Vox Clamantis in Deserto

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Vox Clamantis in Deserto

by orphan_account

Summary

Ever since Clint's brother raised up enough money to get him a hearing aid, he's been hearing a voice saying strange things and calling for help. Driven by his need to help others, he starts a journey to find out who and where the voice is; all the while discovering government secrets hidden for decades and reshaping his own future.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

There's a voice calling to Clint. It's been doing so for months now, calling to him, and only him as far as he can tell.

Nobody else in the circus seems to hear it. They seem to think he's just pulling their legs, except the ones that genuinely think that there's something wrong with him. Barney thinks differently. Barney thinks that it's interference or failing tech in the cheap hearing aids that he bought. He's been working harder, pulling favors with everyone else and doing extra odd jobs to try and save up for something that'll work better for Clint.

Clint knows the voice is something, or rather, someone else. Perhaps he can only hear it because of the hearing aid in his right ear, but he knows it's someone that wants and desperately needs him to listen.

The person never addresses Clint by name. They never state their name. Just random words mixed with pleas for someone to come back, someone to find them.

And then it fades away, dormant for minutes, hours, days, weeks. The length of time varies. Same with the length of time that it speaks. Sometimes it's only a few seconds before it stops. Sometimes static slowly engulfs the voice. Sometimes it speaks throughout an entire show night, saying words numbers and 'find me, hear me.'

He tried speaking back to it the third or so time that he heard it, before realizing that he has nothing to send a signal back towards the mysterious voice. He's only an auditory observer in this scenario. There is no true interaction between the speaker and the audience.

Clint wonders if the voice even knows that he can hear them speaking. Based on the things the voice is saying, it seems like it is searching for someone particular, someone that got them into whatever situation they're in now. They don't seem to think that anyone at all is listening, based on the way they sometimes scream and cry in his right ear.

Whoever this voice is, they need help. It's sad that the only one that hears him is a seventeen-year-old carnie with a hearing aid and no formal education. He has no way of finding the voice and helping it out. Not by myself, Clint thinks as he watches some of the clowns drive to town to get food.

He's been thinking about talking to the circus's mystic. He's never spent much time with her, but then again, Polly didn't seem to spend much time with anyone. She was a self-sufficient woman, who only travelled with the circus because she wanted to. There were rumors that she had been a part of organized crime back in her youth, but no one had proof yet.

With a sigh, Clint moved into action to find her. He wandered around the circus, accustomed to watching odd looking people doing normal things and normal looking people doing odd things. The snake charmers and acrobats played while the giant woman and dwarf men cleaned, scoffing at the others' antics.

"Steve, come find me Steve." The voice murmured in his ear. It'd been speaking non-stop for twelve hours, as if the speaker wasn't bound to the normal bodily functions of other people. "It's cold and dark here. Where am I? Where are you?"

Clint keeps himself from reacting. He doesn't want to startle anyone or clue anyone in on what's happening. Only Polly can help, and even that seems a desperate hope.
He finds her personal tent and knocks on the tarp as the voice miserably whispers, "Train car, train car."

"Come in!" Polly calls, her accented voice sharply distracting him from the mumbling in his ear. He gently peels back one of the flaps and steps in.

It's plainer than he thought it'd be. It's a regular tent, no crystal ball or other things pointing towards the mysterious as most would suspect. Instead, there's a small closet, a vanity with a jewelry box, and a table with a chair where a plate rests. Polly herself looks like an ordinary lady, aside from the power that seems to exude from her. She rules in here, and she knows that he can sense it. "Well, what is it, boy?" She asks.

He started in to action as static takes over his ear. "Ever since my brother got me this hearing aid, I've been hearing this voi-"

"I already know about that." She cuts him off. "And unlike the rest of the fools here, I can tell that you're not crazy or joking." She moves the plate from the table to the vanity and drags over the vanity's stool. "What is it that you want me to do?"

He steps towards the table and sits down when she gestures for him to do so. "Well, Ms. Polly." She brightens at that, as if no one has addressed her politely in years. "I was wondering if you could help me find them. They need help."

She hums. "Let me see it."

He pulls it out of his ear delicately and immediately notices the difference between his ears. His left picks up on all activity outside the tent while his right hears almost nothing. The woman examines it, feeling the curves and edges as she concentrates. "Sadly, I can't find them with this. My knowledge of how signals are sent and received is lacking." She hands back the object. "However, perhaps I can see your future and that can help you." She rummaged in the closet. "I do require payment though, so I hope you brought me something agreeable."

