Put Away Childish Things

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Put Away Childish Things

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Summary

Tony and Clint are captured by villains who can only get what they want from a child-Tony. So, obviously, they de-age him. Because comics.

Notes

Title taken from a CS Lewis quote.

Huge thanks to forsweatervests, who had to beta this puppy three times, and egelantier for hand-holding and second-opinioning. All of the huge ass plotholes and other problems that are left? Me, all me.

So, remember when fandom had an auction to help out victims of Hurricane Sandy? Yeah, well, the world's most patient auction recipient, arsenicmauls (ironic, a little) bought a fic of at least 5k by me. And we had this whole discussion where she said: "Okay, so you know that trope that comes up a lot in H/C where one character just tries their best to be useful, all the time, to the point of completely misunderstanding what everyone expects from them and missing the part where they have actual friends, and it sometimes ends in a feels-splosion? I love that. Characters with shit self-esteem and submissive streaks a mile wide = a very happy me," and I basically exploded with glee and wrote 36k that took forever between the writing and the fixing. Basically: OMG, I really hope she likes this because for reals, best recip ever.
Clint wakes up in his boxers on smooth, cold concrete with a headache. For a second he thinks he has a hangover, and wonders what the fuck he was doing. He never drinks enough to black out. For that matter, the others have never allowed him to wake up alone and dehydrated, not since they'd all converged on the Tower. Clint would really like to roll over to find Bruce's capable hands prodding at him a little, checking him out, or to come up against Thor's chest, even if the god does have a tendency to laugh at Clint's weak human tolerance.

The feeling of his perch imploding and falling out from beneath him resurfaces then, and he's a little surprised he's not dead. He breathes in slowly, out slower, assessing his physical condition. There are bruises everywhere on his ribs, his left knee feels wrong, perhaps strained, what feels like a deep cut on his right shoulder blade is burning, and his headache is nearer to a migraine than a hangover, now that he's actually paying attention. All in all, it's not bad.

He opens his eyes carefully. He needn't have bothered, though, as his environs are near pitch-black. He sighs and levers himself to his feet. The next few minutes reveal he's locked in a six-by-four concrete cell with no windows and only one door. The locking mechanism, so far as Clint can tell without his sight, is on the outside. There isn't even a bucket.

Clint would like to go back to sleep but he's not entirely certain he doesn't have a concussion, so he paces and mentally works his way through the entire Led Zeppelin catalogue. It's a little harsh on the headache, but it does the trick.

The door to Clint's cell opens and he's on his feet before he even thinks about it, but it does him absolutely no good. They—he thinks there are three of them, from the sound of their steps—taze him with something infinitely stronger than the warning piece Coulson carries on him. And Clint has never had any desire to be tazed by that little toy to begin with. He doesn't pass out, but he wishes he had.

They throw him on another concrete floor, but there is light in the new cell. It seeps through his eyelids, hurting (his eyes) even through the lingering pain of the voltage. Someone is shouting, someone familiar. Clint tries to contain his thoughts, to marshal something past the panic of his own muscles refusing to respond to him.

Things get quiet suddenly. Clint isn't sure what has changed. Then the familiar voice is nearer to him, asking, "Jesus, what the fuck'd they do to you?"

Clint doesn't have control of his tongue or vocal chords, so he just lays there, quivering. He's placed the voice: he's in a cell with Tony. Tony's a genius, so Clint's going to let him figure it out on his own. Clint is, admittedly, a little dispirited to find he's not the only team member captured, but at least four of them are still unaccounted for, plus Coulson, Hill and Fury. Things aren't desperate just yet.

He doesn't acknowledge the wellspring of guilt that follows his disappointment, the quiet Greek chorus in his mind reminding Clint he is a SHIELD agent, and Tony is a civilian contractor, and that this is exactly the sort of trouble Clint is supposed to keep Tony out of. The guilt is useless, he knows. Phil would call it "counterproductive," his tone clipped and clear and his eyes searching. Tony is already captured. The only thing to do now is keep him as safe as possible until Clint can get Tony out or the others find them.
Tony is still talking, but Tony talks a lot. It's kind of comforting, really. Clint can't follow what he's saying, but the cadence of Tony's annoyance is well-known and helps Clint with the worst of the alarm over not being able to control his limbs. There's a buzz at the edge of Tony's words and at times they fade completely from Clint's consciousness, but if Clint concentrates he can pull himself back toward them. The harshest of the aftershocks are fading, he's pretty sure he'll be able to curl up or roll over or do something in a bit. Until then, he concentrates on breathing, and the up-down notes of Tony's ongoing monologue.

Their captors come back shortly, right as Clint has regained his ability to stand. Clint's pretty sure the timing is planned, intended to show them both the full breadth of their helplessness. Clint forces himself to his feet and dives for them when they go for Tony. Without his suit—and where the fuck is his suit—Tony isn't a soldier, he's not even entirely one in the suit. Tony's instinct to help signs him up for a lot of shit he hasn't read the fine print on, Clint thinks.

There are five guards: two behind Clint, at the door, and three advancing toward Tony. The two at the door take Clint down almost as soon as he's managed to get up. He tries to use his smaller size as an advantage, but the guys are trained, Clint's reaction time is maybe half what it usually is, and nothing of his is getting by them.

Clint struggles to see Tony, see what's being done, see if he's got any way to stop it. The other two guys have got Tony face-down on the floor, one of them sitting on his legs, another pinning his arms behind his back. He's insulting their lineage creatively, but Clint can hear his fear. He wonders if the others can or if at some point he started to really know Tony. Clint stills a second later as he watches them inject Tony with something. He stays locked in his position, watching, for maybe a moment before he's doubling his efforts to get free, asking, "Hey, no really, not gonna share the good drugs? That's just rude, guys."

They ignore his outburst, ignore him. Once they've gotten whatever it is the syringe holds into Tony, the guy with the drugs leaves, and the others filter out, but not before stomping on Clint's ankle to keep him down while they make their exit.

Clint slowly inches over to Tony as soon as they're gone. Even in his own thoughts it makes him skittish to admit it, but the greater proximity calms him a little, tricks him into feeling a bit safer. Tony's unconscious from whatever they gave him, his body twitching in a way that makes Clint more nervous than him simply lying there would. Clint tries a couple of times to get Tony to wake, but he's just going to have to wait for whatever they gave him to wear off. He tries not to let himself consider what a bang-up job he's doing of taking care of his teammate in the silence that fills the cell.

He falls asleep himself, waiting, and wakes to the sound of Tony shifting, sitting up. Clint's glad he's awake by the time Tony gets his bearings, because the first thing Tony does is try to rip the arc reactor out of his own chest. Clint immediately captures Tony's hands and shouts, "Stop! Stop. What the fuck are you doing?"

Tony looks at him and there are two things Clint notices: the first is an utter lack of recognition in his gaze, the second is that there's something slightly different about Tony's face, but Clint can't quite place what it is. Tony snarls, "Who the fuck are you?"

"Your teammate, Clint Barton," Clint says, "and I think our captors might have given you some kind of psychotropic drug."
"I don't have a team," Tony says attempting to break away from Clint. Clint holds on, sucking in a breath at the surprising sting of the words, and Tony subsides for the moment. "Starks do not have teams. And what is that thing in my chest?"

"You call it an arc reactor." As best Clint knows, "It keeps the shrapnel from reaching your heart."

He really should know more about this, really should have figured out all he could. Clint knows he's not a genius, but he's far from stupid, and maybe, if he'd just read up on it more, he'd know if Tony was in danger at this moment. Well, beyond the fact that they're being held in a cell and Clint's got no earthly idea of how to get them out.

Tony says, "If this is some kind of kidnapping ransom attempt thing, you don't have to play at being friends. Obadiah's been instructed to never accede to ransom demands, so you can be as nice as you want and whatever partner you've got out there can be as mean, or whatever your game is. It doesn't matter," he sneers.

*Obadiah. Obadiah Stane.* Details start to click into place for Clint. Tony doesn't know what the arc reactor is, doesn't know who Clint is, thinks Stane is alive, and what's different about his face, Clint realizes, is he has fewer lines. Clint asks, "What year is it?"

"Seriously?" Tony asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, seriously."

"Okay," Tony says, his expression full of I'm-only-playing-along-because-I've-got-nothing-better-to-be-doing. "2003."

"Fuck," Clint says aloud, releasing Tony's hands without thinking. Tony shoves him away and Clint hits the ground, the pain of the impact against his previous injuries causing his brain to white out for a moment. He hears himself whimper and senses, more than anything, the way Tony backs off, uncomfortable with the situation. When Clint comes back to himself, Tony is looking around the cell for a way out, but at least he's not messing with the arc reactor.

There are two basic options for what is happening here, as Clint sees it. The first is some kind of amnesia, which is the more probable explanation, but not necessarily the more likely one. The second option, the one that Clint's gut tells him is the situation at hand, is age regression. Normally, Clint's an Occam's Razor kind of guy. But for one thing, he's worked for SHIELD too damn long for that, and growing up in a circus didn't do his perception of reality any favors, either. For another, Clint trusts his eyes and Tony looks younger. It's subtle, but targets are often small, that doesn't mean Clint misses them.

Clint tries to think clearly about why the hell anyone would age regress Tony and who in the world would have that kind of capability. SHIELD's encountered age regression once or twice before, and it's mentioned in Section X of the manual, under the header for responses to events out of the ordinary. It's a long section, though, and Clint wasn't really that attentive when he last read it, at least seven or eight years ago.

Clint's not coming up with any answers to the myriad questions flooding his brain; they are just exacerbating his headache. He resigns himself to the fact that he's going to have to get information from their captors if he can. He wishes Nat were here. She's a million times better at this sort of thing. Meanwhile, he's going to have to keep an eye on Tony, and make sure he doesn't cause himself permanent damage by playing with the shiny new toy lodged in his chest cavity.
Their captors pump the cell full of sleeping gas and when Clint wakes up, Tony is clearly over ten years younger—in his mid-thirties, Clint thinks. He's shirtless and...his arc reactor is missing. Clint looks frantically around the cell. There's no blood, nothing to suggest it was forcibly or even surgically removed.

Clint experiences a moment of blind terror, of horror so deep at his own failure, he forgets to breathe. He's at Tony's side before he even realizes he's moving. When he presses his hand to Tony's heart, Tony waves his hand lazily and mumbles something about, "Later, sweetheart."

Any other moment, Clint would catalogue this reaction and make a joke about telling Pepper, but a) he doesn't even know if Tony's met Pepper yet, and b) he's too relieved that Tony is, to all evidences, still alive and well to do anything but hold his hand over Tony's heartbeat, undamaged and impossibly whole. He doesn't think about what that means for getting their Tony back; the Tony Clint has come to know, the Avenger who's won them all over, despite their better judgment. For now, all that matters is that Tony doesn't need the thing to survive.

