represent. We’re, like, family, right?”

Clint put an arm around her, hugging back, and looked between the three of them-- Natasha, one of his oldest friends, standing behind him with a soft smile on her face; Kate, who Phil had brought into his life, grinning up at him; Yolanda, whom he’d found himself, smirking at him from the doorway.

Yes, the time was definitely right.
“Not gonna back out,” he told Yolanda. “Not ever. Let’s go.”

Yolanda nodded, leaned over to punch him in the arm, then led the way. Kate gave him a last squeeze before following her. Clint was preparing to follow them when Nat caught his arm. He looked back.

“I--” she said, and then shook her head. Clint looked down, surprised to find her eyes looking a little damp and her lips curled up in a helpless smile. She wrapped her arms around his waist and held him close. “I’m happy for you,” she managed to whisper.

Clint hugged her back, breathing in the warm clean scent of her hair.

“Couldn’t have done it without you,” he told her, meaning it to his very bones. “Won’t do it without you. Promise.”

----

“Hey Cheese, thought you could use this.”

Phil turned in the act of tying his tie, to catch Nick Fury setting a highball full of scotch down on the dresser next to him. He looked from the glass up into Nick’s sunglasses.

“Didn’t think you’d be able to make it,” Phil said, hoping his voice didn’t catch. Nick shrugged, looking oddly diffident despite the sleek lines of his black suit.

“Woudn’t miss it, you know that,” he said, then waved a hand at Phil’s half done tie. “Don’t let me stop you. Nearly everyone’s in place downstairs.”

“Do I know that? You seemed dubious when we told you. Which is understandable.” Phil did up his tie as he talked, trying to keep his tone gentle. He hadn’t expected to see Nick any time soon after he’d been given the Directorship. Nick was still busy playing dead, saving SHIELD agents and sending them Phil’s way-- and he had an unexpectedly delicate desire not to step on Phil’s new-Director toes.

“I was dubious about what you asked me to do, not about coming. Fuck, Cheese, I wouldn’t miss this-- even if Z wouldn’t have knocked me out and kidnapped me if I tried not to go. Been a very long time coming.”

He still looked a little unsure of his welcome. Phil sat down on the end of the guest bed and looked up at him.

“If we thought it was appropriate, I’m not sure why you didn’t,” Phil said. “Unless you’re still worried about how I feel about TAHITI?”

Nick picked up the drink he’d brought for Phil and swallowed about half of it in one go.

“I’m not sorry about resurrecting you Phil, not even given how everything turned out-- or how badly it could have gone. I’m aware of all the bullets we dodged.”

Phil tried to hold back a wince, thinking of all the bullets Nick might not be aware they’d dodged, and just how many midnight carvings Phil had woken up to.

“Then what’s the matter?” he asked, trying to get himself off that train of thought. Nick looked at him as if he was maybe dim, as if he should know the answer already.
“What I regret,” Nick sighed, staring at the scotch remaining in the glass-- as best Phil could tell-- and grimacing, “is how I handled your relationship with Clint.”

He looked over at Phil when he was done, his eyebrows scrunched in a way that made Phil think his eyes behind the sunglasses must be apologetic, absurd as that sounded. Phil felt his stomach fall.

“Is… did I say something I don’t remember? About that?” Phil asked, not sure he wanted to know. “Did you… what did you do, Sir?”

Nick winced at the honorific, clearly catching that Phil was retreating, starting to put up his walls.

“Nothing is what I did, Phil. A whole damn lot of nothing. I gave Clint your last letter and then I got distracted by trying to bring you back and I didn’t pay enough attention. I admit I-- I should’ve looked closer. Should’ve seen that you weren’t the only one carrying a damned torch for years. That he was just as stupid about you still as you were about him.”

“He hid it well,” Phil told him. Nick snorted, still hunched over.

“And I was the Director of a spy agency. No, I should have known. Maybe I could have made it easier on him.”

“How? Let him know I was alive, when you didn’t know if I was ever going to… to be functionally myself again? You let him follow the IOUs, that’s probably the best thing you could have done for him.”

“Eh,” Nick said, and he downed the other half of the drink. “You left him the IOUs, you did that. I just didn’t stop him. Fact remains I kept you apart. I had to-- I’d probably do it again-- but you don’t take the man who did that and have him marry you. Phil, that just isn’t how it works.”

He sat down as he spoke, and stared at Phil over the tops of his sunglasses, bad eye blind, good eye glistening a little. His hands were held out, like he was offering something he wanted badly for Phil to take.

Somehow, in all the long years they’d known each other, as mentor and student, CO and junior, Director and agent, as friends, Phil didn’t think he’d ever seen Nick quite so stripped bare. He wondered, suddenly, if it was an excess of Hydra, or maybe the addition of a Dutch assassin, that had stricken his conscience.

How would he have felt about this confession, as an agent? Betrayed? Compassionate? Confused? Phil shook his head-- it wasn’t a very useful line of thought. Nick would never have shown his soft underbelly this way while he was Director. Anyway, Phil was Director of SHIELD now. And he was beginning, just beginning, to understand all the ways the Director might sacrifice himself and his own best intentions to the cause.

“It’s funny,” Phil said, trying to find his voice around the lump in his throat, “because when Clint talks about you, he just says he’s grateful. Not only for the space you gave him after I… after I died. He says he’s grateful that you told him about me and TAHITI, so he knew what he was getting into. I… I am, too.”

Nick shrugged it off, and it sent a spike of sudden annoyance through Phil.

“No, I am, Marcus. I can’t tell you how much of a difference it made that he already knew.”

Already knew even things Phil couldn’t have stood to tell him. That scene on the beach, Phil thought, would have gone very badly if Clint hadn’t known what TAHITI had done to Phil’s brain.
“Anyway, you brought Clint to me at the Playground. Far as I’m concerned, you already brought us back together. That has to count for something.”

“Then I don’t need to do it again,” Nick said gruffly. He did, Phil noticed, look a little less bleak. “But I like the officiant you got. Good choice. Now. You ready?”

Phil gulped, and peeked out the window, where he could see that Nick was right— all the guests were gathered, sitting in folding chairs draped in lavender tulle, chattering at each other.

“Almost,” he said, taking a deep breath. “You go get in place. I’ll follow.”

Nick nodded then, after a moment’s hesitation, reached out and hugged Phil.

“You deserve this,” he said, and was gone.

Phil stood still as he left, blinking in shock.

He was still blinking when Skye slipped in the door, tsking when she found him not yet fully ready.