Clint shifts, pulling a small bottle of whiskey out of his shirt and $10 out of his pocket. He places them down on the table as she brings out a stack of cards.

"Stole that from the kitchen, did you?" She laughs when he nods. "Well, never let it be said that I don't have a soft spot for well-intentioned rascals." She sighs and pauses as she looks at him, as if she's seeing someone else. "This is more than enough payment, Clint." She pushes the money and bottle to the side. "Now. Let's get started."

Around two a.m., he quietly slips from his and Barney's tent. There's a note on the little dresser that they share - an apology for leaving this way, and a thank you for always looking out for him. Clint makes his way through the circus, passing by Polly's tent again, where she stands. He can't make out her face in the darkness, but he can see her nod in the moonlight. "Good luck and good bye."

"Thank you, Ms. Polly." He says softly. She doesn't look nearly as threatening and foreboding now, but power still radiates from her. It just seems gentler, kinder now. "Look after my brother?"

She nods again before slipping back into her tent.

With that, Clint heads out east.

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Weeks later, he's bumming around New York City. It's getting hot, and his birthday's in a week. He's
made no progress in finding out where the voice is actually coming from, but he's not going to start doubting Polly and the cards. So far he's had an easier journey than he expected. People have been helping him along, offering him rides and food. On the occasions where he has run into the police (mainly because he's sleeping in public), they haven't given too much trouble.

The voice still hasn't told him anything identifying, but he's started writing down the things it's been saying. Certain words and phrases are repeated, such as 'Steve', 'Winter Soldier', 'Russia', 'Hydra', and 'train car.' He's searched them together in various combinations on the internet, but nothing relevant has popped up as far as he can tell. Not unless the history of Russian train cars is the key.

Looking around, Clint notices that a majority of the people around him are wearing business suits. No one pays him any attention, too absorbed in the papers they're reading or their phone conversations. He realizes he's outside of Stark Industries, a gregarious building that makes him dizzy as he looks up at it. It explains everyone around him though.

He wonders if this is how the voice feels, if this loneliness and unimportance is what it faces every day. Tasked with the impossibility of survival and success, he feels lost and overwhelmed.

Right now, the voice is mostly covered by static. Clint can just barely make out the voice, but the words themselves are indiscernible. He's pretty sure the battery in the earpiece is dying, and he can't afford a new one.

"Please don't die soon." Clint mumbles to himself. Apparently, he was louder than he meant to be, because a man walking by side eyes him pretty hard. Clint doesn't react to the man's gaze and instead moves towards the building. He's here for a reason; he has to be. Others could chalk it up to coincidence, but Clint can feel it. There's a reason why he's in front of one of the leading tech companies in the world, and it definitely has to do with the voice. Someone or something inside is going to help him.

Hesitantly, he peers in through the glass doors. There's security officers and cameras near the receptionists and elevators, so his chances of sneaking in are pretty much eliminated. Plus, he doesn't really have a plan of what to do once he gets past the lobby floor. The best he's come up with is find someone that works with satellites and radio frequencies and jam the hearing aid in their ear.

'Maybe it's crazy enough to work.' He thinks as he rolls his shoulders back and marches to the receptionist desk. The security guard there stares him down as does the receptionist.

"I really need to speak with Mr. Stark. It's an urgent matter."

To be fair to the receptionist, she doesn't even raise a brow. "And do you have an appointment with Mr. Stark?"

"Well, no, but he's definitely gonna want to hear what I for him."

"Unless you have an appointment, you cannot see Mr. Stark."

"Fine." Clint grits his teeth. "I would like to schedule an appointment." The security officer scoffs at him. "For his earliest convenience."

"Look, kid, you realize you aren't going to meet him, right? Mr. Stark's an incredibly busy man. He doesn't have time to meet everybody that wants to get his autograph." She sighs. "I'm sorry, but it's not going to happen."

"I'm not just here to meet him to shake his hand or kiss ass for a job. I need his help to save someone's life!" The security officer turns back towards him as he stomps his foot. "He's the only
"I do like hearing that I'm smarter than people." Comes from the center of the lobby. Standing there slumped is a man in a suit, next to a strawberry blonde woman. "Pep, any openings today?"

"You do have an appointment with stockholders in twenty minutes that I'm sure you want to avoid." The woman says smoothly.