He really hopes whoever's got it isn't capable of reverse engineering it. He wishes he could ask Tony the likelihood of that but since Tony hasn't invented it yet, Clint isn't sure how to ask, or if he even should. Regardless, if Tony still thinks Clint is the enemy, he won't be getting any kind of answers.

Which is good, Clint suddenly realizes, because if anyone could reverse engineer the arc reactor, it would be a Tony who didn't know what he was doing. Fuck. Clint seats himself in between Tony and the cell door and contemplates whether their captors are planning on ever feeding the two of them.

It gets repetitive, telling Tony Clint's not the enemy every time Tony wakes up five to ten years younger. It also wears at the guilt Clint's still pretending he's not nursing. He might not be Tony's enemy, but he's not much of an ally currently, either.

Clint's not certain, but he thinks they're only doing one injection a day. Tony's maybe thirteen today, so Clint's estimating it's been five days. They've begun feeding Tony, which is a relief. They gave Clint some bread on the third day, and they've started being relatively regular with water. Clint can go a long time on water. Tony still thinks Clint's one of the captors, so he's not inclined to share what he gets, but that's fine. Clint doubts he'd take anything from him. Between the drugs and the radical physical changes, Clint suspects Tony needs to be taking care of himself as best he can.

Yesterday, assuming Clint's right about the time lapses, Tony was nineteen, and all the broken, bitter, jagged edges he's learned to hide behind sophistication and bluster were on exhibition. It made Clint feel like a voyeur. Today, though, today is worse, because Tony is all the things he was at nineteen, but also scared stiff, and clearly certain he's not allowed to be.

Clint wants to talk to him, just to bleed some of the tension from the atmosphere, but he can't think of anything to say that won't sound suspicious. Eventually, because he's exhausted and desperate, he goes with, "When I get out of here, I am taking the world's longest shower and eating eight-layer nachos from this place Hill found that is seriously the shit."

Thirteen-year-old Tony is all gangly limbs and acne, but his voice is steady as he asks, "You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"Don't have one," Clint says, which is ninety-nine percent true, and he feels he can skate on that one percent in this instance.
Tony just scowls at that. Clint sighs. Tony talks all the time; of course now would be the time he’d stop.

Seven or eight-year-old Tony still thinks Clint is the enemy, but he hasn't grown into his full candy-coated shell of bristling attitude just yet, and so mostly just perches, wary and tense and a *fucking child*, across the room from Clint. Clint, for his part, is starting to freak the hell out that they're going to keep regressing Tony until there's nothing left.

They don't gas the cell that day, though. Instead, somewhere around the time Clint has gotten used to expecting it, six guys come in, most of them purely to keep Clint down. Tony's not really a threat at this point, although Clint notices they don't let the kid out of their sight.

There's a food tray in one of the guy's hands. Nothing fancy, it looks like maybe oatmeal and some fruit. Clint looks away. It's enough to tempt him, and even if he'd be willing to steal food from a civilian, from one of his team, he wouldn't from a kid. Except they give him the tray. It's set down on the side Clint's been occupying, and the guy smirks. "Bon Apetit, Barton."

And then they're gone. Clint knows he needs to think this through, why they would start feeding him —*stop* feeding Tony—now? But there's a scared, hungry child pretending not to be in the same damn cell with him, and Clint is aching and tired and wants nothing—*needs* nothing—more than to make things all right for Tony. He decides, "I'm gonna take a few bites of that and we're gonna wait to see if anything happens. If it doesn't, the rest is yours."

Tony looks at him upon that announcement. He's silent for a long moment and then says, "Well, that's a stupid plan."

Clint shrugs. It's actually kind of comforting that Tony's still smarter than him. "It's the one I've got."

"I'm not going to trust you over a bowl of oatmeal."

Clint takes several deep breaths and then admits, "I could give a rat's ass whether you trust me. But you're eating."

Tony's features stay haughty. "You gonna make me?"

Clint levels a look at Tony. "Tony, if it is a choice between force-feeding you until we can get out of here and returning you to the others as a skeleton, trust me when I say you will eat." Clint purposely does not think about how it will feel, physically forcing a child to do anything. He's done all kinds of terrible things for what he believed to be the right reasons in his time with SHIELD. He can do this.

Tony's eyes narrow. "The others. What others?"

Clint once again wishes Natasha were here. Natasha would know how to make Tony accept the truth, even if she did it with lies. He takes his first bite of oatmeal. It's instant, and too watery, but it's food, and it's going to be a challenge to cut himself off after a few bites. "We have a team." *A family.* "And they will find us."

Tony tilts his head. "Did my dad hire them?"

Clint thinks of Steve, misses his loud laughter and quiet presence. More than ever, he wishes he was with Steve, or maybe Phil or Pepper, someone who would allow him to curl quietly against him or her, who would take charge and let him rest for a bit. "No, but a friend of his is the boss."
"Well, then, hate to disappoint you, but they might take their sweet time getting around to it."

Clint is caught, for just a moment, by how much older Tony sounds than he appears. It's disorienting in an already confusing situation. He tightens his fingers around the spoon, and slowly, deliberately loosens them one at a time. He doesn't argue, knowing it will do no good. Instead he says, "I think the food is fine."

Tony hesitates, but in the end he takes the spoon and digs in.

They feed Clint, and only Clint, a few more times. Clint is starting to wonder what the fuck the holdup is with the rest of the team. Even if all six of them are being held captive, SHIELD should be on top of this. Clint can acknowledge his captors clearly have some high-level tech or magic, and even though the world's foremost tech expert is here with him, SHIELD is the leading intelligence agency in the world.

Someone's getting a talking to when this is all over.

Tony, meanwhile, is clearly trying to keep it straight that Clint is the enemy, but he takes the food more easily each time, and sometimes he even talks a bit, looking ashamed of himself and going silent as soon as he realizes what he's done. Clint doesn't push. He doesn't need Tony to trust him. If he finds a way to escape, he can knock Tony out and carry him if necessary. It'll be rough, but he'll do it.

When Tony can't keep himself awake anymore, despite obvious and valiant attempts not to succumb to sleep including non-stop pacing and calculating pi as far as he can aloud, he twitches irritably and whispers pleas in his sleep. At one point Clint has to put his hands over his ears, close his eyes, just for a bit. He'd hug the kid if it would do a damn bit of good, but Clint imagines Tony would jolt awake in a panic instead.

Clint doesn't let himself sleep, despite his exhaustion, not while Tony is out. He wouldn't sleep, period, if he could help it, but certainly not now. He does slow stretches, trying to help his body heal, and doesn't think about the complete lack of expectation in Tony's expression, the way the boy holds no hope that someone is coming for him.

They want Tony to do puzzles. It seems innocuous, really, and part of Clint thinks acquiescing for as long as possible might be a good plan. The other part of Clint is really worried about the big picture he's not seeing. Tony, luckily, makes the decision for both of them out of sheer obstinance. He sits pretzel-style on the floor and pretends like the man offering him the tools for the puzzle isn't even there. Clint sees him waver—and if Clint does, puzzle-man and the guys who are holding Clint do too—when he's offered macaroni and cheese for completing it. It's a dick move. They've barely been feeding him enough as it is, and Tony loves cheese in all its forms, probably always has. Clint does not doubt they know it.

In the end, though, Tony just sits there, not even talking. Eventually, they give up. There's no food that day. Tony is blatantly unsurprised.

Clint is having trouble thinking all that well. The burn or cut or whatever it is on the back of his shoulder is hot and pulsing and the fever that was low-grade before is ratcheting up, now. Sometimes he daydreams that Bruce or Jane is there, checking the damage, fixing him up with gentle hands and a bit of off-color humor to keep him distracted.
The current situation needs to make sense, though, for him to be able to have any idea of how to approach the situation. Mostly, this needs to make sense so he can keep Tony safe, especially since it's so clear Tony is the prize, here. Clint keeps one thought foremost in his mind: he is not allowed to leave Tony alone, not allowed to leave Tony without protection.

He forces his brain to slow down. "Tony?"

Tony looks over at him warily. Clint can't blame the kid. He asks, "You ever take an IQ test?"

Tony scowls, but there's enough of adult-Tony in kid-Tony for Clint to recognize the yes in the expression. Clint presses, "Do they have puzzles like the one they wanted you to take?"

Tony blinks uneasily, so Clint knows he's right. "They help to see how a person thinks, to some extent, right?"

Tony mumbles, "They're not well-calibrated."

Clint's not sure it matters. He's also not betting on these people not having better tests. He wishes he'd read Tony's dossier more thoroughly now, but there's a fact that stuck out to him, because it was mindblowing: as far as anyone knew, Tony'd created his first complex robot, the very beginnings of JARVIS, at age seven. Before that there'd been plenty of "simple" creations—that most people would never be able to even imagine—but seven was when Tony had accidentally shown the world that he was literally decades, if not more, beyond everyone else.

It's messy and fucking complicated and overdramatic, but Clint's pretty sure these people are trying to map Tony's brain, trying to recreate his genius. It probably can't be done. Clint isn't taking the chance.

"Tony, um. Not that you were going to, I get that, okay? But you can't do the puzzles. Or anything they ask."

Tony sneers. "If this is reverse psychology, it's not going to work."

Clint nods in relief. Natasha would probably laugh at both of them. "Good. Just—that's good."

The next time they bring the puzzles and Tony holds out, Clint realizes what the downtime, the food was all about. Because they also bring four guys to hold him down and strip everything but his boxers—he's vaguely flattered, since he's feverish and starving and could maybe take two of them at a time, maybe—and a portable brazier.

Tony is surprisingly good at shuttering his emotions for his age. Clint doesn't want to think about the why of that, even if it is useful at the moment. But he's still a kid, and there's a tightening around his mouth, a slight flickering of his eyes that gives him away. Clint's not sure if it's because he has begun to be grateful for Clint giving him the food, or because Tony's just never been bloodthirsty, but either way, he's upset. In sharp opposition, Clint is feeling calmer than he has in days, since so long as they're concentrating on hurting Clint, Tony's physically safe.

The guy who tried coaxing Tony into doing the puzzle the previous time says, "I believe you are smart enough to know how this works, Mr. Stark."

Clint almost appreciates their complete lack of mindfuckery. Any type of trickery is unlikely to work on Tony, so he might wish they'd tried that first, but as they clearly know not to, at least they aren't being disingenuous at this point. And, more importantly, they obviously don't want to harm Tony,
not physically. It's almost like having two advantages, except Clint isn't in any position to actually use them.

The first time Tony tells them no, his voice doesn't shake, and Clint smiles. Attaboy. Of course, the smile disappears the second the brand is applied to the meat of his good shoulder blade. He closes his eyes, because it's only going to get worse. His body's protective adrenaline will wear off, and they will move to his spine, his lower back, anywhere nerves cluster.

