Summary

It’s Aaron’s first mission for SHIELD since he and Marta joined them about six weeks ago. It has been four weeks since the brothers first met. What will happen if the mission goes sideways?

Notes

Disclaimer: I own nothing but the story, though I would like to appreciate a Clint or Aaron of my own, thank you! I also own this ‘verse,
Author's notes: Lots of love to my betas: anuna_81 for providing lots of thinky thoughts on the characters and making sure they were recognizable, cheering me on all the way :) And hufflepuffsneak for your keen eyes, making sure that it reads right and for being super encouraging :) Thanks a mill again, my dears, I couldn’t have done it without you!

Aaron ran, zigzagging, rabbiting from the HYDRA compound with the goons chasing him. He wouldn’t have worried, if it hadn’t been for the AK-47’s they were brandishing.

"Uhm guys, I could use a little help here," he panted as he ducked to provide less of a target.

The HYDRA cell they were investigating was manufacturing some kind of super anthrax. All they had needed was a sample of the bacteria for analysis to ensure the safety of everyone involved. Aaron had been the logical choice, a genetically enhanced solo operative, and he had relished the chance to prove himself in the field. The infiltration had gone smoothly; Aaron had just informed
Clint that he had obtained a vial of the bacteria. And then it all went to hell in a hand basket in a matter of moments.

“What happened?” Clint asked, his voice calm and steady.

Aaron would have sighed in relief if he’d had the breath to spare. Clint. Just the guy he needed.

“I got made, now a dozen goons with guns are after me,” he breathed. “I can’t get up high, can’t shake ‘em.”

“I see you,” Clint said.

“I need an exit,” Aaron panted, assessing the terrain in front of him.

There was hardly any cover, the old plant the HYDRA cell had set up shop in was the only building around. He headed towards a line of trees that just might provide sufficient cover for a little while, but he had no idea how dense the trees were.

“The trees won’t help you much; cover’s not deep enough to lose them. Go straight through and then head right, there’s a deserted village. No roof access, most of them have caved in. But you might be able to shake ‘em in the streets,” Clint instructed.

Aaron was running for his life, breaching the tree line, when it happened. A shot found its mark, searing pain in his right shoulder tearing through him, his body jerking forward from the bullet’s momentum as it hit.

“Aaron,” Clint yelled into the comms, Aaron could make out a slight tremor in his voice.

Aaron stumbled, then caught himself on a tree and slipped between the light cover of the trees. Fuck, it hurt. The bullet was lodged in his shoulder blade, he could feel it. But he grit his teeth and hurried on despite the pain, he was never gonna make it out if he stayed still.

“Envelope is secure,” he panted, referring to the sample of the toxin he had been able to stow away in a padded pouch inside his jacket before his cover had been blown.

“And you?” Clint demanded.

“I’ll live,” Aaron replied, dumbfounded at the unexpected concern for him coming through the comm.

“Just get me somewhere they can’t follow.”

“Alright. Head right, those houses look abandoned, you should be able to take cover somewhere. I’m coming to get you, alright? You hear me? I’m coming.”

Aaron would have laughed with relief if he’d had the strength, he knew Clint wouldn’t leave him hanging. It felt good to have backup that genuinely cared about him, he’d never had that before.

“Okay,” he replied wearily, the wound in his shoulder sapping his energy.

“You should make it to the structures before they clear the trees if you can keep up the pace,” Clint instructed.

Aaron rallied, grunting in pain as he straightened up and ran full tilt. If he could only make it to the first house, he could hole up there if need be, hide somewhere.
“I hear engines ahead, coming closer,” Aaron huffed as he neared the entrance to the first building.

He startled as Natasha’s calm voice filled the comm, saying, “That’s our guys. SHIELD forces are on their way. We’re gonna get you out before you get caught in the crossfire between HYDRA and us.”