“Boss,” she said, with the same warm inflection Clint used, “everyone’s waiting for you.” She reached over to the dressing table and picked up his pocket square, tucking it carefully into place and smoothing it out. Phil watched her as she did, her head bent in concentration, bangles jingling as they slid down her wrists and revealed the suppressors Fitz had designed for her.

It seemed like so long ago, and yesterday, that he’d first found her tapping furiously at her laptop in her van. That she’d wormed her way into SHIELD, that he’d nearly lost her when Ward kidnapped her. And here she was, terrified of her own new-found powers, her new-found father— and terrifyingly dear to Phil himself.

At least he wasn’t doing this alone. He had Melinda, who protected Skye fiercely. Clint, who, on the opposite hand, seemed to delight in letting Skye loose. As long as there were other people who understood this shaky-legged, unpracticed fondness he had for Skye, he could be less afraid he was going to destroy them both with it.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he told her, meaning it. She looked up at him, a little shocked.

“No place else I’d be, AC,” she said, and then she bounced on her toes once and flung her arms around his neck, hugging him tight.

For the first time, Phil was able to put his arms around her and hug back without feeling either discombobulated or weepy. Well-- not very weepy. And good weepy, rather than overwhelmed.

“C’mon, boss,” she whispered, tugging him towards the door.

Melinda met them as they went into the hall. She didn’t bother to say anything, she just looked Phil up and down before nodding in what he assumed was approval.

“Starting to wonder?” he asked her, and she shook her head.

“Not about this,” she said. “I know you, Phil. I’m glad for this.”

As they started walking down the stairs, she murmured an addition.

“And I’m happy to let Clint take his turn watching out for you.”
“Like only one person is enough to keep me out of trouble,” Phil whispered back, squeezing her arm. She did look happy, buoyant even, in her quiet May way. There’d never been any question in his mind that she’d do whatever he asked of her, when he was afraid he was going mad. But he’d hated having to ask-- complex moral dilemmas wrapped up with close friendships probably featured heavily in Melinda’s personal version of hell. This must be a major relief.

“An army couldn’t keep you out of trouble if you were determined, Phil. But at least that’s more people to share the load.”

“Only one more personal favor,” Phil told her as they reached the back door, which Skye was holding open, and stared out at the back lawn and the assembled guests. “And no more.”

“Yes, well,” Melinda reached over to adjust his tie, then faced front. “This one is easy.”

They stepped out into the sunlight.

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Clint frankly stopped listening as the little wizened ex-SHIELD harpist, who’d moonlighted in SHIELD’s facilities division before the fall of the Triskelion, played Greensleeves. It wasn’t exactly appropriate, but it had been either that or Pachelbel’s Canon, which was a hard no. Of all the things Clint had thought he’d be doing in the aftermath of the fall of SHIELD, standing on a farmhouse porch surveying the crowd of people sitting on the lawn in front of him, most of whom had known Phil and himself more or less intimately in their time, and waiting for the processional to start, had not been at the top of his list.

He was still not entirely certain he was here, despite Natasha’s hand firm in his. It seemed surreal, dream-like, though his daydreams had always featured an elopement, possibly to someplace tropical. But after TAHITI and their time in the Florida bungalow, neither he nor Phil had really been feeling beachfront weddings.

It just felt a little too perfect, seeing everyone the cared for gathered on squeaky folding chairs draped in lavender fluff. Several ex-SHIELD agents (currently DUCK agents, and soon to be SHIELD again) ranged around the sides of the gathering, trying to maintain a secure perimeter as discreetly as possible when wearing both purple satin and coms and being loomed over by guard alpacas, on loan from Phil’s ex-CIA friend. It couldn’t really be real.

“Hey Clint,” Kate said as she came over and looked up at him. “I’ve got everyone settled, I think. Even Tony Stark-- Ms. Potts got him and Captain America and everyone seated on your side.”

“We have sides?” Clint asked, a little startled. “Really?”

Kate shrugged.

“Sort of,” she said. “More or less. Yours is filled out with some of the DUCKS, to balance out everyone from SHIELD 2.0”

“Where, ah, where did the Taco Tuesday gang end up?” Clint asked, squinting out into the crowd. Kate saw the moment he spotted them-- right up front in the middle of the three sections of seats. Edna’s blued hair was hard to miss, especially as it was right next to Nick Fury’s bald head and the tall swath of black hair and eye-splitting backless angora that was Waarzegster. Behind them, Clint saw a happy pang, were Joe and Zak and Yolanda-- and even Mercedes, far too close to Edna for anyone’s comfort. He was glad they’d all taken to him equally as they had to Phil. Or, well, vice versa.
He saw a couple of people in the next row back the surprised him as well, and turned back to Natasha.

“How did you get them here?” he asked, pointing to the broad red-coated shoulders of a Canadian mountie.

“That’s not important at this juncture,” Natasha said, winking at him. “What’s important is why, and you know why.”

Clint opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again, taking another look over the crowd. A little further back sat a tall redhead, with a not-so-tall companion. Up front, two very familiar women were putting finishing touches on the wedding arch, moving greenery. Over on Phil’s side, the woman who’d tried to lead them to a getaway boat in Miami sat along with two men Clint didn’t recognize but was morally certain he knew.

“You’re welcome,” Natasha said when he turned back to her, mouth agape. “I worked with Basil and Kate; we thought you’d want everyone here.”

“This location cannot possibly be secure after all this,” Clint protested.

“Which will make Bobby Whitefeather happy, because then he’ll have it all to himself again. Clint, I know you have to do this wedding under assumed names, and I know you’re going to have to keep living in the shadows. The least I could do was give you both one day in the sunlight.”

There was nothing Clint could say to that, so he didn’t. He just reached over and hugged her tight.

They were still hugging when Phil came out on the porch, and Clint forgot to breathe.

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He looked amazing, of course. And he didn’t do anything to convince Clint this wasn’t a dream. From his sleek dark blue three-piece with the purple pocket square to the agent on his arm, right on through to the love riding high in his big blue eyes when he saw Clint, he was every inch the stuff Clint’s mooniest daydreams.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Phil said, his face splitting into a goofy smile.

Clint bit his lip, trying in vain to keep from grinning like a loon himself.

“You’re real,” he told Phil.

The goofy smile melted into something equal parts desperate and fond.

“Really real,” Phil said. “Promise.” And then, with a quick sideways glance at Melinda, he leaned forward and waggled his eyebrows. “Want me to prove it.”