Clint makes himself breathe and check in on Tony, who's trembling. Clint's going to do his best not to scream as long as he can hold out. Normally he wouldn't bother, because, honestly, who cares? But Tony needs all the help he can get, here. Clint catches Tony's gaze and his eyes are dark and brown, confused and scared. Clint says, "You're doing great, kid," and allows himself to slip away when Tony refuses again.

Clint passes out at some point, he thinks around the time they press the brand to the back of his knee. He wakes up still clothed only in boxers—which he supposes is something—his entire front side freezing from contact with the concrete, most of his back blazing from the burns. He's very thirsty.

He forces himself to open his eyes, find Tony. It's not hard. Tony's sitting with his knees tucked to his chin, arms wrapped around his legs, immediately in Clint's line of sight. He's obviously freaked out, but otherwise seems unharmed. Clint says, "Hey," or well, makes a sound. It will have to do.

"I didn't do it," Tony tells him, defiant and desperate all at once.

Clint works to get some moisture back in his mouth. He tries to think of something Phil or Steve would say, perhaps even Thor, the natural leaders amongst them. Nothing comes to him. "You were awesome."

"Wh-who are you? Even if my dad managed to hire a bodyguard I've never seen," Tony looks doubtful of this possibility, "he can't possibly be paying you enough for this."

"Maybe I'm hoping for a bonus," Clint mutters.

"That why you're also being nice?" Tony challenges.

Clint sighs. "I'd tell you, but you wouldn't believe me."

"Try me," Tony says.

Clint debates for a second, then says, "All right. You and I were captured probably about ten days ago. I don't know who's holding us. All of my theories have serious holes. We fight on a team together, and we take care of our own. You were older than me when we got here, which is why, if you think about it, you can't remember how you got here, or even being taken. You were dosed with something because whatever they want, it has to do with your developmental processes. And here we are."

"That's...far-fetched." Tony doesn't sound disbelieving, exactly, more as though he's trying to work out where the advantage in a lie would be, and if any of it is ringing true for him.

Clint closes his eyes again. Being awake is really exhausting. Tony must decide Clint would have tried a better story if he just wanted to fuck with Tony, because he asks, quietly, "We're on a team together?"
"Mm," Clint says, not opening his eyes. In the dark, he can almost pretend he can feel the others, calming even in their rage at being kept away. He's not sure he wants to see Tony's face, anyway. The quiet skepticism in the question, rather than any other he could have asked, makes Clint's stomach ache.

"So this is just…like."

Clint struggles to get his eyes back open. He might not want to, but he knows he needs to look at Tony. The kid is a picture of confusion and uncertainty and badly hidden fear. Tony tries, "I'm useful to you, right?"

It is sheer willpower that gets Clint to his knees, and keeps him there, despite the burns. Tony's blinking at him. He fixes Tony with his most straightforward expression and says, "Tony, you're probably the most useful person on planet earth, but that's not what this is."

He reaches out and catches Tony's arm, tugs the kid gently toward him so he can wrap his arms around Tony. Clint's not super-practiced at being comforting and his own childhood taught him squat about providing children with kindness, but it seems like the thing to do. At first, he's sure he's gotten it wrong, because Tony stiffens in his embrace. But when Clint starts to loosen his grip, Tony huddles in, so Clint just holds on. Tony relaxes after a moment.

"People are coming for us, Tony. And until they get here, I'm not gonna let anything happen to you." He repeats the words silent to himself, half as reassurance, half as warning.

"What about you?" Tony asks. "If I'm so useful, and you're on my team, you must be pretty important, too."

Clint smiles a little into Tony's hair, thinking about the way Tony has spent the time since the Chitauri building them homes inside of his Tower, protecting them, showing them what they mean to him even as he mouths off about his apathy. Clint has never really even heard the words Tony uses to decry the fact that he values the team: he's far, far too used to the things people do meaning more than anything they could say. It is weird to have this alternate-version of Tony, who hasn't learned to hide behind words and bravado quite as well just yet. He has to struggle not to squeeze too tightly.

Clint says, "My job is to protect you guys, watch over you. Let me do my job, Tony."

Tony scowls at Clint and makes an unhappy noise, but it's not disagreement. Clint rubs a hand over Tony's back. "Thanks."

When they bring in a tub the next time, Clint has his first moment of being relieved Tony can't remember anything. The Tony he has is doing his best not to look at the water, to pretend obliviousness to all of them. That's fine, because Clint's pretty sure his full-grown teammate would be having a PTSD episode.

Clint's evidently a little too at ease with the situation, he realizes a moment later, when two of them grab Tony. Clint doesn't even hesitate—he twists in a way that will dislocate his left shoulder but also give him the leverage to kneecap one of his jailers and break free of the other two. He's dizzy and off-balance almost immediately, but he pushes past it, concentrating on what he can do to negate the threat, get them away from Tony.

Of course, then they bring in reinforcements. If Clint counts correctly, he brings down five of them, but it's not enough, there are just more. He's pleased to see that the scientist who keeps questioning
Tony is a bloody mess. Even that, though, can't overcome the fact that they're going to hurt Tony anyway, and Clint is helpless to stop them.

"As I was going to say," the scientist says, and there's an edge of anger there that wasn't before, "we believe Tony needs to understand what he is asking of you before we begin today's session."

Clint snarls. "Tony understands more about this world than you were born knowing."

"True," Tony agrees, which makes Clint smile. They catch each other's gaze for a moment, and Clint reminds him, "They need you."

He watches Tony cling to the thought as he's pushed, head-first, into the tub. Clint counts. He knows he shouldn't, it will only make it worse, but he's fucking powerless to do anything, even to look away. They bring Tony up long enough for him to gasp and then have him back under again. They go four times, and Tony is limp and shaking and a mess when they finish.

They dry him off perfunctorily. Clint talks to him, mindless of the tug to his injured arm it earns him. He talks about the time he got to take a hot air balloon ride and other inane, calming topics. The scientist looks at the men holding Clint—back to three—and gestures them over to the tub.

He places the puzzle in front of Tony. "Now. Just one, and we leave you and your friend alone for the rest of the day."

Clint sees Tony think about it, sees Tony try and figure out how it would hurt anything, sees the moment Tony figures out the problem with slippery slopes. Tony whispers, "I'm sorry."

The word breaks on a sob, but only just. Clint is pushed into the water.

* *

They have to perform CPR on Clint. The rib that was fractured breaks during the process, and vomiting up water is agonizing. Clint tries to pay attention, because he's not certain they're going to stop and he thinks another bout of CPR might end in a punctured lung.

He's right, they don't stop, but they do give up before he has to be revived a second time. It's worrisome to Clint, how knowledgeable they are, how close they can get to the edge without going over it. They want Clint alive for the moment, obviously, but they really don't care about whether he has the use of his limbs or any other functionality. He's not even all that optimistic they care about his long-term survival.

Tony is silent and eerily still after they leave, his gaze boring straight into the smooth cement wall. Clint tries to find a comfortable position. He's freezing and he can't tell if it's from the water or the fever. When he's done the best he can, he says, "Hey, what's your favorite food?"

It's the first frivolous question that comes to mind. He just wants Tony to talk, and he needs a subject that, if overheard, won't be an issue. Food was one of the first things Phil ever got Clint to talk about, back when Clint hadn't realized just how much of a carnie-hick he really was compared to city-boy Phil.

Tony's eyes dart to where Clint is, and then away. After a second, though, he says, "Baked ziti. With mushrooms. And lots of cheese."

Belatedly, Clint realizes he has made a tactical mistake, because he loses a couple of minutes to the thought of food, any kind of food, and only snaps back when he hears Tony's somewhat-frantic, "Clint!"

"What? Oh." Tony mulls it over. "Um, who's your favorite superhero?"

Clint can't decide whether he wants to grin at this choice of questions, or cry a little bit at how even Tony makes his voice, like the answer doesn't matter, like there's nothing invested in the inquiry. Either way, he says, "Black Widow. But I can think of four others who can edge her out from time to time."

He would be embarrassed by how much the consideration makes him want to hide in Thor's cloak with Jane, the three of them sharing slow kisses and loud laughs, how it makes him want to peel Steve's cowl off with his fingers, take a ride on Hulk's shoulder, massage the strain out of Bruce's muscles or taunt Iron Man into doing stupid—hot—stunts, especially that last, only he doesn't have the energy. Mostly, he just misses them.

Tony frowns. "I don't know that one."

"I'll introduce you some day," Clint promises. After a beat where his excitement is palpable, Tony hunches back in on himself and shakes his head. "That's okay. She's probably not interested in kids. They just get in the way, and stuff. And I talk too much."

The shift in Tony's voice is strange. Clint wonders if Howard had the same cadences Tony suddenly adopts, or someone else. Whoever it was, Clint would like to have some quality time with that person, but since she or he is most likely dead, he makes himself pay attention to the kid who's sitting in the cell with him. "I like it when you talk. It's boring in here without you talking."

"Yeah, but outside—"

"You're funny and really, really smart." Clint has, at times, tuned Tony out, but he's never felt the outright desire to make him shut up. It would be hypocritical, given that Clint often deals with stress by way of snark, and Tony lives under a lot of stress.

Tony looks dubious, but in the end all he says is, "Your turn."

Clint almost asks "for what?" before remembering that they're trading questions. "Okay. Um, what's your favorite time of day and why?"

Tony shrugs. "Whenever Jarvis has some time off, because he always at least pretends to be interested in my schoolwork and stuff. Do you have a pet?"

The question takes Clint aback. "Um, no. Do you want a pet?"

For a second, Tony lights up. "Yeah, that'd be awesome, especially something like a pot-bellied pig. Did you know they're really smart? You can train them to do just about anything, and they're loyal, just like dogs. Or a miniature horse." Tony looks back over at Clint and says, softly, "You... probably meant a dog or a cat, or something."

Clint shakes his head. "I've always wanted an owl."

Tony smiles. "That'd be neat. They can turn their head three-hundred-and-sixty degrees, you know?"

Clint does know. "Useful." Then, "Your turn."
This is not Clint's first captive situation. There was a clusterfuck in Belgrade a couple of years back, and he did a two-month stint in Saudi Arabia in his early days at SHIELD. The first time had sucked more than the second, simply because Clint hadn't believed anyone would come for him. Before SHIELD, he'd been sold out by one of his contacts once, and lived through it only by dint of what he was willing to do to survive. So, yes, Clint's got mental and physical scars, but he's also fairly in control of them. He was an adult for those experiences—if you count nineteen as being an adult, which Clint does, thanks—and has learned to live with them. It's why most types of physical pain are not enjoyable, but they don't trigger him, either.