"It's always fun to leave them scrambling." Mr. Stark says wistfully. ("Only for you, Tony." 'Pep' stage-whispers.) "Well! It's your lucky day, kid! I'm trying to find something more entertaining that investors, and you're trying to get my help. So, you have five minutes to catch my interest, and we'll see where we'll go from there." He grins toothily at Clint.

"There's a man I hear in my hearing aid that needs help." Clint starts, before realizing how crazy that sounds. "Wait, no. I mean, I know how that sounds, but I swear it's true!" He pulls the notebook of sayings he has from his hoodie as he tries to organize his thoughts. "I don't know who or where he is, but I never heard him until after my brother got this for me. He doesn't know that I can hear him, but he keeps talking about Russia and a winter soldier and hydrams and a train car and some guy named Steve."

"And your name just also happens to be Steve, right?" Mr. Stark drawls.

"My name is Clint." He retorts sharply, just as the static clears away in his ear piece.

"I need help. If anyone is listening, I need help." The voice calls, clear as day. Dropping the notebook, Clint hastily claws the aid out of his ear and offers it forward.

"He's talking right now! Just listen!"

Stark makes a subtle nod to the security officer that right by Clint. The man grabs it from Clint's hand and examines it before putting it in his ear. His brows immediately raise and he nods. "The kid isn't lying, Mr. Stark."

Clint lets go of the breath he didn't even know he was holding.

"Doesn't mean this is anything more than a gag to waste your time." 'Pep' says, eying Clint up and down. He can't even really blame her. His clothes are ratty and sweat stained from his journey. Still, the accusation hurts.

"Look, lady. I barely know how it works aside from turning it off and on, so unless someone's pranked me too, it's no joke. I've got better things to do than spend weeks traveling here and worrying the rest of the carnies."

"Carnies?" Clint didn't think it was possible for Stark's eyebrows to go higher than they already were.

"Clint Barton, a.k.a. the amazing Hawkeye of Carson's Carnival of Travelling Wonders, at your service." He says with an exaggerated bow.

"So - and correct me if I'm wrong here - an archer kid from a travelling carnival can hear a mysterious man on his hearing aid has travelled weeks to ask my help in saving said mysterious man from the Russians?"

"Well, he says he's alone, so probably not the Russians." Clint amends. "And I'm a week away from being an adult."
"Pepper, pinch me. I have got to be dreaming." The woman, Pepper, obliges and pinches him hard on the arm. "Ow, okay, so not dreaming. Apparently this is reality."

"You betcha, Stark." Clint grins. He knew something good would happen here! He scoops up his notebook before turning to the guard. "Don't suppose I can get that back? I do actually need it to hear anything on my right." The man shrugs before giving it back. "Thanks."

"Well, you still have two minutes, but I'm sure I speak for everyone here when I say you've proven yourself far more interesting than expected." Stark turns towards the elevators. "Follow me, Clint. Oh, and have fun with the stockholders, Pepper!"

The room that Tony takes him to looks like it's straight out of a sci-fi show. There's an innumerable amount of gadgets here, each one looking more complicated than the previous. There's still a human touch to the room though, in the notes and pencils and speakers around the room.

"I really should just call the police and tell them that I have a runaway here, but the irony of a kid running away from the circus doesn't escape me."

"I wanna go back, just," Clint shrugs, "He needs help and I'm the only one that knows. And it's a carnival. There's a difference."

Stark waves him off. "Semantics. In any case, this isn't going to be easy. It's not like we know where he's broadcasting from and how to track him." He pauses as if thinking. "You really have no idea how to mess around with electronics?"

"Can't we just chock it up to coincidence?"

"Just like it's a coincidence that you're talking to me about this?"

"Fair enough." Clint nods. "Still, if you don't get it, can you actually help me at all?"

"Ha! You know what; I like you. You're more honest than most people. But no, I can't really help you. Not how you're asking me to, kid." He hops to sit on one of the tables. "But! I might know someone that can help both of us." He pulls a phone out of his pocket as he swings his legs. "A very grouchy man, that most definitely tolerates me at best and confiscates my tech and verbally berates me at worst." He winks at Clint as he holds the phone up to his ear. "Hope you don't need much sleep, because you're not gonna get any for a while. Nick! Aren't you glad to hear from me again?"

The last two sentences are directed at the phone, as Stark fiddles with it some more and activates the speaker phone.