Melinda yanked him backwards.

“Damnit, Phil, wedding first,” she said.

Clint felt his grin come racing back, so fast it made him giddy.

“I hate to break it to you, Mel, but the wedding definitely didn’t come first. In fact, Phil--”

Natasha shoved him at the stairs at the same time as Melinda turned Phil and pushed him forward. They stumbled down the stairs in shabby unison, laughing all the way.
The harpist, clearly unprepared, skidded to a halt, scattering arpeggios. When she started up again, it was with the first plaintive notes of the processional. Clint took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. When he looked over, Phil was doing the same.

Phil winked at him, his grin fading back into an intense non-smile-smile, then faced forward. They stepped off together down their separate aisles, keeping abreast as they made their way forward. Clint felt more than saw the eyes of their friends on them, and wondered, just for a moment, if they hadn’t all turned empath. He thought he could feel affection radiating at him. Or maybe it was him giving it off.

Halfway down the aisle, Clint felt Nat stiffen beside him.

“Clinton Francis Barton, that is the theme song to Jurassic Park,” she hissed.

“I know, isn’t it great?” he whispered back. He waited until they were nearly at the front before adding “Phil chose it,” and had the pleasure of hearing Nat choke on a laugh beside him.

They reached the front just at a crescendo of the harp, and Clint felt Nat drop his arm as he turned. He glanced right, taking in the front row, all the way from Skye on Phil’s side, her hands wrapped around each other and her face already looking teary, to Kate on his side, beaming under her big hat. And all their friends gathered in between.

Then he looked back at Phil, and nothing else mattered anymore.

He heard the rustle as the officiant stepped up beside them, the deep rumble as he cleared his throat, the shuffle, the mutter, the intake of breath.

“Dearly beloved,” the officiant started, and Clint glanced over, concerned. His voice was already shaking a little. The officiant met his eye and nodded, then looked over at Phil, who winked at him. He sniffled, then took another deep breath-- and one more still. When his moustache had finally stopped quivering, he started again.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man, and this man” he nodded at Phil, whose grin was starting to spread again, then glanced at Clint, who felt suddenly light-headed, “in the bonds of holy matrimony…. And about time, too, bro.”

Basil sounded so very offended that Clint couldn’t help it, everything fizzed over, all the joy and the unreality and the feeling like his head was filled with helium, and he burst out laughing. After a moment he heard Phil laughing, too, and he reached blindly out for him, needing anchorage. Phil grabbed his hand and squeezed tight, warm and strong and solid. Clint sniffed his way back to composure and looked up, to find Phil beaming back at him.

“All done, bros?” Basil asked them both, and they nodded. “Is good. We begin again.”

Clint laced Phil’s fingers in his, and held on. It sounded like a wonderful idea.

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Holding the reception in a barn, Kate had informed them, was the in thing. Clint had asked her if she’d ever been in a working barn, and she’d rolled her eyes and said that of course you cleared the animals out first.

She’d said this in front of Bobby Whitefeather himself, and for a brief moment Clint hadn’t been sure whether his wedding planner was going to live to see the ceremony.
He shouldn’t have doubted her, he decided, as he glanced behind him at the open barn doors, glowing with lantern lights. He nodded at Kate, who was hovering in one door, and she disappeared inside. As he waited for her, he glanced out across the tables arrayed on the lawn, where everyone was in the middle of their dinners and decorum had been abandoned in favor of licking fingers and swigging wine. It was by far the most generous secret wedding he’d ever attended. It stopped his heart to realize it was his-- and Phil’s.

He looked over at his husband, sitting beside him, and this time managed to let his gaze linger for a whole five seconds before he had to look away. It was the longest he’d been able to look at Phil since they’d walked back down the aisle together an hour ago, holding hands. Phil hurt to look at, so bright he seemed lit from within. When Clint tried his vision blurred and his chest ached.

It was weird how close the symptoms of marrying Phil were to how he’d felt mourning him. Like joy and grief could both be so great they bent around and met.

“Hey,” Phil said in an undertone, and Clint tried to look at him once more.

“Hey,” he managed back, not sure his body could hold the love trying to beam out at Phil.

Luckily, Kate interrupted him before he could explode, and handed him a microphone. Phil gave it a curious glance and Clint waggled his eyebrows before standing up. Facing the crowd, whose chatter was dying away as they turned to wait for him, Clint felt a sudden urge to hide. He flailed out and grabbed at Phil’s hand, which was miraculously coming up to meet his.

Everything came into focus, all the love on the faces of their friends grounding him. He licked his lips.

“I, uh, Kate seemed to think we had to give speeches,” he started, then cleared his throat and counted to five in his head to settle himself. He could do this. He knew his mark. He just had to let go and hit it. “I admit when I pictured myself marrying Phil, I never got this far-- or else I skipped over it.”

“Heyo!” someone called from the crowd-- Clint didn’t think it was Tony, but he also didn’t think it wasn’t. At any rate, the chuckle gave him the last push he needed to continue.

“Yeah, well, I don’t think I can be blamed. But I do want to, uh, say a couple things. Less about Phil because... “ he looked down at Phil, who was watching him with the same intensity he did on missions… “because I wouldn’t know where to start. He has-- you have, Phil-- always been the one who challenged me, who knew what I was going for better than I did and made me believe I could get there. You… you keep me going and… and if I keep going on I’m going to go all Bette Midler here.”

Clint had to break there, to let Phil crack up. Which was deliberate; he’d seen in Phil’s eyes that the love was going to swamp him soon, too. They didn’t talk that much about this for a reason, after all. But tonight, Clint needed to. Just this once, in public, in front of everyone.

“Anyway,” he sniffled, “it never did matter if we were or weren’t in a relationship, or even on a team together. Even when you were furthest from me, you still were watching out. Even when I didn’t know it. Even… even after you died.”

He gave Phil the barest minute to crumple at that, because if he stopped there long it would still be too much. Instead he nodded, gave a weak smile, and rolled onward.

“I mean obviously you didn’t stay dead-- no one ever could get you to just stop for a minute, jeez--
but while you were dead, you gave me the best thing I think you ever could have. You gave me your friends.”