Whipping is a different story. Clint thinks they know it, too, judging by the slight smirk of the guard who has been in charge of carrying out Clint's torture. In his hand he's holding a fucking birch, hazel rod by the look of it. Unlike the ones Clint's father forced him to strip off the tree in their backyard, this one, Clint imagines, is made for this purpose, which means it will have been soaked in brine.

He fights them when they come to secure him. It's not because he thinks he has a chance. Between the infection, injuries, starvation and sheer numbers, he knows he's screwed. He just can't help himself. He finds Tony, locks gazes with him and orders, "Don't listen to a thing I say, not a wor—"

The guard holding the birch swings it and hits with no warning, no warm up. Clint bites straight through his lip and makes himself keep his eyes open, keep them on Tony, remember where he is. Tony says, "I like the color red. You?"


Bruce and Jane and even Thor have begun wearing more of it. He wonders if they know. He thinks they do. Clint tries to lose himself in the thought of Thor's new purple muscle shirt.

Tony doesn't even look at the scientist, who is once again reminding Tony he can stop all of this. The birch rod crashes into Clint's thighs. He keeps his eyes open. There's an actual child in this situation; Clint cannot afford to be one.

He holds out as long as he can before he starts begging. Tony's a trooper: he does as told, and begins to pretend Clint isn't there, either.

It takes Clint a while to regain lucidity. He's not sure how long, he's lost track of time entirely. It would worry him, but he's got bigger problems. For instance, given the shape he's in, he's ninety-nine percent certain they're just using him to soften Tony up. He has no evident use to them, and having Tony alone would probably be more effective at this point.

When he opens his eyes, Tony's watching. Tony says, "They brought water."

Water means having to move, and Clint's not certain he can, but Tony looks small in a way that has nothing to do with his current size. Clint mumbles, "Water, good," and forces himself onto his side. He retches once he's managed, the broken rib sheer torture throughout. He pants a bit, blinks, and tries to clear his head. He feels the rim of the cup at his lip and nods slightly. Tony tilts it back slowly. Clint takes as much as he can.

He keeps himself on his side. It seems safest at the moment, even if it's taking effort. Sooner or later he's going to have to put himself on his back to keep the rib from doing any further damage. Clint doesn't want to think about that. He manages a, "Thanks," in Tony's direction.
Tony bites his lower lip, then releases it to say, "They're going to kill you."

"Yeah," Clint says, because Tony's smarter than him and has had enough people lie to him in his time. He's doing his best, he knows he's not supposed to abandon Tony, but at the end of the day, Clint is still human.

He tries to think of something else to say, because Tony's also a kid, and scared. "S'okay, bud. Team'll find you."

Clint feels something on his hand and almost pulls it back on pure instinct. Then he recognizes the touch of skin, the small tremble he sees shake Tony's frame. Clint puts all his energy into squeezing the hand gripping his. "Gonna be okay. You'll see."

Clint drifts for a moment in a world where he gets to see how Steve scares the crap out of anything that so much looks at kid-Tony sideways, and Natasha gives him inappropriate toys. He comes out of the vague dream to Tony's voice. 

"You should rest, probably," Tony tells him. Clint can hear how much he wishes Clint would stay awake, stay with him.

Clint forces concentration. He doesn't want to leave Tony alone, not right now, not at all. It's hard though, sometimes, to figure out how to approach Tony. For all that Tony clearly had a lonely childhood, the creature comforts and relative safety of it had evidently given Tony a different perception of the world than Clint remembers having. Often, Clint finds himself saying or asking something that makes Tony look at him like he's grown another head. Clint works to find something simple, something he can't go wrong with. "Know what I like? I like motorcycles."

Tony's lips curl a bit. "Bikes are okay, but cars are better. Especially the old ones, because when you take them apart they have all the right kinds of stuff in them, but I can make it a million times more efficient."

"Yeah?" Clint asks, and does his best to listen to the answer.

*

Their tormentors come back. They've got a case this time, and Clint's too out of it to really pay attention to what's inside when they start unpacking. Tony can't look away. Clint's thinking about how to distract Tony, reminding himself of his priorities, when the guy laying out devices goes down.

It takes Clint a moment to recognize the sound that immediately preceded the action as a silenced gun. By the time he blinks over at the door, the rest of the goons and the scientist are all dead. Natasha says, "I've got Barton."

"And Stark," Clint manages to choke out, tilting his head toward Tony.

There's a beat after this pronouncement, a moment where Natasha's eyes go dark and cold enough that Tony recoils. Clint's about to reassure him when Natasha takes a slow breath and gets herself under control. Her voice is full of tightly leashed anger when she says, "Cap, see if you can find labs, and if there are any, take some hostages."

Clint kind of wants to hug Cap when he doesn't ask, just says, "Roger that."

Instead, Clint tells Natasha, "They have the reactor."
Natasha uses anger in place of fear, so Clint isn't surprised when another flare of pure fury shoots over her features. She swallows and adds, "You're going to need to find the reactor, too."

Cap's voice is tight when he says, "I see it, they haven't bothered to hide it. Is Stark—"

"Alive," Natasha says. "I'll explain when we meet up."

She looks at Clint, her eyes assessing him, running over him more than once, which is less a sign of her having trouble figuring out where the injuries are than of her working to feel calm. "Can you walk?"

"Not far," Clint admits. But he can force himself to his feet. Tony scrambles to stand beside him, and Clint ruffles his hair. "See, told you they'd come. I'll introduce you when we get somewhere safe."

Clint drags himself a few wobbly steps, biting his lips to keep from making a sound. Natasha catches him, her hands more gentle than he expects, but more than strong enough to keep him upright. Clint wants to cling, wants to take deep breaths of nothing but the smell of her hair, wants to say he missed her. It's not the time. She speaks into her comm-piece again. "Thor, I need an assist."

Clint is totally secure enough in his manhood to let Thor bridal carry him the fuck out of this place.

Clint passes out once they're all on the Quinjet and wakes up in his own bed. The latter is surprising, since he was obviously in need of medical attention when he lost consciousness. Sure enough, there are IVs traveling up from his arm and he's got bandages almost everywhere he can see or feel on himself. Next to him, something shifts, and Clint glances over, noticing Tony curled up and sleeping. He's clean and in Black Widow pajamas.

From his other side, Bruce says, "He wouldn't leave your side and medical was freaking him out."

Clint turns his head, the rush of relief he feels bordering on too intense. He has to stop himself from reaching out for Bruce, making sure he's really there. "Hey, hi."

"Ice?"

Clint nods and takes the cup Bruce extends to him, his fingers brushing the other man's, lingering just a bit. Bruce does not pull back, so Clint takes the chance to sneak in a caress. He's too tired for anything more. He pops a chip in his mouth and asks, "How long were we gone, how long was I out and have you figured out how to reverse the de-aging?"

"Sixteen days, three days and no." He hefts the book he's got in his lap. "So far, I have yet to find anything that hints at how it could have been done let alone undo it."

Clint makes a face. "No hostages?"

"The only person in the lab must have had some kind of cyanide pill or other device," Bruce says.

Clint isn't exactly surprised, but he wouldn't mind something going right for once. He doesn't like the shadows rimming Bruce's eyes, though, the way his shoulders are even more tense than usual. He wishes their Tony back, if only for the fact that Tony can always shake Bruce from the worst of his moods, either by sheer annoying persistence, or filthy suggestions he makes acontextually and just leaves to hang between the two of them. But Tony, that Tony, isn't here. Clint reassures Bruce, "If anyone can do it, doc."
Bruce smiles faintly. Clint glances over at Tony and does his best not to cringe. "Sorry I didn't—they were good, I couldn't—"

"Hey, Clint, no." Bruce's voice is even, calm, but there's an aura to him that Clint recognizes and neither of them needs Bruce changing right now, so Clint nods. When he's not half-dead, Clint finds the moments when Bruce wavers, when he can hold onto himself in the face of the Other Guy, to be inappropriately hot. Clint suspects that it reminds him of how Natasha keeps herself folded away, keeps others safe from all the destruction she can create. There's something about that choice that goes straight to Clint's groin. Right now, though, he's more three-quarters dead, and all it does is make his heart speed up a little with fondness and a faint desire to be interested.

Since Clint's only just hanging onto his wakeful state, he asks, "The others around?"

"We've been taking shifts. It took five of us to get Natasha to sleep, though, so Thor, Jane and Steve are snuggling with her in your guest room."

Clint can remember a time, not so long ago, when the only people the two of them could stand to sleep with were each other and Phil. It seems like forever and a day back, and it's not a time he has any interest in returning to. "Guess I'm off cuddles by medical orders for a bit, huh?"

He tries to make it sound like a joke, make it gruff and unconcerned, use his Big Boy Voice. But the past two weeks are catching up with him. He's missed the others, missed feeling safe and like part of something and not as though the weight of the world rests solely upon his shoulders. He does his best not to feel like he failed and doesn't deserve their attention, their care. He's only partially successful.

Bruce stands. "See if you can move over a bit without waking Tony."

Clint's seventy-five percent ninja, he can handle this. Tony murmurs a bit and shifts, but he stays asleep. Bruce climbs in under the covers on Clint's other side and tucks himself against Clint. "Tell me if I hurt you."

It's so painfully good, having Bruce there, having one of them wrapped around him, all Clint can do is say, "Bruce," and fist his hand in Bruce's t-shirt. Bruce kisses his temple. "I'd call the others, but Pepp's kind of having a rough time with the Tony situation and Phil's staying with her for the moment."

Clint wants to worry about Pepper, but he's so tired and Bruce is so comfortable and all he can say is, "'S'good."

Bruce chuckles. "Sleep, doctor's orders."

Bruce isn't really Clint's doctor, and Clint's only so-so at following orders, but he sleeps all the same.

* *

Bruce is gone when Clint next wakes, but the sound of a familiar voice discussing Captain America, volume 5, issue number 7 is enough to calm him immediately. Clint listens, fading in and out, while Tony and Phil argue over the shield as an ideal weapon. Phil's non-command voice, his downtime, personal tone, makes Clint want to touch the other man, take what Phil will give him. Instead, he stays still, not trusting his own reactions. Phil lets Clint get away with it for what Clint guesses is a couple of minutes before ruffling his hair and saying, "Bruce made me promise to get food in you when you woke."

Clint watches as Phil moves off the bed and walks out of the room. He does not bring his head up
from the pillow in a futile attempt to follow Phil's hand. Phil's in worn jeans and a soft, v-neck gray tee. Clint wants to lay his head on Phil's stomach and sleep some more. Alternately, he wouldn't mind undoing the fly of those jeans with his teeth and taking Phil apart with his tongue. He blinks at the suddenness of the thought, at the way his heart beats a little faster.

He distracts himself by looking over at Tony, who's changed into jeans and a t-shirt with something that might be a vampiric goat on it. Who the hell had they let shop for the kid?

Clint says, "Hi."