"Tony, I have told you time and again that we are not friends and that -"

"That I should only use this number if I've considered apologizing and blah blah blah. Right. We both know that's not going to happen, Nick. Now, let me get to the point. I have a young Clint here - say hello, Clint -"

"Hello?"
"Good job, Clint - who says that he's been hearing a voice in his hearing aid." The man on the other side takes a breath. "More to say, please wait your turn. Not only has he mentioned that no one else can hear this voice unless they’re using the hearing aid, thereby ignoring all the laws regarding how sound and hearing aids work; the voice has also mentioned some things that I thought might grab your attention." He stops, pauses. "This is the part where it's your turn, Nick. Honestly, you're terribly at this."

"What is the voice saying?"

Clint waits for Stark to continue, but instead the man just looks at him. "O-oh! Uh, well, it keeps talking about a train car, and asking for help, and hydra, and -"

"Russia, and winter soldier." Stark cuts him off, which he isn't even surprised about. He seems like the type of man to ruin a surprise just because he wants to talk. "So what do you say, Nick? Is that something you're interested in?"

There's silence on the line for a few seconds. Clint's surprised that Stark's held himself back enough to not demand a response.

"Where did you find this one, Tony?" Nick asks. Clint can't get a read on his tone. In his right ear, the voice continues to ask for help, quieter and slower, as if it was falling asleep.

"Downstairs in my lobby. He's from a carnival."

"Bring him in."

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Tony takes Clint to the top of the Stark Industries building, and basically shoves him into a helicopter. Some of the bodyguards from the lobby are there, as well as Pepper. Tony talks to them quietly, quiet enough so Clint can't hear anything that's said. After a minute, Pepper hugs and kisses Tony before the man does a hop and a skip to the helicopter. He sits in the back with Clint and soon they're flying over the city.

"Ever flown before?" Tony asks as Clint stares out at the world.

Clint shakes his head. "Don't have the money."

Tony hums. "Live it up then, because we’re about to head off to an airfield to strap down for a private flight to a top secret government agency."

That catches Clint's attention. "It’s that serious?" He says as he turns to look at Tony.

"Yep! You got the express ticket to Area 51, kid. Kidding, kidding," He backtracks as Clint’s eyes widen. “But this is serious. Not many people get to go where we’re going. It's like Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory, but with government secrets and a lot creepier."

"Huh." Clint turns to the window again. Right now, the voice is mumbling low enough that he can’t hear it at all. Even if it were speaking, the helicopter is too loud for Clint to actually make out any words. Instead, he brings out his notebook and starts to doodle on the back pages; a space he’s reserved for pictures of the places he’s seen in his travels and the people he’s met. He’s by no means a good artist, but this is important and large enough that he wants to share it with Barney and everyone else once he returns to the carnival. If he returns to the carnival.

What if he never makes it home?
It’s a thought that’s occupied him for a while. Before it’d been because he was afraid that he’d die out on the road, but he’d been too determined to push forward and help. Now though, he’s wondering if the government will let him go home, or even live for that matter. He wonders if they’ll let the voice live. Somehow that thought seems even more saddening than the idea of his own mortality.

For now, Clint guesses that he’ll just have to wait and see. He can definitely put up a fight if it becomes necessary, but he doubts that he’ll be able to escape if the government decides to kill him or the voice. There’s no way that he’s going to do this much to help the man if the government is just going to kill him. He grits his teeth and grips his pen tighter, causing divots in the notebook page. He scribbles furiously, a fantasy of himself shooting arrows onto stick figure men in black-esque figures.

“Nice.” Tony comments, startling Clint out of his fantasy. “That supposed to be you?”

He shrugs and tries to fight away the blush he can feel on his face. “Just in case they decide I know too much.” It seems silly now.

Tony snorts, definitely solidifying the ridiculousness of his idea. “And you’re just magically going to find a bow and some arrows? And somehow manage to shoot them before they shoot you with their guns? Look, kid. They’re not going to hurt you unless you give them a reason. I wouldn’t take you there if I thought they’d hurt you.” Tony looks serious, which is weird. With everything that Clint’s seen, it’s startling to think that the CEO could actually take something seriously.

“What if they decide that he’s a danger?” He taps on his ear to specify the voice he hears.

Tony’s face shifts to saddened. “Not our call to make. Plus, for all we know, he might not want to live anymore. Who knows how long he’s been trapped, or what he’s been put through. It might be kinder to kill him.”

That’s a disheartening reality that Clint hasn’t thought about.