Here, Clint turned back to the guests, letting himself slow down and look over them all—Skye sitting with Edna and both of them looking so touched, Yolanda glaring at him like she resented being made to feel goopy, Zeg with their mysterious smile and Nick looking so stone faced Clint thought he must be trying not to sniffle, Tony and Steve both with their hands cupped over their mouths and the kinds of soft looks on their faces that would have made for terrific blackmail under other circumstances, Zak leaning forward with his hands on the table right next to Joe’s, Kate off to the side openly crying into Natasha’s stole, Basil weeping into his moustache. And more, so many more. He grinned.

“We wouldn’t be here without you. All of you. And I— I wouldn’t have known so many of you if Phil hadn’t known you first, if he hadn’t loved and trusted you all enough to want me to know you, too, after he died. You are… I can’t… when we were furthest apart, when I thought I was a widower who never had a husband, and Phil couldn’t hold me up, you did. When Phil was lost, you saved him. We spent years thinking we couldn’t make a relationship work while we tried to save the world and… and we weren’t wrong.”

This time the distinct “boo” was definitely Tony’s. Clint snorted at him.

“We weren’t. Phil and I together, we’re strong and getting stronger, but not strong enough to do it alone.” He glanced back down at Phil, needing to know Phil saw where he was going.

As always, Phil knew exactly what he was doing, and he stood up, moving to hold Clint around the waist and look out on the crowd.

“Clint’s right,” he said, and squeezed. “Like usual.”

“Thing is,” Clint continued, “we’re not trying to do it alone this time. You-- all of you-- for whatever screwed up reasons-- are here helping us. And that’s why we didn’t just elope, even though this whole wedding is-- sorry Kate-- absolutely ridiculous for two spies. Because we needed you here, helping us get married. We need you here, in our lives, helping us keep those promises. I met a lot of you because of Phil’s IOUs, but I’m telling you it doesn’t matter if I redeemed them or not, we both owe all of you so, so much more than we can ever repay. But we’ll try. We’ll spend a lifetime doing that. And I just-- I’m sorry, I’m running out of words. Um, Phil?”

He turned to Phil, hoping for salvation. Phil kissed him soundly, a kiss that was equal parts love and reassurance, then turned to the crowd.

“I think Clint about covered it,” he said. “And-- thank you. Thank you all so much.” Then he raised his wine glass in a toast.

It was empty, but that was okay; Clint had one they could share. So they did.

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Trinh sighed to herself, dragging the tines of her fork through the smears of purple and white icing left on on her plate. Sarah was standing a short way away, chatting with Zak’s cousin Yolanda, and Trinh was expending a great deal of effort on project Don’t Stare At My Best Friend Like A Creeper.

Sarah had caved to Kate Bishop’s puppy eyes (because Sarah might be a modern Amazon with the face of a Renaissance portrait and the body of a goddess, but she also had a badly-hidden giant soft
heart) and let herself be dressed for the wedding. Trinh still wasn’t sure where Kate had gotten so
many different kinds of purple clothes so quickly--money talked, she supposed--but she’d done a
remarkably good job at making them all look pretty damn snazzy while still sticking more or less
to everyone’s taste. Thus, Trinh had a white chiffon party dress embroidered with tiny purple
flowers, clustering in the bodice and flowing down to scatter over the delightfully twirly skirt,
while Sarah--

Trinh sighed dreamily.

Sarah was wearing slim-fitting trousers in a deep inky purple, Doc Marten oxfords in purple suede,
and a silver charmeuse halter top that flowed like water from the base of her throat, leaving her
arms and shoulders bare except for her bracelet. (Trinh had spent several days making a new batch,
with extras for all of Agent--Director--Coulson’s team and Hawkeye’s people; Kate, Skye, and
Agent Fitz had turned up with a couple spools of purple silk cord and a bunch of cleverly
miniaturized tools and components, and she hadn’t had the heart to turn them down.)

Sarah’s shoulders and arms could have belonged to one of those ancient statues, pearly-pale and
finely shaped and gorgeous. Trinh knew from experience how strong she was--you had to do a fair
bit of pulling other people up over cliffs or walls or into trees or helicopters in their line of work--
and couldn’t help imagining what it might be like to feel it in a more… recreational context.

She’d always admired Sarah--okay, she’d always thought Sarah was beautiful and amazing and
strong and smart and kind, and wanted Sarah to notice her, and maybe tried to do things that she
thought Sarah would like to get her attention. So honestly Trinh was pretty embarrassed that it had
taken the fall of SHIELD for her to realize that her feelings toward her friend weren’t--as she had
laughingly called them--a “straight-girl crush,” but more of a, well, bisexual-girl crush. And wasn’t
that a kick in the pants, honestly? Trinh would have said she knew herself pretty well, but she’d
been totally oblivious. At least in hindsight, this explained a lot about certain intense friendships
she’d had as a kid, not to mention her idle daydreams about hanging out with Scully from the X-
Files that had involved a lot more rolling around in their PJs than finding aliens. So, yeah, the dust
had started to settle, they’d gotten comfortable at the farm, and Trinh sat down and faced the fact
that she had a giant crush on Sarah.

(Sometimes, she would remember the way that panic had clutched at her chest as they had
searched the dark snowy mountain that night, her heart leaping and then sinking every time the
dogs alerted or someone thought they saw something, and then the rush of overwhelming relief and
joy that had sent her rocketing into Sarah’s arms when she found her, and she would think to
herself that it was more than a crush, a lot more. But she wasn’t quite ready to think too hard about
that, yet. Trinh had a longstanding rule that she was only allowed to process a maximum of two
life-changing events at a time, and she was pretty full up right now with realizing her sexual
orientation and learning that Agent Coulson was alive; the possibility of love would have to wait.

Besides, Sarah might not even be interested. Maybe she only liked women who were tall like her,
or calm like her, or confident and quick-witted and dignified like Erisa, or deadly and tactical like
Agent May. No use getting spun up about a possibility that might never be relevant.)

She hadn’t said anything to Sarah yet, because--well, it was kind of scary. Trinh ordinarily had
little trouble asking out anyone she liked, but this wasn’t only the first woman she’d been interested
in (or, well, had realized that she was interested in: hindsight!), but it was Sarah. And if she asked
Sarah out and it ruined things, Trinh didn’t know how she’d stand it.

Then again, though. If it went well. If Sarah liked the idea. That could be… amazing.

Sarah looked over and caught her eye. Trinh felt her face heat at being caught looking, but Sarah
just smiled at her, open and sweet, and Trinh couldn’t do anything but smile helplessly back. Sarah tilted her head a little, a subtle “come here” gesture they used in the field, and Trinh found herself shoving her feet back into her sparkly lilac heels and crossing the room toward her as though she was pulled by a string.