“That’d be nice,” he replied, breaching the door to the first ramshackle building just as bullets started flying around him.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he entered the cover of the abandoned house. The wooden floors were littered with debris that impeded his long strides and he swore at it under his breath. The breath was startled out of him as his foot crashed through the floor on his next step. A loud rumbling started around him and he pitched forward as his momentum carried him on. The floor below him gave way and he tried to turn as he fell, hoping to break his fall with his back. The vial that held the toxin could not be damaged.

He crashed into the cement floor of the cellar, his right side erupting with pain, his vision whitening out. His ears rang as something hurled towards him. Then the world went black around him.

Marta stared at the monitor, watching the building collapse. Her knees went weak and her fingernails dug into Clint’s arm. He didn’t seem to notice. His voice didn’t change at all as he kept repeating Aaron’s name, trying to get a reaction, yet the comm stayed silent. How could he stay so calm when Marta found it hard to breathe as the words no, and Aaron kept playing in an endless loop in her head?

Natasha saying, “The team is ready, we’re leaving now,” shook her from her fixation with the monitor’s image and she whipped around. She had to go with them; she had to be with Aaron. He had saved her life over and over while they were on the run, she couldn’t leave him alone now.

Reining in her emotions she squared her shoulders and caught onto Clint’s wrist, saying “I’m coming with you.”

Only now did she notice the way his hands were balled into tight fists and she suddenly understood what it must cost him to keep his professionalism in this situation. His eyes found hers and for a second she thought he could read her every thought. Then he nodded and both joined the rest of Strike Team Delta as they hurried to the waiting quinjet.

Natasha handed her a comm link as they took off, saying “It’s set to Aaron’s frequency. You will stay with Clint at all times when we touch down, understood?”

She nodded, taking the tiny piece of plastic and inserting it into her ear.

“Aaron?” she called lowly, hoping to hear something.

Static. She looked to Clint, he shook his head. Her stomach knotted in dread. Please don’t be dead, please be alright, please.

“Please, Aaron,” she said aloud, her hands fisting in the hem of her shirt.

But the comm stayed silent.

She saw Clint switch off his comm and turn to talk to Natasha. They were going over their strategy, no doubt. It didn’t concern her, she was no tactician, spy or soldier, she was only here for one reason. Aaron.
“Aaron? Come on Aaron, don’t do this, dammit. I know you’re there, come on Aaron.”

There was only silence.

“Touchdown in five,” the pilot announced over the comms.

She watched as Clint assembled his sniper rifle and the rest of the team, six men and two women including Natasha, checked their tac vests and weapons. Her heart plummeted as she realized that she was really entering a battle zone. She knew how to use a gun, but her close quarters combat skills were rudimentary. Aaron had taught her how to defend herself, but she’d never had to use any of the moves he’d shown her.

Just then she saw Clint and Natasha’s hands clasp briefly as they looked into each other’s eyes for a second, the moment gone as fast as it had come. And not for the first time did she wonder if they ever let down their guards completely, allowed themselves a respite from their professional wariness. She didn’t have time to really dwell on that thought as Clint approached her with a tac vest and helped her put it on. Aaron, I’m doing this for Aaron, she thought as her heart thumped wildly.

“Has he responded yet?” he asked her. She shook her head no and saw his face turn stony for a fraction of a second.

He shook it off, saying, “You’ll stay with me. I’ll take out the HYDRA soldiers so our guys can get to Aaron. I won’t be able to talk to him when you rouse him, so you’ll keep him awake and talking, okay? We’ll get him out of there. I promise.”

When, not If, the conviction in his voice made shivers run down Marta’s spine. She didn’t doubt him for a second. Marta nodded, that was what she’d wanted, be close, make sure Aaron made it out okay. Clint briefly clasped her shoulder and prepared for the landing.

“That brother of yours is quite impressive,” she told Aaron. He couldn’t hear her, but she could imagine him agreeing with her assessment.

The hold opened and the team dispersed, Clint and Marta hurrying to the spot on the hill Clint had decided on as his sniper’s nest, while Natasha took the rest of the team to the plant.