The sounds of the helicopter reign supreme for the rest of the flight.

Soon they arrive at an airfield, where a small plane awaits them.

As they leave the helicopter, Clint asks, “Couldn’t we have just driven here?”

“And start rumors about me abducting homeless youth? Nope, no can do.” Tony responds as he walks over to the plane, not even waiting for Clint. “You already caused enough of a scene at my place that I’m sure stories are already flying around about why I didn’t have you kicked out. Someone probably thinks that we’re relatives or something.” He pauses. “Oh god, what if they think you’re my secret child or something? I’m too young to be your father.”

Clint scrunches his nose. “Gross. And we don’t look like each other at all.”

Tony shrugs. “People tend to jump to conclusions.”

It surprises Clint how the take-offs between the two different aircrafts differ so greatly. The plane is quieter, smoother than the helicopter yet so much slower. The world outside his window shrinks as they go higher and higher, until cars look like ants and rivers look like a trickle. He thinks that this must be how the trapeze artists, a nice middle aged couple named John and Mary, felt whenever they performed.

Tony doesn’t even bother talking to him this time. Instead, he’s listening to a pair of headphones with his eyes closed and his chair turned towards the back of the plane.
The voice has stopped mumbling, though Clint can still barely hear it. The distance between them seems to grow and stretch, as if the signal is affected by altitude. Clint scribbles that down on the inside of the notebook before curling up in the chair. It’s big and comfy, nothing like he imagined plane seats to be, but he supposes that's the luxury of private planes. He closes his eyes and lets the steady motion and soft noises of the plane lull him to sleep.

He wakes up when the flight attendant gently taps on his shoulder.

"We're about to begin our descent. You need to do your seatbelt.” She waits for him to listen to her instructions before walking over to wake Tony and get him to buckle up as well. After that she walks to the back of the plane, out of Clint's sight.

The landing is rougher than the takeoff. He grips onto the chair’s armrests as he stares out the window, watching the plane return to the world. The place they’re landing at does look like a weird government building. It’s surrounded by water, with docks for boats and a bridge for cars, in addition to the landing strip for the plane and various helicopters. There’s very few people around the outside, which makes it seem all the more untouchable, as if humans aren’t allowed here for long. Clint knows that’s a ridiculous thought – people had to build it after all, and people definitely worked there – but it’s eerie without many humans around.

He’s never been in a place like this. The closest was when he and Barney were taken in by the police after their parents died. But even then, there had been plenty of people mingling about to make him feel less isolated and less unwanted. Here, the building is staring down at him as they land, judging him, and deciding where he belongs and what should be done with him. He’s not safe and he knows it.

When the plane engines finally stop, he hears the voice say, “Someone save me. Please.” For once, Clint can’t help but agree.

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When they get off the plane, an armed guard with a nametag reading ‘Coulson’ leads them to the oppressive building and directs them to an elevator. He punches in a code and the elevator begins to move down. Tony barely speaks to the man, which feels surprisingly out of character. Coulson seems nice enough to Clint, but there’s definitely something about him that hints at being more than the boring man that he appears to be.

The doors open to a lab, where Coulson scans an I.D. card and punches in another code before the door opens. It’s only then, when they’re surrounded by scientists, does Tony speak.

“Thought Nick would be meeting us here.” He comments as he looks around the room with a look of boredom.

Coulson smiles a polite smile. “He wanted the scientists to get a chance with the hearing aid first before he started questioning the kid.”

Tony harrumphs but accepts Coulson’s words. With a nod from Coulson, a young woman approaches Clint and smiles at him. Hesitantly, he pops the hearing aid out of his ear and places it in her gloved hand.

“Thanks.” She says, before pocketing the device. “Now, I just want to ask you a few questions. Have you noticed anything odd about what you’re hearing, aside from it being out of the norm itself?” She asks.
Clint shrugs. “Sometimes there’s a lot of static. On the plane ride here, it seemed like the signal wasn’t as strong as it was when I’m on the ground.” Truth be told, the voice had been quiet as they had made their way down in the elevator, but its soft breathing seemed clearer than before. “And it was almost as if the person on the other end was actually breathing next to me when we came down here. They weren’t speaking though, so I dunno.” He shrugs again.

The woman nods and Clint sees another scientist jot down some notes. “Anything else?”

Clint shakes his head.