“Hey,” Trinh said, stupidly, as though she and Sarah hadn’t been sitting next to each other during the ceremony and most of the reception.

Sarah dimpled. “Hey yourself,” she said. “I’ve been meaning to tell you, I really like your hair. It’s very Princess Leia at Endor, but sparkly.”

“Well, you know me, that’s totally my look,” Trinh said, unable to stop herself from reaching up to push one of the purple crystal hairpins more securely into the braid-crown thing that she’d practically shellacked in place on top of her head. “Like, guerilla warfare, but ornamental.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Yolanda said, toasting her with half a glass of one of the purple signature cocktails, which seemed to have an entire hibiscus flower floating in it.

“Not at all,” Sarah said, something odd in her voice. “I like it.”

Trinh looked up, biting her lip without thinking as she tried to figure out what Sarah’s shift in tone meant. She’d gone bright pink along her cheekbones and the tips of her ears, and she kept looking at Trinh and then looking away quickly.

Kind of like the way Trinh tended to look at her.

There was a bubble in Trinh’s chest, a knot of apprehension and hope, and she felt her pulse speed up like she was about to do a difficult instrument landing, or fight a bunch of dudes, or jump out of a crashing helicopter (which, okay, she’d only had to do the one time, so people could stop ragging her about it any time now).

Well. There wasn’t really going to be a more romantic setting, was there?

“Dance with me,” Trinh blurted.

Sarah blinked. “Me?”


Yolanda laughed. “You kids are adorable,” she said. “Have fun.” She waved her now-empty cocktail glass at them and wandered off toward where Zak and Darrell were having some kind of intense-looking conversation with Agents Fitz and Mack.

“She’s only like five years older than me,” Trinh said, looking indignantly after her. “Just because I’m short--”

“Trinh,” Sarah said.

Trinh stopped short, and looked up. Sarah’s voice had sounded wobbly, which pretty much almost never happened unless someone had almost just gotten killed or there was, like, a really sad dog food commercial. (Sarah had a thing about animals.)

Sarah reached out a hand, then started to pull it back, but Trinh grabbed it before she could finish
“Dance with me, Sarah,” she said again. “And let me take you out to dinner after. I mean, not right after. We just ate. But like, tomorrow. As a date.” Her voice squeaked embarrassingly on the last word, but she set her jaw and refused to back down to her own nerves. “Because I really like you.”

“I…” Sarah’s fingers tightened around Trinh’s hand. (They were so long and pretty. Everything about Sarah was long and pretty, except her hair, which was short and pretty.) “I didn’t realize you… with women, I mean.”

“Yeah, I kind of didn’t either for a while?” Trinh cleared her throat. “It’s kind of embarrassing, in hindsight. I should have been more self-aware. So many things make a lot more sense now… anyway, I’ve decided to blame the patriarchy and our gender-normative, heterocentric culture. But, um, yeah. I do. Well, now I do. At least I want to? If you do, I mean, otherwise we can pretend I didn’t say anything and oh god please make me stop talking.”

Sarah laughed, her face clearing. “I really like you too,” she said. “And I would love to dance with you.”

The bubble in Trinh’s chest was full of fizzy sweet wine and butterflies and rainbows. “And dinner after?”

Sarah squeezed her hand. “Anytime you want.”

“Oh,” Trinh said, and pressed the hand that Sarah wasn’t holding to her mouth, which suddenly wanted to tremble. She was not going to cry. Not with as long as it had taken to do her eyeliner. “Thank you, that—that’s really good.”

“Yeah,” Sarah said. “I think it will be.” She took a step toward the dance floor, tugging Trinh along a little. “Come on, let’s dance.”

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“So, whaddya think?” Clint asked, his voice half muffled in Phil’s collar.

Phil tightened his arm around Clint’s waist reflexively, and adjusted his jaw so that his husband’s breath wouldn’t tickle him.

“What do I think about what?”

“That,” Clint said, tilting his chin at the dance floor, where little Agent Nguyen and not little at all Agent Reade were dancing together, looking so transparently happy it was surprising that they hadn’t melted into a fluffy purple puddle on the floor.

Phil considered them a moment, then considered himself, surprised at the level of smugness he was starting to feel build up in his core.

“I think we have to start thinking about fraternization regulations, I-- no, no, don’t frown at me. I think that’s great, I’m just realizing there’s going to be more and more of this and maybe everyone’s best served by clear guidelines. Okay?”

“We did fine,” Clint said, then promptly grimaced as he realized what he’d said. “Okay fine we didn’t, but not because of that.”

“No-o,” Phil agreed, and paused himself to kiss Clint’s hair as a reminder that they’d managed to
work things out eventually. “While I’m at it, now that we’re less hilariously understaffed, maybe I should start thinking about promoting work-life balance? I mean... “ he gestured at the two women on the dance floor. “I’d like them to have a better chance than we had.”

“If you’re going to promote work-life balance, Director,” Clint said, “why don’t you start with yourself and delegate that job to Erisa?”

“Fair enough. I-- Ms. Rodriguez,” Phil greeted Yolanda as she came up to them.

“Coulson,” she replied, giving him a nod, “can I steal your husband for a bit?”

“For a bit?” Clint asked, straightening up.

“For a samba,” Yolanda clarified.

“You want to dance with me.” Clint said it more like he was clarifying something on a bad comm line than like a question.

“I want to let you know what all I added to your luggage for you guys’ little getaway, and go over your flight plans. And also-- while I will kill you if you tell Abuela this-- I happen to like Gloria Estefan, so I’m going to update you on the dance floor.”

“Save me,” Clint said, turning his face upwards to Phil. “You married me, spare me from this awful fate.”

“Mm, I don’t think that was in the vows,” Phil said, trying to look serious even though he could feel his face threatening to burst into a foolish grin at the reminder that they’d just exchanged vows and everything. “For better or for worse, yes, but they said nothing about Miami Sound Machine.”

“You’re trying to get rid of me already,” Clint pouted, but he was also clearly trying not to grin.

Phil rolled his lips, smiling back at him, trying to hold back any stupid reassurances, because of course Clint knew he wasn’t, and it didn’t need to get any sappier in here.

It was no good; the marriage was still too new, and he’d lost Clint for so, so long-- for good, even, till death did them part. Apparently he couldn’t joke about this yet. So Phil leaned over and kissed his new husband, long and tender, until they both sighed against their joined lips.

“You know that’s not true,” Phil whispered to him. “Now go and dance with Yolanda.”