Marta could hear machine-gun fire and found herself transported back to her house, cowering in the corner as shots rang out. She’d hoped to never find herself in a situation like that again. But Aaron had called her a warrior and it felt like a curse in retrospect, she couldn’t stay behind, not when she could go and be with him, try to be there for him. She swallowed her fear, took a deep breath and followed Clint. For Aaron, she could do it for Aaron.

They made it to their spot without incident and Clint set up his rifle. Marta flinched when the first round left Clint’s barrel and he called out, “One down,” a few seconds later. Marta tried to tune out the sounds, concentrating on Aaron.

“Aaron, we’re here, please talk to me. Come on, don’t do this to me. Aaron, dammit.”

And there, almost undetectable over the sounds of the battle was a break in the static.

“Aaron,” she called again, holding her breath, straining to hear something, a breath, a word, anything.

And there it was - a moan, a sharp intake of air, and then a cough.
“Aaron,” she released her pent up breath, smiling. “I’m here,” came his soft reply.

He was alive. Talking.

“Are you okay?” she asked tentatively.

“Not really,” he panted.

Of course he wasn’t okay.

“I’m here, Aaron. Hang in there, please,” Marta pleaded.

“Not going anywhere,” Aaron ground out and a fierce smile raced across her features.

Then he spoke again, his voice full of concern, “It’s dangerous, you shouldn’t be here.”

“Did you forget? You told me yourself that I am a warrior. I’m always gonna come for you.”

She flinched as another shot rang out beside her.

“Not worth it,” he breathed out and she felt frustration flood her.

“Two down,” Clint called out beside her, then demanded, “He’s awake? How is he? Ask him for a sit rep. And how he’s doing. And what he remembers from the plant.”

She turned to him, her fear for Aaron unloading onto Clint with a snarled, “Yes, he is. I can handle it. Go back to shooting people so we can get him out of there, okay?”

She was sorry the second the words had left her mouth, he was only here to help and out of concern for his brother. His eyebrows rose, but he stopped butting in and concentrated on his mission again.

Turning her attention back to Aaron she said, “Now, tell me what happened.”

She could hear him release a breath, then say, calmer than before, “Uhm, fell through the floor, landed on my back, don’t remember much past the impact.”

“Are you hurt, can you tell me what’s wrong?”

There was a short pause and then a harsh intake of breath, before Aaron’s voice filled the comm again.

“My right arm’s broken. An’ something’s wrong with my right leg. Doesn’t feel broken, but it hurts.”

“And the gunshot wound?” she asked, trying to keep her voice even. She couldn’t, she wouldn’t fall apart now. That was not what she had come here for.

“Still bleeding, hit my shoulder blade, think the bullet’s still in. Breathing hurts,” he said, his voice expressionless, the way she had come to learn meant he was hiding something.

“So, let me recap this for your brother. You’re bleeding from the gunshot wound, the bullet is still in. Your arm is broken and something’s wrong with your leg but you don’t think it’s broken.”

Marta bit her lip to keep from letting her emotions show. She looked at Clint, his face set in a grim
mask, his posture rigid. She could practically see the calculations running through his head, assessing the situation, determining how to best help his brother.

“Sounds about right,” Aaron replied and Marta could hear an edge of panic in his voice.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as another shot from Clint had her hold her breath, wishing she was anywhere but here, that she and Aaron were on a tropical island somewhere.

“I,” he took a shuddering breath, “can’t feel my arm anymore. Fell asleep. Can’t move. Can’t, there’s no space. Marta, there’s no space to move.”

She could hear him start to hyperventilate. Helpless, he was probably feeling helpless, the most difficult thing for him to take. But she couldn’t let him panic, not while she couldn’t get to him. She inhaled deeply, forcing her reeling emotions down. For Aaron, she thought, I can do it.

Calmly she said, “Aaron. Aaron, it’s okay, you’ll be fine. We’re almost done here. We’re almost there, we’ll come find you.”

Clint loosed another shot and a second and third immediately after.

“Affirmative,” Clint said, “Only two left.”