“Well! Not much to go on, but better than nothing.” The woman announces before heading back to the other scientists. They begin murmuring to each other, low enough that even Tony doesn’t seem to know what they’re saying.

Right now, Clint’s just feeling at a loss. He hadn’t realized how used he’d become on the voice and static in his right ear. He feels off balance without the weight of the hearing aid and the sounds it amplified. The room feels too big and too small, the noises too loud and too quiet, his clothing too rough and too soft all at the same time. Without waiting a second, he bolts back into the elevator and hits a random floor button.

The doors close before Tony and Coulson can get to him and he curls up in the corner, feeling even worse as the elevator moves.

When the doors do open again, it’s to an office type floor. Clint can make out the desks and roller chairs. The main thing though, is a redheaded girl standing in front of the elevator.

She looks around his age, and she doesn’t look surprised to see him at all. Her hair is in soft curls around her face as she looks down at him calmly. She steps in and turns around to press a button. Once the doors close and the elevator begins moving again, she hits the emergency stop button between some floors. She then sits down next to him, and watches him.

It takes some time, but his breathing evens out, and the world stops feeling paradoxical. He’s still uncomfortable.

“Thank you.” He mumbles, letting his body relax and unfurl.

She nods. “It’s difficult being in a place like this.” Her voice is soft and accented. “And you are young and unexperienced.”

He frowns at her choice of words. “You are too.”

She smiles, and though her lips remain sealed, it is sharp and dangerous. “We are very different.” She says. They barely know each other, but it’s evidently true in the way she acts and the words she says. “But I remember. You will be fine.”

He nods. “I’m supposed to talk to someone named Nick. Someone important.” Her left eyebrow raises at that. “You know him. Can you take me to him, please?”

She’s silent for a second as she evaluates him. He almost feels embarrassed about the way he looks (and probably smells), but he doesn’t have time for this. “Okay.” She nods and stands up, going over to the panel in the elevator and punching in a code similar to what Coulson had done earlier. “You’re interesting.” She states as she stares ahead and the elevator begins to move.

“You are too.” He responds. He can just see the edge of a smile on her face.
The doors open to a highly professional floor. There’s an empty waiting room with couches and a mini table in front of a pair of frosted glass doors that Clint can’t see through. It’s quiet out there, no hustle and bustle of people walking around. He stands up as the young woman glances down at him before they walk out of the elevator together. Giant windows surround this floor, giving Clint an incredible view; much like the one from the helicopter.

The woman pulls a card out of her pocket and presses it to the wall against the door, which causes the door to click open. She guides him into the office where a man with an eyepatch is reading over something. He doesn’t look happy.

“This is Nick.” She announces before sitting on the edge of Nick’s desk. “My name is Natasha.”

Nick has yet to look up at him. “I’m Clint.” There’s no reaction from either of them. “I came here with Tony Star-”

Nick sighs and puts down the paper he’d been reading. “Thank you Natasha.” He massages his temples before looking at Clint. “So. You’re the one hearing things on your hearing aid.”

“Just a voice.” Clint says defensively. “And he needs help. I don’t know where he is but he’s been saying weird things.”

“Right.” Now Nick is straightening up and staring at Clint. “I’m going to assume you don’t know what Hydra or Winter Soldier are.”

He hears Natasha breathe in sharply through her nose, though she doesn’t give off any other signs of acknowledgement. Clint shakes his head.

“Near the tail end of World War 2, a group called Hydra formed. They were creating new technologies and experimenting on humans. One of their primary projects was Operation Winter Soldier. Not much is known about it unfortunately, just that it had to do with somehow connecting humans to technology and creating a soldier that would be nigh impossible to defeat.” He pauses. “It sounds like the voice you’re hearing is one of the people they were experimenting on.”

Clint frowns. “But that was so long ago. How could it sound so young if it happened almost 50 years ago?”

Nick shakes his head. “I don’t know. It could be a recording. It could have to do with technology developed from another organization called Red Room.” Nick glances at Natasha.

“They did talk about working with another group. They… weren’t happy about it.” She comments. “It is possible that the serum that they used on me was used on the subjects in the Winter Soldier project in order to extend their lives.” She carefully avoids Clint’s eyes as she speaks.

“Be that as it may, we don’t know enough to go find this voice right now.” Nick speaks as if the room hasn’t grown heavier. “Our scientists are working on it, but it’s still going to take time. For now, I’d suggest getting some food and rest. We’ll get you when we’re ready to do anything else.” With that, he turns to look at Natasha again. “Show him where the barracks are. Get him set up with some clothes and a room.”