“Ugh, I’ve changed my mind,” Yolanda said, even as she took Clint’s arm. “He’s got terminal sap, and it’s probably contagious.”

“Blah,” Clint leered as they left, breathing heavily on her.

“Damnit, Jets,” Yolanda groused, and then they were out of hearing range.

Phil watched them go with a sappy look on his face, then turned back around and wandered off. He had been spending so much time staring into Clint’s eyes all night and feeling like the entire barn was light on gravity, that he hadn’t had much chance to look around his own wedding.

He slid around the edge of the crowd, glancing between the dancefloor, where Avengers and SHIELD agents, ex-Mounties and ex-cons were all jostling for room, and the lawn that was visible through the big open barn doors. There, under strings of twinkle lights and a bright moon, more friends were clustered, talking low or just staring up at the night sky. Phil closed his eyes, and for
one brief moment let himself bask in the tide of affection rising slowly around him. For one night, at least, the world felt kind. Something slid into place, deep in his heart, and he nearly gasped.

I really did it, he thought. I’m alive. I’m here.

He opened his eyes, hoping he would find Clint in his line of vision. He needed someone to share the realization with.

Instead, he found himself facing the presents table.

“Oh my god,” he said, then rubbed his eyes and looked again.

No, it was still there.

“Oh my god,” he said again, as he arrived at the table. It was worse up close. He glanced back out at the dance floor, where Steve Rogers was busily dancing with Benton Fraser. (It turned out that the super soldier serum did not enhance one’s dancing ability.)

“You okay?”

It was Joe Rollette, who’d been standing by the table watching the crowd. He was glancing over at Phil like he thought Phil might decide to faint on him.

Phil wasn’t entirely sure he wasn’t going to. He took a step back, the better to take in the entirety of the enormous canvas propped at the back of the table. It was one of those paintings produced from a photograph, and it featured a grinning Captain America, holding a cheap plastic shield and standing next to a llama in a Cap suit. There was a bow in the upper left-hand corner, and a tag that proclaimed it a gift from Steve Rogers. (“And Tony” said a postscript at the bottom, in a different pen.)

“Captain America hates me,” Phil said faintly.

Joe frowned at the painting.

“Somehow I doubt that’s it,” he said judiciously. “He was crying when you guys said your vows anyway. I mean— unless he had a thing for Hawkeye and you beat him out.”

Phil tried to imagine that, but gave it up quickly. His sanity had been hard won, and he didn’t want to risk any of it.

“I doubt that’s it,” he said.

“Tell you what, though,” Zak continued, “I finally get why you used to talk about him all the time. He’s… a bit of a shit, isn’t he?”

That, Phil decided, he definitely was. Still— Phil himself had played dead for a few years in there, and Steve had helped pick up the pieces of Clint. He poked the painting again, right in Captain Llamerica’s pecs, which had been signed “to my biggest fans-- from Steve.” Maybe after all this was what it looked like when Steve Rogers forgave you.

Of all the things he’d lost to Loki, the Avengers were the one thing Phil’d never thought he’d have a chance to reconnect to. Alive again indeed. Well if nothing else, this should make it a lot easier for him and Clint to work out their overcrowded schedules.

“They kind of underplayed that in the history books,” Phil said to Joe, only to find Joe ignoring him
in favor of the crowd again. Phil followed his glance, and nearly laughed. He was staring across
the dance floor, where Skye was standing, chatting animatedly with Zak Rodriguez. And lovely as
she was, Phil didn’t think for a minute he was watching Skye.

“You know,” he said slowly, coming over to stand next to Joe and settling in to watch with him, “it
is a wedding.”

“You sound like Uncle Bobby,” Joe said, sounding a little frustrated. “I don’t know what he
meant.”

“You don’t know what he meant,” Phil repeated, frowning. “Joe Rolette, have I taught you
nothing?” Joe swung his head towards Phil, looking shocked. “Agent Rolette, what’s the first thing
an agent should always be aware of?”

“Himself,” Joe replied automatically. “I… I think I am, sir.”

“All right, what’s the second thing an agent should be aware of?”

“His team.” Joe’s gaze swung straight back to Zak. “Believe me, sir, I’m aware.”

“Aware of how you feel, or how he does?” Phil asked softly. “Because I have to tell you, I’ve
known a lot of good professional partnerships, and some stunning ones. And there’s a difference
between what, say, Clint and Natasha have and what Clint and I had. Or what I think you have with
Zak… or want to have with him.”

He watched Joe slump, looking suddenly nearly as tired as he had when Phil had first seen him
again beneath Puerto Rico, carrying Skye. They’d had less time than Phil would have liked to
connect after that-- Joe had spent most of his time with his uncle and Phil had spent it, well,
everywhere else. But now he wondered if Joe’d ever fully recovered. Skye, he knew, was still
feeling kind of shaky about her new powers, even with the support. Sure enough, when Joe finally
replied, it was about what Phil’d guessed:

“You always said a good agent makes sure they’re not a danger to their team.” Joe shrugged again.
“Can I say that? I’d never forgive myself-- not to mention Sarah and Yolanda and Mrs. Rodriguez
would never forgive me-- if I let Zak get hurt. I… maybe when I get a better handle on this.”

“Ah, yes, that sounds familiar,” Phil said, wondering if Melinda had wanted to shake him when
he’d said it about his own brush with Kree juice-induced insanity as badly as he wanted to shake
Joe now. “But I think I also remember telling you to trust your teachers. Doesn’t sound like your
uncle is worried about that. And… Joe. Let me tell you, it makes a world of difference to have
someone at your side. You don’t need to handle this alone.”

There must have been something in his voice-- he would have been surprised if there hadn’t been,
given that he’d choked himself up remembering seeing Clint watching him when he woke up from
his fugue on the beach, compassion riding in his eyes. Joe was staring at him like Phil’d started
speaking in tongues. After a moment, however, he collapsed back into himself.

“It’s just a bad time,” he sighed. “It’s busy, we’re-- I’m not even going with when you all leave,
I’m staying here with Bobby and Skye to train and I can’t just ask Zak and then disappear on him.
And then there’s missions and Hydra and saving the world and it wouldn’t be fair to him. I can’t--
plus, I can’t know. I can’t… I couldn’t stand seeing him like he was in the Kree temple. I never
want him to have to see me like that. Maybe later. Maybe if we ever… if life ever quiets down.”