Marta turned all her concentration towards Aaron. His breathing was fast and labored, and she was scared for him. She had to keep him from panicking, so she swallowed her fear and started talking.

“Aaron, close your eyes. Remember our time on the boat? In the Chinese Sea? The water was so unbelievably clear. And I said that I wished we were lost. Do you remember that? Can you picture the sea?”

“Yes, I remember,” he said, his breathing still ragged, “that was when I thought I might have a chance with you yet.”

“I was so scared, but you always kept me safe. You made me stronger than I ever thought I could be.” She could hear his breathing evening out and released a sigh of relief. “That was when I first admitted to myself that there is something between us and I just wished for more time.”

“Yeah, me too. ‘m glad we got the time,” he slurred, and Marta’s stomach turned into a chunk of ice.

Two more shots rang out behind her, making her flinch and stop talking. She turned to Clint who was lowering his rifle, his brow furrowed in concentration as he listened to his comm. Then he nodded, saying, “Roger that,” and turned to her.

“Let’s go,” was all he said as he got up, helped her stand and started down the incline.

“We’re coming Aaron. We’re coming now.”

“Good,” he said, sounding weary. “I can hear the guys pulling away boards. Feel it too.”

“Yes, there’s a lot of them, and we’re doing our best to get to you. Just keep your eyes closed and think of the sea. The breeze felt so good against my skin. I knew being there with you that I was safe. You’re my safe haven, Aaron. I love you.”

Aaron replied with a murmured, “Love you too.”

Then he keened and fell silent. Marta felt like someone had punched her in the gut, all air driven
Making the kills had been harder than Clint had anticipated, concentrating almost impossible. His comm had been set to his team’s frequency, their part of the op going down without a hitch. He hadn’t worried about Nat and the others at all; the op was a cakewalk. Get in, secure the hazardous material, apprehend enemy personnel, blow the place up. Easy as pie. Having a sample of the bacteria beforehand would have been preferable, but it couldn’t be helped. As long as the toxin wasn’t released while his team was in the disused factory everything would be okay.

He heard Natasha confirm their taking of the enemy compound at the same time the last enemy combatant fell, Clint’s bullet tearing through his chest. He felt an odd sense of satisfaction. He didn’t particularly enjoy killing, but he was willing to make an exception in this case.

He had kept an ear on Marta, following her side of the conversation with Aaron. And what he heard made his stomach clench in apprehension. Aaron wasn’t doing well. His little brother. He hadn’t been able to protect him. The thought didn’t sit well with him. As soon as command confirmed the last kill he slung his rifle over his shoulder, only one thought on his mind. He had to get to his brother. He helped Marta up and hurried to the collapsed building Aaron was trapped beneath.

Men and women in SHIELD uniforms were already pulling debris aside when they made it to the bottom of the incline. Then he heard Marta calling “Aaron? Aaron?!” and his heart plummeted. He turned to her and his hand clamped around her arm.

“What happened?” he demanded as his heart pounded in his chest.

“He just – he keened and now he’s not responding,” Marta answered, eyes wide and fearful.

Clint turned to the SHIELD agents clearing the debris, their action focused on the area directly above Aaron as confirmed by the satellite images command had supplied. The thought of being too late, of losing yet another member of his family was almost overwhelming. But he was a tactician, he thought in patterns, could plot moves. He needed more information.

Facing Marta, he voiced his fear. “I want them to dig faster, but I’m afraid it’ll upset something and make things worse. What do you think? You heard what happened, I didn’t.”

“I think we have to be careful, he said there was hardly any space as it was and I think something must have shifted. It’s like a game of Mikado, if you move one part another will move as well. We have to make sure not to aggravate his injuries,” she answered, and he saw her shaking minutely, but her voice remained firm.

Newfound respect for Marta coursed through him. He smiled grimly at her and joined the other SHIELD agents at the mountain of rubble. He instructed them on how to proceed and they worked meticulously, carefully removing one part after the other. It was slow going and the fear for his brother was increasing with every passing minute.