Tony is watching him. Clint gets the feeling he's cataloguing something, but what, Clint couldn't say. Finally, Tony says, "We really do have a team." There's a second before he continues, "Captain America is on our team."

Clint's stomach aches at the way Tony still seems uncertain, even though Clint's wholly sure all the others—perhaps minus Pepper—have introduced themselves and reassured him in their own ways. Clint works to get himself sitting up, which is painful but worth it to be able to look at Tony on a level and say, "Haven't lied to you, yet, buddy."

Tony considers this. "But you would?"

"To keep you safe?"

Tony looks somewhat bewildered by the fact that this is the issue upon which everything hinges. It makes Clint want to growl, to kick something where it will hurt. Instead, Clint nods. "Without thinking twice about it."

Tony plays with a thread that has come loose from the hem of his jeans. "Only to keep me safe?"

Aware he might be irreparably harming the space-time continuum or some other important shit that Clint isn't exactly read up on, Clint asks, "Has anybody told you where we are?"

"Bruce and Phil say we're in Avengers Tower. Thor says we are in the home of earth's mightiest heroes and saviors, but Thor kind of talks like Beowulf is making a comeback."

From the door, holding a tray, Phil asks, "You've read Beowulf?"

Clint's glad Phil can place the reference, because it's foreign to him. Also, he appreciates the save, since it means he won't have to be the one to reveal the future to mini-Tony and possibly doom all of them to unknown fates. They'll figure out other ways to reassure Tony of his worth. Bruce and Natasha probably know all kinds of tricks.

Clint smiles appreciatively at the help, but Phil's gaze is on Tony. Tony shrugs and offers, "I like monster stories. What did you read when you were my age?"

"Comics," Phil says. "And Highlights magazines."

Tony turns to Clint. "What about you?"

Clint hesitates for a second, this isn't something he likes talking about, but Tony's asked and Clint has just said he won't lie to him unless necessary. "I wasn't all that literate until I was twenty-three."

"Oh," Tony says.

Phil moves to the bed in the awkward pause that follows, and says, "I'll get you a copy if you want,
but to be honest, I always felt too sorry for Grendel and his mother for the story to really work for me."

Tony frowns at this. "They're monsters."

Clint holds back a smile, because it's the first time in this entire mess Tony has sounded like the seven-year-old he currently is. Instead he focuses on the toast and broth Phil has brought him, while Phil responds, "They're different, and that makes them feared. But difference is not necessarily bad."

"Being different makes you a freak. Nobody wants a freak." Tony's voice is low and sure and somehow off. Clint hears the echo of someone else's words in the tone.

"Oh, I don't know," Phil says. "I'm pretty fond of freaks." He tussles Clint's hair. Clint swallows a mouthful of broth and sticks his tongue out. Tony laughs. Clint suspects the effect is ruined so far as Phil goes by the fact that he also rises into the touch a bit, his breath stuttering ever-so-slightly.

Quietly, Clint says, "Yeah, freaks are the best."

* 

Jane is saying, "Well, you must have felt it was appropriate."

Clint struggles up to full awareness, anchoring himself in the feel of Jane's hand steady on his stomach, slipped right beneath the hem of the t-shirt he's wearing. Her skin is warm and soft, and he can feel the burn scar on her palm from a lab accident when she was in school. At any other time he thinks he'd already be arching up for a kiss, but at the moment it's just grounding, just a sign of safety. He mumbles, "Hey gorgeous."

She's got a STablet on her lap and Clint suspects she's been alternating between working on the de-aging issue and keeping Tony company. Clint peers over at Tony who looks forlorn. "What's up?"

Tony crosses his arms and doesn't answer. Jane says, "He met JARVIS."

It takes Clint a second—they still have him on certain drugs, he thinks—but he realizes that while Tony might have understood intellectually that his parents and Jarvis v1.0 are all dead, it probably hasn't really emotionally sunk in until this moment, when the only JARVIS available is one Tony doesn't remember creating. Clint wonders how JARVIS is handling the situation. He's never entirely sure if the AI actually experiences emotions or can just make decisions on his own based on accumulated knowledge. As if trying to answer, JARVIS speaks up. "I apologize. It was not my intention to upset you, Master Stark."

Quietly, Tony says, "You sound like my Jarvis."

There is a pause before JARVIS states, "I am more yours than anyone or anything has ever been or ever will be."

Clint could be wrong, but he thinks he hears a tinge of jealousy in the declaration. Jane frowns. Clint can hear how badly she's attempting not to sound possessive as she says, "But the rest of us are darn close."

Tony blinks at her. She smiles, that perfect Jane smile, sweet and careful and smart. Clint can see where it almost wobbles, but he doubts Tony can. Until Clint had accidentally overheard Steve and Jane talking about how terrifying not being alone was sometimes, he'd pretty much thought Jane was at ease with all of them, with the way they were beginning to knit together.
When he'd asked Natasha, "What's Jane's deal?" she'd looked at him a little too blankly, forcing him to elaborate. "She just, it seems like maybe she has abandonment issues."

Natasha had looked at him like she was wondering how he'd managed to survive to adulthood and said, "There's a reason she was by herself in the deserts of New Mexico with nobody and nothing to help her out but her PoliSci admin."

"Oh?" Clint had tried.

Natasha had laughed at him, shortly. She hadn't been amused. "She can't pass, Clint. Me, if I wanted to surround myself with people I could make myself into what they wanted me to be. Pepper's good at that too, when she needs to be, which is why she can run the company. But Jane? She's too smart and no good at hiding at."

Clint blinked. "I like smart. You like smart."

"But most people don't," she'd said, just a fact to her. "And Jane…she survives in her own way. She taught herself not to need anything other than the science, or at least tried."

Clint had tried that with his bow. It hadn't worked out, long term. Now, looking up at Jane with her brave, brash, kind smile, the one that starts in her eyes, Clint wonders if he kissed her, what would happen. Would he break that shell of courage? And if he did, would she melt into him, let him help keep her safe, or would she wall herself up against him? Clint wants to touch the side of her mouth, wants to feel her fingers against his cheek. He stares a little too long at the corner of her lips, he knows, can see that she's caught on.

He doesn't blush at her scrutiny, but he does color a bit when he remembers Tony's in the room. Tony, just like the rest of them, evidently can't help returning Jane's smile. It's a bit wobbly, but it's there. Clint allows himself to picks up Jane's hand and kiss it before rolling over and going back to sleep.

Natasha's there when Clint wakes next, Tony and she engaging in a silent and possibly high-stakes chess game. She looks over the moment she senses Clint joining them—so, before he's even really managed to open his eyes—and asks, "Hungry?"

Clint is, but he's also really, really ready to get out of this bed, so he says, "Make your move, I've got it."

Clint moves slowly, because for all that he's not a fan of being an invalid, he's not stupid, either. Pushing things just means more time spent in bed. He peers in his refrigerator, where, sure enough, there's a container of Bruce's garlicky carrot soup. He grins and pulls it out to pop it in the microwave. He grabs a glass and pours himself some water and then makes his way back to the others. He's shaky and breathing heavily by the time he returns, and his ribs and shoulder ache fiercely, but Clint is used to the feeling of healing, and all of this definitely falls into that category.

Once he's settled with his back to the bed, he asks, "Who's winning?"

"She is," Tony scowls.

Clint puts the spoon in his mouth to prevent himself from smiling. Genius or no, going up against Natasha at games of strategy is rarely a good idea. She's looking Clint over, returning the smile with her eyes. She holds the look for a second longer than she usually would and Clint wants to tell her he's fine, but she would just ignore him. He lets her do what she needs to.
Clint swallows and asks, "How's Bruce, uh—"

"Still nothing," she says, her hand tightening over a piece she's been holding at her side, one of Tony's. Clint counts the seconds it takes her to release her muscles. It's longer than he's terribly comfortable with.

Tony perks up a little, having found a move, and pushes at his piece. It takes Natasha three more moves to trounce him. He looks at the board carefully, and Clint can see him replaying the game, trying to figure out where it went wrong. Finally, without looking up, Tony says softly, "Thank you for playing with me. I'm probably not a very fun opponent for you."

Clint hates the rigid line of Tony's back, is thinking about how to soothe him—and it sucks that this smaller, more open Tony can't just be a piss poor loser—when Natasha asks, "What makes you believe that?"

Clint doesn't blink at Natasha, only years of practice and the necessity for showing no emotion stopping him. It's cruel, Clint knows, but would have bet Natasha would be the worst of all of them with kids, let alone a kid-Stark. Tony shrugs. "It's not very fun for me to play with most people. There's no challenge."

Clint knows the feeling of believing oneself to only be good for one thing. Clint lives in terror of the day when someone makes a harder shot than he can. But seeing it in Tony, the clear relation of his self-worth to his intelligence and the same belief that said intelligence makes him a freak, is turning Clint's stomach.

Natasha casually sweeps the pieces off the board. It gets Tony to look at her. Her expression is steady, but her eyes hold an urgency in them, as though she has only one shot at making something work. Clint feels a pang of familiarity and wonders how often over the time they've been on the team she's been scared of doing this wrong, if it's half as much as him or twice as much or neither. She says, "I learned to play by allegory."

Tony shakes his head a bit. "I don't understand."

"Strategy has always been essential to my life. And making a mistake, generally fatal." She holds his gaze. "You're a good player. But I'm glad you're not a better one."

With that she gets to her feet, pausing to swipe a kiss against Clint's lips, and walks out with just a tiny bit more swish in her hips than she has naturally. Clint can't tear his gaze away. If he were feeling any better, if Tony weren't sitting right there, he thinks he'd throw caution to the wind and catch those hips with his hands.

Tony looks at Clint. "She kissed you."

Clint bites back a sigh. He is not explaining the burgeoning, complicated, perfect mess of everyone's relationship to each other, especially not because Tony is too fucking smart, and will start asking questions that will only be creepy to answer, given the circumstances. He's not even sure he would know how to explain, if he so wanted. Clint's not sure when things began changing, when the slight sparks of post-combat sexual interest started to lengthen, widen into something broader and more challenging. He can't say when he started wanting to run with Steve so he wouldn't be alone, or to make sure Bruce was eating. He can't pinpoint the moment he watched Jane pull Thor away from the rest of them a few moments after she'd gotten back from a trip, or Thor catch her up and cajole her away from movie night with a grin and wanted, so damn badly, to follow, to be let in. And he definitely can't put into words the way his relationship with Natasha—which has functioned as a knotty, but working friendship for so long—is shifting again, not back to where it once was, but into
something richer, deeper.

He says, "We've been partners a long time."

Tony doesn't look like he's buying it. Clint, in a moment of foolhardy desperation, asks, "Hey, has anyone introduced you to Dum-E yet?"