He was still watching Zak, though, and he whined a little as Zak threw his head back to laugh,
letting light glint on the planes of his face, his smile, his bared throat. Phil decided that he probably was getting what he deserved, after everything he and Clint had pulled.

“Would you prefer it if he found out you loved him when someone reads it to him in your will?” he asked, knowing it would shock. He got the reaction he wanted, Joe slewing around to stare at him.

“N… no? That sounds horrible? That… but that’s not what….”

“May as well have been,” Phil told him. “Look, this is not an area where you should do what Agent Coulson did. Agent Coulson-- and Agent Barton, too, it takes two to mess up this badly-- spent a lot of years telling ourselves exactly what you just did. It’s too busy, we’d be too compromised, what it adds up to, after all, is we didn’t trust ourselves. Or each other, come to that. And so we spent years telling ourselves later-- until it was too late. Not nearly too late, actually too late. We wouldn’t be here without what I can only call the application of mad science. Don’t let that happen to you.”

Joe was looking back at Zak again-- if he kept bouncing between them this way he was going to make himself motion sick.

“Why was it easier for me to walk into that stupid temple?” he asked-- Phil wasn’t sure if he wanted an answer, but gave him one anyway.

“Because you’re trained for that. You’re not trained for this. Joe, trust me. If you really don’t want to, don’t. But don’t do it just because you think you or he are too weak. Didn’t you hear Clint’s speech earlier? None of us do this alone-- and we won’t make you, either. If you two decide you want to start something, don’t you think all your friends will back your play? Look at Sarah and Trinh; do you plan to make them do this all by themselves?”

“Of course not,” Joe said, scandalized. “They’re my friends, and they love each other. I mean, I’m going to tease them endlessly, but-- oh.”

“‘Oh,’” Phil agreed. “Look, I’m not going to make you do anything, I’m not going to push, but I am going to go over there and say hi to Skye. Come with me.” He laid a hand at Joe’s back and started moving forward.

“Not going to push,” Joe grumbled. “I think you’re overly invested, sir.”

“Maybe,” Phil agreed. “And maybe it’s my wedding and I get to be if I want. I’m not going to ask him for you, if you want to do it, ask him yourself.”

“Ask him what,” Joe wailed, as Phil maneuvered him around Antoine Triplett and Mercedes, who were currently shimmying together.

“It’s a wedding, Joe,” Phil sighed. “Ask him to dance or something. How did you make senior agent again?”

“This was not on the quals.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“Wait-- but. What if he doesn’t like me after all? What if--”

“Oh my god,” Phil told him, “fine. Die an old maid, if you prefer.”

They were nearly even with Zak and Skye now, who’d noticed them coming. Skye glanced quickly
from Joe, to Phil’s face, then to Zak, then back to Phil, and winked.

“Hey, AC,” she said, peeling herself away from Zak and grinning, “I haven’t gotten to congratulate you yet.” And she flung herself at his neck and hugged him.

“You’ve congratulated me five times by my count,” Phil whispered into her hair, as he pulled her closer and let her cling. He was still too apt to wake up at night remembering how limp she’d been when Joe had helped her out of the rubble of the temple. “At least once with champagne and another time by slapping Clint’s ass and then winking at me.”

“He was fine with it,” Skye hissed back, “he laughed. Are they talking now?”

Phil pulled away slightly and looked over her shoulder. Joe had come to lean next to Zak against the side of a table. Only, because he was so much taller, he’d misjudged the lean and nearly fallen flat on his ass. He’d managed to catch himself on a chair. Zak was looking at him with a mixture of fondness and profound concern.

“Kind of,” Phil said, releasing Skye so she could re-arrange herself to watch them as well.

“So, um,” Joe began, deliberately nonchalant. “It’s. Um. It’s a wedding.”

Zak blinked, then looked past Joe at Phil and Skye.

“So,” Phil said, turning swiftly to Skye, “I really liked the purple cake. How’d you manage that?”

“Lots of food coloring,” Skye replied swiftly. “Lots and lots…”

Behind her, Zak was agreeing that it was, indeed, a wedding.

“Lots of dancing,” Joe observed, sounding strained. He got, for his troubles, a double-take, and Zak agreeing that yes, there was indeed a lot of dancing.


“Oh my god,” Skye whispered, looking pained. Though not, Phil thought, as pained as Joe probably felt.

Zak looked back out at the dance floor, his face going sour.

“Dancing? Honestly? I hate it. Everyone in the damn family likes to dance-- look at Cousin Yo out there, she was practically doing backflips with Hawkeye a minute ago. And everyone always expected me to be great, you know? Latin and Israeli-- and queer. I should be on Dancing With the Stars. Ugh. Just-- ugh.”

Phil closed his eyes. It was better than seeing Joe’s face, at that moment.

“Oh.” Joe said, quietly but with, to a trained espionage agent’s ear, infinite pain. “Right. I’m just… I’ll just… you probably don’t want me to.”

Phil opened his eyes to find Joe stalking off, already disappearing into the crowd. Zak was blinking after him, mouth hanging open.

“Oh my god, Zak, you idiot,” Skye said.

“What?” Zak turned, looking first to her then to Phil, like he needed a translation.
Phil wasn’t feeling very charitable at the moment, though, and didn’t give him one.

“If this is what Internal Affairs was teaching agents, no wonder you all missed Hydra,” he said. Beside him, Skye nodded decisively.

“Okay, that’s not even fair, everyone missed Hydra, and what the hell do you mean I—”

“Zak,” Yolanda yelled, advancing on him through the crowd of dancers. “What the hell did you do to that poor kid? He looks like he’s gonna cry.”

Zak looked between them all one last time, and went white as a sheet.

“Fuck,” he said. “Oh, fuck me.”

“Not looking likely right now,” Yolanda told him acidly. “Not looking likely at all.”

---

Clint had barely made it out of Basil’s arms-- into which Yolanda’d spun him after she finished dancing with him-- before he had started looking for Phil. Yolanda had assured him everything was packed, and the night and his patience were starting to wear thin. It had been a wonderful wedding, but now he wanted to get started on the honeymoon before someone could invade and interrupt it. A momentary shift of the dancers revealed Phil, on the far side of the floor. Clint started towards him.

As he reached the middle of the floor, he saw the dancers parting. Joe Rolette was stalking through the crowd, so fast he sent Charlie Crews tumbling into Edna’s arms-- even though he hadn’t touched her. He must have his shield up, then, at least a little. Edna looked thrilled with having Crews in her arms. He handed her a pluot as he straightened up, and she tucked it into her bosom-- or tried to; it was knocked out of her hand by Zak, rushing along in Joe’s wake.