She nods and slides off of the desk. Clint doesn’t follow when she walks by.

“I want to be one of the ones that finds him.” He declares. “And I don’t want him to be killed.”
“I didn’t expect anything different.” Nick responds.

Not feeling satisfied with getting his way, Clint demands, “I also want a bow and some arrows. In case.” He adds.

Nick blinks before nodding. “I’m sure R&D can make something for you.”

Clint smiles. “Thank you.” He says before making his way back to the elevator.

Natasha is quiet on the elevator ride.

Clint, never really knowing what to say, breaks the silence with, “You weren’t joking when you said you were older than me.” It does nothing to break the awkwardness, so he adds, “At least you won’t have to worry about using anti-aging cream?”

She snorts at that, and seems almost taken aback at the noise. “You don’t think I’m a freak?” It feels so honest and raw.

He shrugs. “I’ve been hearing a voice in my hearing aid. And I’m from a carnival. I’m kinda used to freaky.”

She turns and smiles at him. “You’re a good person. Strange, but good.”

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A week passes.

Clint turns eighteen.

Natasha brings him a cake from the cafeteria and they celebrate quietly.

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The light in Clint’s room turns on, startling him from his sleep. Natasha is coming towards him with guarded excitement in her eyes. “They think they found him.”

Within minutes, Clint is up and dressed with his bow in hand as he and Natasha race down the hall to where Director Fury and Assistant Director Hill stand. Hill looks amused, and so does Fury, now that Clint knows how to read him. Clint’s time in SHIELD had been divided between working out and spending time with Natasha for ‘spy training’ as she called it. He’d known enough about sneaking around thanks to his childhood, but learning how to get people to tell him things was an incredible skill.

“Go get something to eat, you two. We’re leaving in an hour for Russia.” Hill says. “Next time, don’t spoil the surprise, Natasha.”

Natasha just shrugs a shoulder and glances over at Clint. “He wanted to know as soon as possible.”

Fury huffs but smiles. Clint knows he’s glad that Nat had become his friend. “We still don’t know if it’s a recording or an actual person, but we’re still going to check it out, if only to find out more about the Winter Soldier project.” He reaches into a pocket and pulls something out. “We also thought you would want this back.” He uncurls his fist to expose Clint’s hearing aid.

Clint reaches out and gently takes it before pressing it into his ear. He’s immediately greeted by a mumbling voice and soft breathing. It feels weird after so much time without it, but it feels good. Clint wonders if this is how most people view coming home after a long trip. “Thank you, sir.”
The director nods at him. “It might not be safe there. It’s best that you bring weapons and protective wear, just in case. There’s no evidence that the base has been abandoned, though there’s been very little activity around this area for some time. Now go, get something to eat. You’ll need it.”

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The following hours are a blur. Even the time spent on the plane seems to go quickly, and before Clint is ready, the plane is landing and they’re hiking to the signal area.

Clint knows they’re on to something. The sounds are clearer and louder in his ear as they quietly make their way through the snow. It’s at its loudest when the locate a covered staircase that descends below the earth. The voice sounds like it’s screaming in his ear as it speaks. The words are too loud for Clint to actually understand what’s being said, and he wonders ironically if this is causing more hearing damage than originally expected.

There are decayed bodies in the darkness. The smell is terrible and Clint gags so many times, that they stop walking and wait for him to compose himself. He ends up vomiting when he sees that he’s touching a red stain on the wall above a body. After he finishes dry heaving minutes later, he makes his way back to the group. His stomach, throat, mouth, nostrils, and eyes all burn as he stumbles along. Nat grasps his arm and squeezes gently. He nods and moves closer to her as they continue.

As they continue, he starts to feel pulled to the left. Something is calling to him, and it increases as they come to a crossing of paths. Without warning anyone, he turns left and begins going faster, faster, faster as his gut directs him to answers. He finds a door and throws it open before rushing in, his bow ready in his right hand.

The scene in front of him is beyond words. There are monitors flickering and casting light on the concrete room. In the center is a man what could may be called a chair, if he wasn’t bound to it. His arms are out, bound to parts of the chair thing. His right arm is normal, but his left is a mess of metal and cords. His eyes are covered by some type of mask, and there are wires and tubes running from the machines in to various parts of his body. He’s breathing heavily, mirroring the breath in Clint’s ear. He’s shirtless and his pants are heavily degraded. It smells of human waste and Clint is almost afraid to approach the man. But he knows he has to do it.