Tony throws what can only be described as a temper tantrum later that day. At first it takes Clint so much by surprise he's not sure what's happening. Then recognition sets in but he still has no idea why it's happening. Tony made it through two weeks of near-starvation and emotional torture without so much as a tear shed, but now, when he's safe, he's screaming at Clint and throwing things at Thor and Steve, who have come down to the workshop to check on them.

Then again, Clint made it through that same amount of time enduring physical torture and never panicked like he is doing now, so maybe that's only fair. "Tony, what—"

"...know it's my fault, but I didn't mean—!"

"Hey," Clint says, "hey."

"I'm sorry," Tony wails and then breaks into sobs, before immediately covering his face with his hands and ducking behind the nearest counter.

Clint turns to look at Thor, who is just behind his right shoulder, his hand resting gently on Clint's lower back. Steve is also standing in Clint's personal space. They've all been a little more tactile than usual since the rescue and, as a group, they normally like to touch each other. Before, Clint had thought of it as their way of testing boundaries, seeing how many sparks they could make fly until something caught fire. Right now, though, it is something different, even if it still makes Clint burn right down to the core of his stomach.

He needs it desperately, though, the feel of their skin keeping at bay sense memories of other hands, of brands and unrelenting water and switches. Clint doesn't know if Tony feels the same way, but it's all Clint can really think to offer just then, not really having any idea what Tony's feeling sorry about.

Regretfully, he slips from Thor and Steve to approach Tony, coming around the counter slowly, to give Tony time to react. When Tony does not move, Clint brushes the tips of his fingers over Tony's shoulder. Tony makes a noise through his sobs and Clint snatches his hand away. Tony makes another noise, somehow worse, and Clint lays his hand down on the tiny shoulder. Tony is still except for the shuddering of his crying for all of a second and then he manages to somehow press all of himself into Clint's hand while melting into the touch at the same time.

Clint tries to remember if any of them have touched Tony since his regression. Clint did once in the cells, when he'd stopped worrying Tony would rack him for it and when Clint had been pretty messed up in his own right. He hasn't since the team found them, though. Clint might know fuckall about children, but he remembers wanting to be held as a kid, doing anything in his power to get the administrators at the orphanage to just squeeze his hand. Swordsman had beat the desire out of him, but it had taken years for the instinct to dampen and even then, it had just been lying in wait for the moment when he felt like he could trust someone enough to rest his chin on her shoulder or brush his foot against hers under a table.

Meanwhile, since he and Tony have returned, almost everyone has come by to lie next to Clint or hold his hand. Clint peers around the counter and asks the others softly, "Um. Has anyone, y'know,
Thor and Steve exchange a look and then Steve winces and answers quietly. "With Pepper being so thrown by the whole situation, it kind of seemed like it would be inappropriate."

There's a beat before Thor says, "I suspect in our attempt to reassure ourselves that we are not defilers of children we gave him cause to believe we were withholding affection because he carried some blame for your condition."

"Yeah," Clint says, rubbing his free hand over his face. "That's pretty much where I'd gotten, too."

He takes a breath and just listens to the hushed, bitten-back sounds of Tony's distress. Then he nods once. "I'm sorry, Tony. We're all crap at having a kid around and obviously not dealing as well as we thought. We—none of us realized."

Even as he says the words he's pulling Tony into his chest, letting him curl up again once Clint's gotten Tony settled in his arms. Tony's making weak attempts to stay stiff, but Clint is having none of it, rubbing his back and murmuring until Tony loosens and lets Clint actually hold him.

Tony mumbles. "M sorry I got you hurt. And that you have to take care of a stupid kid, now."

Clint ruffles Tony's hair and says, "You didn't get anybody hurt, you kept me safe by not talking, and there's not a single tiny part of you that's stupid. Nobody is or was mad. We just...we just miss things, sometimes. We want to take care of you. Want to take good care."

"Mm," Tony says, and it is the hum of a boy who is not-completely-asleep, but three-fourths there. Clint rocks a little, and Tony's breathing evens out. When Clint is certain Tony's asleep he peers over at where Steve and Thor are watching, waiting to see if they're needed and says, "Normally, this wouldn't be a thing, since he's like, a whole two pounds, but—"

Steve's already lifting carefully Tony up, Thor coming around to pull Clint to his feet. Clint takes the help, breathing out a "Yeah."

* *

The one person Clint hasn't seen since waking is sitting in the middle of his bed when they make it back to his floor. She looks brittle, despite her pretzel pose. Clint says, "Hey, Pepp."

She runs a hand through her hair. "Sorry. I—"

Clint shakes his head. There is something between the nine of them, something fluid and undefined and that none of them has been truly brave enough to do anything more than poke at the surface of yet, but Tony and Pepper are married. Clint can comprehend the difference. He's seen the way Pepper can get Tony to settle for more than an hour, the way she can pull him back to bed on Sunday mornings with nothing more than a quirk of her lips. He's seen her change Tony's mind by doing nothing more than murmuring Tony's name. Clint knows there are layers to their relationship, and he's not sure he'd be doing any better than Pepper if Natasha was in Tony's place, and he hasn't slept with her in years.

Even aside from all that, Natasha has been on the phone with Pepper every day, according to Bruce, and Pepper's damn well got her hands full making sure nobody notices they haven't seen Tony Stark in nearly a month. A week or two is easily explained away, but right now she's got nervous shareholders and board members on her hands. Bruce said dryly, "Nat offered to just clean the slate and find a new board for her to begin with but she seemed to feel that was an unnecessary measure."
Thor walks around Clint to settle Tony on the bed, pulling the covers up over him. Pepper tucks her hands under her arms and says, "JARVIS said Tony wasn't doing so well." She purses her lips. "I had him give me updates."

"Just a misunderstanding," Steve tells her, eyes earnest, mouth curling into an encouraging smile.

It is rare that anyone moves quickly enough to startle Clint—Natasha has been his partner in all ways, he's too well-trained—but Clint misses the second between Pepper being on the bed and Pepper having him wrapped up in her arms, shaking and squeezing tightly enough to hurt. He doesn't make a sound. He doesn't want to scare her off.

He does bring a hand up to the back of her head and stroke there, too weak to stop himself. There's been a million times when Pepper has stolen Tony away from meals with a brief, 'excuse us' and a look in her eyes, and Clint has had to sit on his hands to keep them to himself, cross his ankles to stay where he was. This isn't like that, not really, there's too much going on, but Clint can't deny that having his hands on her is both calming and regenerative. "I tried to stop them. I know that's not—"

She startles back. "You think I blame you for this?"

The thing is, Clint understands that once the two of them were captured and incapacitated in numerous ways, there really was nothing he could have done. He gets it. But it was him and Tony, the latter having been stripped of his suit and with no specialized fighting training beyond what Phil, Natasha and Clint have been working on with him recently. And Clint's job is to be the team's eyes, to keep them safe. "I never even saw anything. I don't know how they got the suit off him, how—"

"Stop." Pepper's command is quiet, but it's a command, all the same, and Clint knows when those can be argued with and when they must be obeyed. "I don't know these things, either. But I know, without uncertainty or question, that none of this is your fault."

The words don't change anything; Clint is still going to feel like there was something he could have, should have done, because the team needs its Tony, and Clint was there while he was slowly stolen away in bits and pieces. But if Tony is epic crap at being angry or hurt for himself, Pepper provides an excellent substitute. And Pepper can be a fantastic liar to protect what is hers or to do what needs to be done, but she does not lie to them. After a moment, Clint nods, just a bit.

She pulls back into the embrace for a few seconds, whispering words containing more comfort than sense. He thinks he should be doing this for her, reassuring her, but he also doesn't want to take anything from her, and in this moment, she seems to need the role she has assumed. Eventually, she presses her forehead to his and says, "I chat with Tasha every day. Don't think you can get away with any shenanigans, mister."

Clint chuckles a little, and Pepper's smile, though small, is sincere. With a slow intake of breath she pulls away and peers around Clint. Clint looks over his shoulder. Sure enough, Steve and Thor are still there. There is a moment where she visibly pulls herself together in the soothing of her skirt, the straightening of her back. When she has gotten herself where she needs to be, she asks, "Wanna go see if Bruce and Jane have got anything?"

Thor says, "I think I shall stay," his gaze on Tony, whose sleep is restless.

Steve holds out a hand to Pepper, upright and sturdy and with something terrifyingly needy in this expression, all the same. "C'mon."
Clint suspects Jane is actually this Tony's favorite of all of them. She laughs a lot and talks science to him like he's an adult and once word makes it round that people should hug Tony, she cuddles him pretty much non-stop. She is the one who can get away with Sneak Cuddle Attacks. The first one doesn't go so well, with Tony still pretty twitchy from captivity, but after that he learns to recognize the feel of Jane swooping him up from behind and carrying him off to wherever she was going before she found him on her way there, he stops struggling, instead laughing and asking where they are headed. It's strange and kind of amazing to watch, because the adult version of Tony once accidentally shoved Pepper into a wall for coming up behind him when she hadn't realized he hadn't heard her approach.

Of course, Steve has the cache of being Captain America, and Thor evidently gives the best shoulder rides. Tony's in awe of Bruce in a way Clint kind of thinks adult-Tony is too. And, exactly like adult-Tony with fewer guards in place, he finds Natasha fascinating and wonderful and isn't quite sure how to act around her. One moment he'll be trying to show her something he's done, the next hiding away from her, certain she wants nothing to do with him. He calls Phil by his first name and listens raptly to his stories of being a secret agent man, most of which are gloss-overs of ops that went horribly awry.

But it is with Clint he talks the most, words coming faster than Clint's brain can really move. It is with Clint that Tony's shoulders unwind completely. It is Clint whom he asks questions like, "If—If I'm one of you, I'm good, right? I don't turn out...bad."

"You turn out great, kid," Clint says without hesitation, because Tony's smart at reading hints like that. If the answer is more complicated than that, well, Tony's seven. Clint's allowed to simplify.

Tony is still restless, so Clint's aware his answer hasn't done the trick. "What makes you ask?"

Tony looks guilty for a moment before admitting, "I figured out the internet."

Of course he did. Clint is actually just relieved it's taken until now for him to get hold of a phone or STablet. Clint, who has been stretching on the floor of his living area until now, a series of exercises meant to help speed up recovery, sits up straight, keeping his eyes on Tony, and says, "I know you know better than to believe everything you read."

Tony is standing in the middle of the room, fidgeting with some doo-dad he's brought up from the lab. "There's...there's a lot of stuff about me being a mass-murderer."

Clint bites his lip. He kind of wishes Tony had asked Natasha or Bruce or anyone smarter than himself about this. At the same time, there's a place in his chest that is possessively glad he gets these things from Tony. Clint has never pretended he's not a little fucked in the head. "That's a very narrow way of looking at it."

"What's a broad way?"

"Your weapons saved the lives of thousands of soldiers. Weapons creation is a business, and you were a businessman who liked creating. And I think—"

Tony tilts his head, urges, "You think?"