Clint paused, blinking.

“Hey Joe,” Zak was saying, as he ramped up his speed. “Joe. Joe! Joe, stop.”

He finally had closed the distance enough to grab Joe’s elbow.

“What?” Joe snapped, rounding on Zak. (In the background, Clint noticed absently, Basil had picked up the pluot and was dusting it off under his armpit.)

“I-- Joe, look, I--” Zak stopped, clearly at a loss for words, and stared hard into Joe’s eyes.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” Joe said miserably, and Clint winced.

It seemed like the two of them were finding out the hard way that communication on a mission was a lot easier than communication outside of it-- just like he and Phil had.

“I want… I want…” Zak bit his lip, his hand trembling on Joe’s elbow. He looked down at it, as if frustrated at it, then up at Joe. “Goddamnit,” he sighed.

Then he reached up, grabbed Joe’s face between his hands, and planted a very firm kiss on his mouth.

“Um.” Joe said, looking dazed.

From behind him, Clint heard Sarah Reade titter. It was a bit of a shock, since he’d never heard her
do anything of the sort before. Maybe that was what kissing Trinh Nguyen did to a woman.

“I don’t want to dance with you,” Zak told Joe firmly.

“Okay,” Joe agreed, though Clint could tell he had no idea what he was agreeing to. Zak could apparently tell, too, because he elaborated.

“I really do hate dancing. I don’t want to dance with you. I want to… I want to not dance with you. I want to, maybe not dance with you outside, somewhere, where it’s quieter and… less crowded and we could talk.”

“About not dancing?” Joe asked him, still sounding confused. Clint suspected, from the way his mouth was starting to twitch upwards, that the confusion was at least half put-on.

“Yes,” Zak told him. “About you and me, not dancing. Maybe… more than once. Maybe… as a regular thing.”

“I hear the far pasture is good for that,” Clint put in, and they both spun to stare at him. “Not dancing, I mean. I hear it’s pretty free of cow pats.”

“You’ve been talking to Uncle Bobby,” Joe accused him, although Clint wasn’t sure what the accusation was meant to be about.

“It’s a wedding,” he explained. “This is important information to know.”

“I think the far pasture sounds like a plan,” Zak said, and Joe turned back to him. “If you want to, I mean.”

Joe reached down and ran one hand-- the one he’d held that stupid obelisk in for days on end-- over Zak’s cheek. He did it as gently as if Zak’s skin could shatter him, as well.

“Yeah,” he said. “I would.”

“Oh thank god,” Skye said, close by Clint’s side. He turned to find her next to him, watching Joe and Zak with approval as they slipped through the crowd. “AC would have had a fit if those two had messed it up. He was playing yenta.”

“Now that’s a mental image,” Clint told her. Skye screwed up her nose.

“I don’t want to hear what kinky stuff you two like,” she told him, then unexpectedly flung her arms around him and pulled him into a hug. “AC’s ready to go, I think. I just wanted to say good bye. And-- thank you.”

“Thank you?” Clint asked pulling back.

“Thank you,” Skye affirmed, as she gave him one last squeeze. “For coming back to him. For making him happy. It’s-- he doesn’t get to be happy enough.”

“I know he doesn’t,” Clint told her, around the heart that had suddenly gotten lodged in his throat. “I’ll keep trying. It’s… it’s my privilege.”

Skye sniffled, then pushed him off.

“Get out of here, you sap. Take your husband and go before, like, Hydra attacks.”

Clint didn’t need encouragement; he got. He found Phil waiting for him on the edge of the floor,
caught between impatience, eagerness, and-- from the way his eyes travelled Clint’s body from top to toe and back-- lust. Clint was sympathetic; he was being hit by the same mix of emotions. He was so glad they’d had all their friends with them to celebrate, but this next part….

This next part was definitely better done alone.

“Hi,” he told Phil as he reached him, walking straight into his arms. “Wanna get out of here?”

“So much,” Phil replied. He turned them towards the barn door and walked them out.

On the lawn, they were met by Natasha and Melinda, who’d clearly been waiting for them, and who both gave them wordless hugs and then joined them as they walked away from the big barn, from the noise and the crowd and the happiness within it.

At the bottom of the gate, Nick Fury met them, smiling broader than Clint thought he’d ever seen Nick smile before. He was caught by a surge of fondness so strong he nearly hugged Nick again.

“Director,” Phil greeted Nick softly.

“Director,” Nick greeted him back. “I’m told your carriage awaits.”

He was flat-out grinning. Clint felt a trickle of fear replace the fondness, and he quickened his pace.

They came around the corner to find what Nick called their carriage waiting for them. It was the Manuelbago, all tricked out and with new, non-bashful, interior upholstery. He and Phil’d decided that if they were on the move for their honeymoon, it’d be harder for trouble-- or Phil’s subordinates-- to find them.

What he hadn’t expected was the new exterior decorations.

“Whaddya think, man?” Manuel asked, coming around the side of the Mini-Winnie flipping a spray can idly. His teeth gleamed in the moonlight.

“It’s… really something,” Clint managed.

On the side of the ‘bago, the image of a reclining Clint had been joined by one of Phil, embracing him passionately-- and shirtlessly.

At least… Clint assumed it was meant to be Phil; the spray-painted chest hair suggested as much. But--

“Why am I wearing a luchador mask?” Phil asked, his voice high.

“Ah,” Manuel said, winking. “Incognito.”

“Oh. Of course. How silly. Well… it’s….”

“You gotta take care of it, though, man, no setting this one on fire,” Manuel glared at Clint. “I want it back.”


As he pulled Phil towards their honeymoon vehicle, he glanced at the back, and grinned.

On the spare tire, Manuel had spray painted “Just Married.”
And, underneath it, the words “Happily Ever After.”

Clint tightened his grip on Phil’s hand and looked over. Phil grinned back at him.

“I sincerely hope so,” he said.

“Yeah,” Clint sighed. “Me too. Definitely, me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all of you who followed along with this, here and on tumblr, as it posted. We never thought it would take more than a year-- hell, we had no idea it would go half as long as it did. When life threatened to sink us, you were infinitely patient. Without you, dear readers, nothing.

(Also, we love reading your comments. There’s a convenient box right below this note, should you feel so inclined.)

End Notes

The start of the next chapter is here on tumblr! Follow us for the daily updates.

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