He takes the hearing aid out. It’s not needed for this. He steps towards the man in the chair, focusing solely on him, even as he distantly hears the others approaching. He makes his way to stand by the man’s head, making the man tense even more than before. He’s gone quiet, as if he’s waiting for Clint.

“I’m Clint. I’ve been hearing your voice in my hearing aid for about a year. And I’m gonna get you out of here.” He says before putting his bow down, and moving towards the visor over the man’s eyes. “I don’t want to hurt you, okay?”

The man stays quiet, which makes sense. Natasha and Maria are at one of the computers, staring at its screen as Natasha quietly translates to Maria, who has a recorder out. Fury is still by the door, now with a gun out. Clint knows he won’t use it unless absolutely necessary. He starts to pry the visor off, making the metal creak before it slowly gives.

Staring up at him are green eyes filled with disbelief and wonder. “Are you real?” The man asks hoarsely. “You’re not a dream?”

Clint feels his heart break. This man looks around his and Nat’s apparent age. Given the decay of the bodies outside the room, he must have received the same serum that Nat did. He’s been here so long, abandoned, desperately crying out for help to a world that couldn’t hear him.
“Yeah. I’m real. And you’re safe now.”

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The man’s name is Bucky Barnes. He had been a part of the American forces sent out during World War 2, only for his entire regiment to get kidnapped by Hydra forces. Many of them had been killed and tortured, and forced to do terrible, terrible things to each other.

Bucky and his friend Steve had been unfortunate enough to be selected for the Winter Soldier program due to their tenacity. They were hooked up to machines and had parts of their bodies replaced as they were experimented on. According to the files that Natasha found on the computer, not only was Hydra interested in creating immortal killing machines, they were also experimenting with turning memories into data files and creating a hive mind for their soldiers. In rooms connected to the one they’d found Bucky in, they’d found similar devices and contraptions. Some had dead bodies in the chairs, with wires still running through them, some were empty, which felt even more chilling.

Bucky wasn’t sure why Hydra had suddenly abandoned the place; all he could remember was screaming and the people running away and leaving him strapped in. The SHIELD agents found a reasonable cause soon enough. In one room, the machines had been almost completely destroyed and covered with blood. There were dismembered bodies around the room and down the halls around it. At the very end, surrounded by completely human bodies, was a body with all its limbs replaced by machines. It was holding a round object like a shield, though its other arm was shaped like a spear. The actual human parts of the body weren’t as decayed as the other bodies, and there were still tubes and wires in its skin.

Bucky had been rushed to the medical ward, and technically he wasn’t supposed to have visitors, but Clint couldn’t stand the idea of him being left alone again.

On the third day, he snuck in through the vents.

Bucky looked healthier. He’d cut his hair and shaved his face, and his left arm had been fitted with an actual prosthesis instead of what he’d been left with. Clint dropped down from the vent, making Bucky jump.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you. Just thought you’d want some company.” He fidgeted. Was this a bad idea? What if Bucky didn’t want to see him?

To his relief, Bucky smiled. “Thanks. Pull up a chair.”

Clint grinned and sat down on the doctor’s stool. “You’re looking better.” He blushed. “I mean, healthier.”

Bucky sighed. “It was nice to be able to clean myself. It felt like it’d been decades.” He frowned. “I guess it has been.”

Clint fidgeted again. Bucky didn’t deserve to feel uncomfortable. “Nat still feels weird about it too, and she wasn’t held captive as long.” He said.

Bucky didn’t respond.

“Hey.” Clint tried again, moving closer to the bed. “You survived this long. You’re gonna live. It’s gonna be okay.”

Bucky nodded. “Just feels like I’m gonna wake up in that damned chair alone at any moment.”
Clint toes off his shoes and hesitantly climbs onto the bed. Bucky, touch starved, moves to press against him. “I’ll be here with you. I promise.”
Art

The art can now be found here!

End Notes

I hope you all enjoyed this fic! It took a lot out of me. The inspirations for this were the anime Serial Experiments Lain (an anime about a girl becoming slowly engrossed and consumed by technology), Noc +10 (a youtube ARG that's best summed up here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6miahiNDtiE), and a part of Bioshock 2 that I don't want to completely spoil. ;)
I highly recommend each of these.
Please leave me con crit, as it helps me grow as an author.

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