Clint sighs. "I think you wanted to prove to the world that anything your father could do, you could do better."

Tony considers this, shifting from one foot to the other. "Did I? Do it better?"

Softly, Clint tells him, "In more than just weapons design."
Tony purses his lips, then bursts out with, "You're talking about the thing in my chest. In the pictures. They call it the 'arc-reactor.'"

This is honestly worse than the time Steve found an amputee fetish site while looking for medical information. "I'm talking about a lot of things that changed the world for the better."

"What if—what if you can't get him back, and you're stuck with me?"

Clint gets close enough to tug Tony into his lap at that sentiment. "Nobody is stuck with anyone, got that? And if that happens, then I guess you'll just have a second chance to make even more stuff."

Clint keeps his voice even and calm, not allowing any of the ache that rises up in him at the thought. It's true, his answer, and maybe this Tony will even be happier and better off in some ways, but it's beyond Clint not to want their Tony back.

Tony thinks it over for a long time and slowly nods his head. "Okay."

Clint kisses the top of said head out of sheer instinct, and Tony makes a small noise of surprised happiness. Clint wonders if he'll ever hear that sound out of adult-Tony.

* *

Three weeks since the rescue, when Bruce and Jane haven't made any real progress insofar as figuring out how the hell to undo whatever was done to Tony, the team gets called into the field. Jane promises to look after Tony, shoves them all out the door, and the Hulk goes to fucking town on the enemy. Really, there's not even a lot for any of the rest of them to do.

Clint's unbothered, if he's honest, because he's field-approved, but he just started being able to shoot again about four days earlier and it still puts more stress on his healing ribs and shoulders than can be called comfortable in any version of reality. That said, he's a little more bothered when Bruce doesn't join them for debrief. Normally, it takes about half-hour to an hour for Bruce to wake up somewhere, Tony to track him, and someone to pick him up and get him dressed, hydrated, possibly warmed and to wherever he wants to go. Bruce falls asleep in debriefs more times than not, and has to be ushered home, but he's there.

This time, when Phil asks, "Where's Bruce?" Steve winces and says, "Still Hulked out."

Phil, because he's Phil, takes this evenly, but asks, "Do you think one of us should go sit with him?"

They all know it's usually Tony who goes when Bruce is having a hard time coming down. There's a tense pause and then Clint says, "Maybe we should take Tony to him."

Natasha and Phil both betray nothing by way of facial expression. Thor frowns, but is silent. Steve is the one to ask, "What if he doesn't recognize him?"

"One of us is going to take Tony. He'll recognize us. And since the Chitauri, he hasn't had one instance of randomly attacking." Clint rubs a hand over his neck. "I just... I think Bruce is probably really fucking upset he hasn't managed to figure out how to get Tony back and Hulk's probably being protective."

There's a beat before Natasha chimes in with, "Jane said he had a green-eyed moment in the lab the other day. And—and last time we took a nap together he woke both of us up with a nightmare. He
lied, too, when I asked. Told me it was the usual."

Steve raises an eyebrow at that. They all know better than to lie to Natasha. It never works.

Clint adds, "It's worth a shot."

After another long silence where Steve and Phil have some sort of silent, team-leader/handler mindmeld, Steve nods and says, "Thor, you take Tony."

It's logical. If the unexpected does occur, Thor's the only one of them who has a chance against Hulk. Thor nods once, and leaves. Clint ignores the twist of jealousy in his stomach. For the first time in his life, he's considering the thought that he should perhaps see a professional about everything going on without being forced.

Natasha says, "I think we should get shwarma," suddenly and without any irony. It throws Clint. Natasha's not predictable, but she has rhythms he's gotten used to, and this, this person who has some instinct and desire for family, for broader connections, is new. She keeps doing things he can't predict, like dragging Jane out of the lab so the two of them can spend an afternoon getting a pedicure. Natasha likes to be pampered when she has the opportunity, but Jane, he knows, wasn't completely on board, which means Natasha had to cajole her. Natasha has never been much of one to ask for anything, but with Jane, with Pepper, she asks. It's cautious, and she's probably happier than the situation calls for every time it works. Clint has his suspicions about her relationships with women after the Red Room, but he leaves well enough alone. She's clearly handling it herself.

He's surprised to find himself liking it. Clint is good at handling change, but that does not mean he is fond of it. And Natasha has been a known quantity, if not always an understood one, for a long time now. More than that, she has been his known quantity, if not romantically then in every way that truly counts. But this side of her just feels like a secret he never knew, something he's been waiting to learn.

It's kind of reassuring that Phil also misses a beat, although Clint doubts anyone but Natasha and himself notice. Phil says, "Twenty minutes. We'll finish up, and I know a place not far."

Natasha opens her mouth and Phil says, "Yes, it's as good as your place."

Natasha looks suspicious but she trusts Phil, so she lets it go. Clint is tired and hungry and sore, and while this is nothing new, for some reason, today's twenty minutes take an extra long time.

* *

Even by the time they get back with the shwarma—Clint carefully does not think about how Tony won't even know why they've brought it home—Hulk is still around, but he's hanging out in the common space, where the floors are reinforced. Tony is perched on his shoulder. They're watching a show about butterflies.

Tony smiles when he sees them, a shadow of the brash smile he has as an adult, the one that's generally hiding uncertainty. Clint hates the way it's ten times as obvious on Tony like this. Clint wonders what Thor told Tony, if he knows that it's all right, it isn't his job to get Bruce back, calming Hulk down is as much as they can ask.

Steve goes and sits in front of Hulk. "Butterflies, huh?"

"I like things that fly," Tony explains.

Jane, who's reading something while curling herself around the side of Hulk as best she can, smiles
at that, but Clint can see the stress lines around her eyes. He wants to go pull her away. He's not concerned Hulk will hurt her; just hates that she takes it personally when they can't get Bruce back, like somehow their science-bro bond should overcome freak gamma radiation accidents. Thor offers, "I will take you flying some time, Anthony."

Tony—who has finally given up trying to get Thor to call him by his nickname—peers over Hulk to look at Thor. "Really?"

"It shall be my pleasure," Thor tells him. Jane pokes Thor with one toe and Clint sees the look she gives him, reads the promise of reward in it. Clint swallows a little against the dual emotions of jealousy and desire. He doesn't even know which is stronger, or of whom he's jealous.

Tony bounces on Hulk, just a little, and Clint can tell he's working on suppressing the urge to ask for more information, make Thor promise. Softly, Clint asks, "You hungry?"

Tony tilts his head as if he hasn't bothered to consider that he might be. It's so much like their Tony, whom they have to gang up on to get out of the lab and feed himself that Clint has to hold back a flinch. Tony says, "Pretty hungry, yeah."

"Good," Clint says, "we brought dinner. You wanna join, big guy? We can bring dinner in here."

Hulk looks at Clint, then at Tony, then back at Clint. "Keep safe."

"I know, we all want to keep Tony safe, but if you really want him to be okay, you need to let the Doc continue his work."

Hulk gets an expression that Clint has come to think of as his "contemplating face." Finally, Hulk says, "Hungry."

Clint says, "Sure," and goes to help with set up.

Bruce comes back sometime overnight and is sitting in the kitchen when Clint comes in for coffee the next morning. Tony's still sleeping. They'd tried moving Tony onto his floor, but he'd had a nightmare right off and JARVIS had to inform them Tony was hiding himself in a corner of his walk-in closet. Since then, he's stayed with Clint. The others have offered, and Clint has told Tony it's all right, that any of them will keep him very safe, but Tony just keeps coming back to Clint's. It's a show of faith that terrifies Clint when he allows himself to think about it.

Clint does not, under any circumstance, let himself consider how things will be when they get adult-Tony back. If he has to, he'll wheedle Natasha into sleeping with him for a bit, just until he gets used to the feeling of an empty bed again. It's not as if he's ever wanted a kid. It's definitely not as if he doesn't want Tony-of-2013 back.

Bruce has his hands around a mug. Phil is sitting across from him, reading something on a tablet. Clint asks, "Steve out running?"

Bruce nods. Clint can see the tension in his shoulders, and while he'd only just started knowing he could touch when he'd been taken, it seems obvious. Of all of them, Bruce has spent the most time fleeing from human touch, afraid of what connection will bring. It's shaped him into someone who is terrible at realizing how badly he needs physical contact. Even Steve hasn't consciously gone as long without the touch of others. Bruce's shoulders go to his ears for a second when Clint puts his hands to them, but then Clint digs in and Bruce loses every ounce of resistance. Clint asks, "Okay, doc?"
"Hulkover," Bruce says. Clint nods. For Bruce, fitting back into his human skin sometimes causes a hangover-like reaction.

Clint makes a sympathetic noise and works carefully at the shoulder muscles before paying attention to the arms. Clint loves Bruce's arms. They aren't built like a fighters, nor even with the strength of the engineer in Tony's, but rather, they bear hundreds of tiny marks and scars that tell stories, good and bad, about destruction and creation. Clint wonders if he'll ever get up the nerve to ask about them, to nip at and lick and kiss the worst of the past away, swallow down the best of it.

Phil looks up once or twice, but Clint can't read the expression on his face. When Clint's done what he can for Bruce, he says, "I'll reheat your tea."

Bruce murmurs a little incoherently. Clint takes it as agreement. A moment later, Jane and Thor slip into the kitchen, his hand resting at the base of her neck, her leaning into him just slightly. Jane doesn't look as though she's sleeping. In the middle of a project, she can usually go for about a week straight on caffeine pills and donut holes, but it's been well over a week, and even Phil, who's usually all about the donut-hole week, is trying to get something without preservatives into her. Clint wonders if they can get away with sending her to Pepper for a bit. Pepper will make her do things like sit in the sun after lunch and read something besides science journals. Pepper might also brush her hair and braid it or twist it, or even put a few accessories in it, her fingers sweeping down Jane's neck, complimenting her on her patience. Clint has watched this before, the way Jane somehow both relaxes and arches into it, the way Pepper gets lost in her own actions, in the strands of Jane's hair. He has thought about it in the shower more than once, if he's honest with himself.

Perhaps more importantly, sending Jane to Pepper would mean getting her away from the problem. Then again, if someone sent Clint away right now, he'd probably peel himself out of his own damn skin.

Phil takes in all of this while Clint is still considering how to get Jane's shoulders to drop from her ears back down to her shoulders, and says, "I think we should call in a consult."

The pause that follows is tense. Bruce's expression is hard, scary in a different way than his Hulk persona, and heart wrenching in its intense protectiveness. He says, in a low, even voice, at odds with the look on his face, "And you think that's a good idea, how, Agent?"

Clint winces at the same time as Jane. Phil, to his credit, stays calm. "Not like that, Bruce. Not SHIELD or government. The Director is doing his best to keep this information classified to the ten of us who know. I think we should put in a call to Xavier, see if any of his biologist contacts can come take a look."