Marta kept trying to rouse Aaron, but there was no reply. She was pacing just off to the side, calling out to Aaron, talking to him even; he couldn’t understand what she said. And Aaron wasn’t answering. It was driving him nuts. The digging was going too slowly, seconds ticking by like
hours. This was his brother buried under the rubble. A brother he had forgotten about for more than 30 years. Even if they had only known each other for four weeks, he didn’t want to think about losing him again.

The rescue crew made it to the foundation now and when they removed a large piece of plywood from the rubble beneath he could see a glimpse of skin. They redoubled their efforts, carefully lifting a large beam and some smaller pieces of wood and then he was able to see Aaron’s chest moving. He was alive. Clint took a deep breath to calm himself, then turned towards Marta and beckoned her over with a wave of his hand.

“We’ve got him, he’s alive,” he called out to her and everyone around them. She came to stand beside him, her fingers digging into his shoulder where he was crouched. His hand found her arm and he clamped down around it, needing the contact as much as she did. The SHIELD medics rushed over with their gear, ready to spring into action now that Aaron was freed.

“He said his right arm was broken and something was off with his right leg. He’s also got a gunshot wound in his right shoulder; bullet is probably lodged in his shoulder blade,” Marta informed the medics.

One of them, an athletic woman in her late forties, jumped into the hole with Aaron while her partner, a tall man, handed her the scoop stretcher she requested.

“It’d be best if we got him out of here first. There’s hardly any room to operate as it is,” the senior medic said as she placed the two halves of the scoop under Aaron.

The medic’s partner joined her once she was done and they lifted Aaron out of the hole where the scoop was received by SHIELD agents who carried it to the waiting transport stretcher. The medics received him, checked his vital signs, immobilized his arm and leg with air casts, bandaged his wound and fitted him with a pulse ox meter, a saline drip and an oxygen mask. It was all over in a couple of minutes and then they were moving back to the Medevac.

Clint ushered Marta along as they followed the medics onto the quinjet, watched them settle Aaron for the transport as the hatch closed and the craft took flight. His heart was beating a frantic tattoo in his chest, wishing that he had medical knowledge beyond first aid and would be able to assess his brother more thoroughly himself. But even more, he wished not to be in this situation at all. It had been an unfortunate turn of events on a milk-run mission, and he would have traded places with Aaron in a heartbeat, he knew that. It had always been easier for him to endure physical pain than watch people he cared for suffer.

Aaron remained stable throughout the flight back to the helicarrier. Once there, a slew of doctors and medics boarded and whisked him away to be examined and taken care of. Clint and Marta were stopped at the door to the exam room by two burly medics. Not wanting to delay the medical attention Aaron so desperately needed, Clint took Marta’s arm and they settled onto the soft leather bench in the waiting room. He slumped onto the comfortable seat, but he couldn’t relax, the adrenaline leaving him with a kind of hangover. Queasy, he felt a headache come on, so he closed his eyes to shut out the light.

He felt Natasha’s presence before she actually touched him, so attuned was he to her energy. Opening his eyes as she slid into the seat next to him, he felt peace settle around him at the soft touch of her shoulder against his. His hand found its way into hers and she squeezed it, affectionately and reassuringly. He could breathe easier with her close, her skin on his was a soothing balm. He squeezed back as she settled against his side, tucking his arm around her shoulders. Her hand never let go of his.
Natasha held Clint as they stood outside Aaron’s room. His face was burrowed in her hair, his breath harsh against her ear. One look inside and he had turned, walking out. She’d caught hold of him, wrapping him in her embrace, just like she’d done when she’d found him on the edge of the roof after they’d lost Barney. She had feared that her presence alone wouldn’t be enough to keep him with her. She couldn’t let him go.

She angled them so that Clint had to look at Aaron when he raised his head.

“Look at him,” she whispered, lips brushing his cheek as her hand cupped his jaw.

It was trembling beneath her fingers, he clenched it so hard. She stroked gently over his bristly skin and felt him relax minutely. She smiled, her own worries subsiding as Clint exhaled audibly. Her Hawk would be okay, she knew it, she just had to make him see.

“He’s alive because of you,” she added. “You did good, you saved him.”

He raised his head and she watched him regard Aaron, his face expressionless, but worry clearly visible to her in his eyes. She couldn’t see Aaron, but she could imagine the pitiful sight Clint saw, with casts on his younger brother’s right arm and leg, his shoulder bandaged where the bullet had been removed. The monitors, the drip infusion, the oxygen cannula. Clint shivered and she held him closer, willing her calm to spill over into him.

“He’s alive,” she repeated. “He’ll be okay, no lasting damage.”

She felt the moment he focused on Aaron’s chest, rising rhythmically with each breath. Clint inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly and she felt the muscles in his back uncoil, slowly, gradually. His heavily beating heart from a moment ago slowed to a normal rhythm and she allowed herself a small smile. He gently kissed her forehead, and when she looked at him the lines on his brow had smoothed out. She brushed her fingers across his jaw, and he leaned down, his warm lips found hers and she knew it would be alright.

When he broke their kiss and disentangled himself from her this time, she didn’t hold him back. She let him go, knew where to find him later if he wasn’t in their shared quarters. He needed his solitude, and judging from the sounds coming from the room behind her, Marta needed a friend.

She found the older woman sitting on the floor, her back pressed against the wall, her knees drawn to her chest. Her arms were slung around them and her back was shaking. Her sobs were muffled by the way she sat, but she was radiating misery. Natasha sat down beside her and put her hand on Marta’s shoulder, rubbing soothing circles onto it.

“It’s okay,” Natasha said. “That’s a normal reaction.”

Marta inhaled deeply, calming herself, then said, “Nothing about this situation is normal, not for me.”

“Yet you were there,” Natasha calmly pointed out.

“I made a choice, yes. I chose to stay. I chose to go with you.” Marta chuckled self-deprecatingly. “You know Aaron once said I’m a warrior? I’m no warrior.”

“Not every warrior carries a gun,” Natasha answered. “You handled yourself well today.”

“But I felt so helpless,” Marta insisted.
Natasha remembered clenching her fist underneath tables as she listened to progress reports. The man on the bed looked so much like the man she loved that she didn’t need to stretch her imagination to know how Marta felt. The only difference was that she had been trained on how not to show it, while Marta didn’t.

How much harder must it be for a civilian, someone who had no experience with the kinds of choices they were faced with every day?

“Aaron’s alive because of you. You did good, you saved him,” Natasha repeated the words she’d said to Clint only a short while ago.

“Thank you,” Marta said, a small smile spreading across her face. “I’m still never gonna leave my lab again.”

Natasha smirked, her hand closing around Marta’s shoulder in a show of silent support.

There was a rustle from the direction of Aaron’s bed and both women looked up, seeing the injured agent’s head turn towards them, grey eyes blinking open sluggishly. He mumbled something incomprehensible and held out his hand to Marta, his fingers beckoning her to him. She was on her feet, crossing the short distance separating them in no time and sat down on the edge of his bed. Natasha stayed where she was, knowing that her presence had already been forgotten.

“I heard that,” she heard Aaron say, smiling tiredly, “never leaving your lab again?”

“No, I’m locking myself in, and you with me,” Marta said as she bent down and kissed him.

“But you only have the fridge for the samples,” he said as they parted. “Where’re we gonna keep our food?”

“Food? Really? That’s your biggest concern?” she asked, a smile lighting up her face.

Natasha got up as she saw the tension flow from the other woman’s body. She would be okay, as would Aaron. Her heart was full as she slunk out of the room, wanting nothing else but find her archer and hold him close. She cast a last look at the scene before her as she left the room. Aaron held Marta’s hand; she was brushing her fingers through his hair as he yawned.

“No, you are,” he replied, his eyes closing as he drifted back to sleep.

All she could do was try, Natasha thought, but she would do her best to make sure her family was safe.

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