Bruce is still glaring, but there's consideration behind it. Gently, Phil presses, "I realize the import of classification in this instance, and believe me when I say I will put down anyone or thing which presumes to try and take Tony from us, but we need a specialist."

Bruce looks over at Jane, who stares at him blankly for a moment. She closes her eyes and rolls her neck, then catches Bruce's attention again and nods. Thor looks as though he would really like to be breaking shit with Mjolnir. Clint can't blame him.

Natasha startles the crap out of everyone by sliding into the room and saying, "I could talk to Hank."

Bruce pinches his nose. Natasha puts an apologetic hand to his elbow, but he just shakes his head. She moves past to grab some orange juice from the fridge, pouring a glass large enough to share with Thor, when he inevitably decides he wants some. Natasha offers it to Jane, first, a little more insistent than she usually would be. Jane makes a face at her, but also takes a few sips.
Steve, still breathing a bit heavily from his run, comes in and drops into one of the chairs at the table. Clint is, admittedly, distracted for a moment, but then, he's pretty sure Bruce, Phil and Natasha are too, so he only feels so guilty. Steve asks, "Who's Hank?"

"Dr. Henry McCoy," Phil says. "One of the world's leading microbiologists, and an X-Man."

Steve seems aware that they've all shifted to pay attention to him. Clint can see him working through this information, trying to catch up. Steve looks over at Phil. "Will he be discreet?"

"Yes," Natasha says. Clint should be surprised when Steve just takes her at her word—he's still unused to anyone aside from Phil and himself doing that—but Steve has always had a sense for when Natasha's word is good. Or maybe it's just that, so far as Clint can tell, Natasha's never had the heart to lie to Steve.

Steve looks at Bruce. "Are you all right with this?"

"I'm not all right with any of this, Cap." Bruce says, pinching at the bridge of his nose. "But relatively? It's worth a shot. Jane agrees. And McCoy's got a good rep down amongst the freaks." This last is said dryly, but also with a certain amount of emphasis. Clint knows McCoy will come through. Natasha isn't exactly the trusting type.

There's a second, and then Steve nods at Natasha. "Make the call."

* 

Tony falls in love with Hank McCoy at first sight. The doctor meets with Tony less than an hour after his arrival and Tony has to be dragged away from his presence, hours later. Even then, he's bold enough to pester Phil and Jane with inquiries about McCoy, about his work, about his abilities, about everything but his color and fur, which Tony seems to just take for granted as awesome.

Luckily, McCoy seems to find Tony's non-stop questions and tendency to follow him around like a lovesick puppy kind of endearing. Also, it distracts Tony while McCoy pokes and prods. Clint suspects the doctor does shit like hanging from the light fixtures while taking blood just to put Tony at ease, and he's glad Natasha chose this man.

McCoy also talks to Tony like he does the rest of them, as an adult. Tony basks in the attention, the way the doctor explains everything he's doing, waits to hear if Tony has opinions. When Tony's allowed out of Bruce's labs, he bounds over to where Clint has been waiting.

Clint told himself that Tony would be fine, but letting Tony out of his sight in a lab environment is evidently out of the realm of things Clint can handle just now.

Clint looks over at McCoy. "If you need us, ask JARVIS."

"Of course, my dear fellow."

Clint grins. McCoy and JARVIS are going to get along like a house on fire. He takes Tony up to the roof, because after being in the labs, Clint desperately needs to breathe. Tony's talking a mile a minute about something science-oriented. When it's physics, or a related field, Clint can often follow if not necessarily understand, but he thinks what Tony's talking about right now is chemistry-based, maybe, and he's completely lost.

At some point, Tony sort of stutters to a halt and Clint blinks, looking over at him. "Tony?"

"I—Do you have something better you could be doing?"
The worst part is, it's not asked snidely, like the Tony Clint knows would ask it. That Clint could deal with, could give as good as he was getting in terms of tone and attitude. Instead, the question is earnest and a little bit apologetic. Tony's holding himself stiffly, like he expects a blow, but Clint doesn't think it was physical force that left Tony aching when he was a kid. Clint raises an eyebrow. "Then hanging out with you on a sunny afternoon?"

Tony shrugs, scuffs the toe of his tennis shoe along the roof's surface. "Adult things, or, I dunno. Other things."

"Well," Clint says slowly, "I suppose I do have a lot of other things I could be doing. But I can't think of anything that would be better than this."

Tony appears, unsurprisingly—if heartbreakingly—distrustful of this answer. Clint sits down on the roof and asks, "What'd the internet tell you about me?"

Adult-Tony would bluster his way through an answer. Kid-Tony fights not to hug himself and looks away. Clint says, "It's okay, Tony. It was a serious question."

Tony sits down, too, wrapping his arms around his knees. "Mostly stuff I already knew. You're pretty much a badass."

Clint laughs, taken aback at the bare assertion and the slang that Tony could only have picked up from them. "Nothing about when I was a kid?"

Tony chews on his lower lip for a moment. "You were in the circus."

"Yeah," Clint says softly. "Know why?"

"Because you're the best in the world with a bow and arrow?" Tony asks.

"Because I had something the circus could use," Clint says.

"O-oh." Tony frowns. "You weren't with your parents?"

"Died when I was the age you are now. And group homes didn't have much use for me and my brother, so we ran."

Tony's frown deepens, and there's anger in his eyes, but it's softened at the edges, like Tony isn't sure what he's mad about or who deserves his ire. Clint swallows back the smile that wants to grace his features at the way child-Tony is still infinitely and instinctively protective. He continues, "After a few years, neither my brother nor the circus had much use for me, so I…tried to find somewhere that did."

"And you found the team?" Tony asks the question quietly.

Clint shakes his head. "Phil found me. Half-dead and useful for nothing good. He gave me purpose again." Clint swallows. "And then we found Natasha, and she…she was just like me, maybe more. She'd only ever been wanted for what she could do."

Tony's eyes are wide. "Natasha?"

"People don't always see what they've got," Clint says. "And sometimes, even when they do, they don't know how to best keep it."

"But…I'm useful to the team, right? So if you get real-me back—"
"You are real, Tony. And yes, you're useful, and we need you but we also—"

After a few seconds, Tony says, "Clint?"

And the thing is, what Tony needs to hear, what Clint wants to tell him, is complicated given the circumstances. But after a moment, Clint decides it's true, no matter what the situation. "We love you. You're ours and even if you stopped creating things and fighting and having wackadoo facial hair, we'd still love you, in any form, at any time."

Tony's blinking rapidly. Clint takes a breath. "So, no. I really, really don't have anything better to be doing."

*

After the mission where Steve comes back with more than one burn wound, Natasha's shoulder is displaced, and Clint is extremely lucky to only have bruises, given how high up the perch he fell from was, Tony doesn't take well to them being called out. He's still Tony, so he covers it with anger or snarky comments or sometimes just plain hiding away and sulking, but when they come back he's always waiting, and Clint recognizes the look on his face as the one Tony got whenever their tormenters would leave the cell: like he knows safety is just an illusion. For the first time, Clint is relieved Pepper's still on the other coast. She never says anything, but her body language tenses and it takes her a day or two to get back to snarking at them and herding them properly.

The worst times, she goes and hides away in Jane's lab, where Jane is also taking cover, relaxing by way of tuning the world out. Eventually one of the others, usually Thor or Tony, will manage to get them to join in for a movie night, or something, and the worst of the tension will break, but it's not fun for them, he knows, having to get back to day-to-day responsibility at them and herding them properly.

In the meantime, those in the Tower have given up all pretense of trying not to spoil Tony, especially in the wake of missions that go a little off-kilter. Clint cannot say exactly when it happened, but he knows it was sometime around when Bruce introduced Tony to some techno-gadget and he spent the next eight hours in the common room tooling around with it before presenting them with better com technology. Upon being given the gift, Steve looked at Tony—who had drawn himself up to his full height and was doing the best impression of a little dog pretending to be a big dog Clint had ever witnessed—and asked, "Did you make one for yourself?"

Tony had shrugged, and Steve had picked him right up, ignoring any murmurs of fake discontent, looking at him with so much open tenderness that Clint wasn't even sure how he was real, and said, "We're not leaving you," and after that, reminding Tony he mattered, keeping him company, became Mission Objective #1 for the Avengers, their handler, and their in-house astrophysicist.

While Dr. McCoy continues to do his poking and prodding at the issue, sometimes consulting with Bruce or other members of the weird-shit-friendly scientific community, the rest of them work on finding out what sorts of things can make Tony laugh without even trying to hide it.

Thor makes a breakthrough when Jane introduces him to the magic of bubbles. They have to call Tony's cleaning crew afterward, since what happens in the interim isn't really that far off from a full-on foam party. Clint can't help thinking adult-Tony would have enjoyed it in a completely different way, but it doesn't keep him from soaking up Tony's undiluted enjoyment of the suds.
In the wake of Bruce purchasing a hotrod magazine and Tony doing everything but sleeping with it—and then only because Phil discovers it under his pillow and sets it aside—Steve finds himself some glue and teaches Tony the art of decoupage. Tony is thrilled to find himself with glue in his hair and between his toes. Steve just apologizes profusely to the cleaning staff.

Phil is the first one to find them and he asks, carefully, "What happened here?"

Steve winces. Tony hides behind him a little and says, "We made art?"

"It was actually supposed to be a collage," Steve explains, seeming somewhat bewildered himself by the final product.

Phil considers it and taps Tony on the shoulder. "Well, are you going to tell me about it?"

Tony's responding smile is uncertain and wide. Clint will catch Steve drawing it later for safekeeping.

Pepper, when Natasha has her on speakerphone later that day, asks, "How does Steve even have decoupaging skills? Was that a thing in the forties?"

Natasha shakes her head. "I don't think it was a thing."

Pepper says, "Because I mean, I used to do it to my folders and stuff when I was in high school. We didn't have bedazzlers, is all."

Natasha laughs. "Now I know what to get you for Christmas."

Clint asks Steve, "How does one stumble into decoupage?" Steve just shrugs and says, "Things happen."

This is a particularly true statement in their lives, but Clint thinks accidental-decoupage is even more unlikely than a de-aged teammate. He keeps this thought to himself, since every time Steve asks if Tony wants to start another project, the kid lights up like a football stadium after dark. He's glad to have kept his counsel to himself when Tony quietly starts giving each of them little boxes, cleverly patterned with pictures Tony seems to associate with them and their codenames. Tony gives Natasha hers first. It has both a simplicity and a darkness to it: a queen chess piece repeated as a motif. Inside, there's a note. Natasha shows it to Clint later. It says, "Clint told me Black Widow's his favorite superhero."

"Oh, great," Clint says, laughing a bit.

"Turn it over," she tells him.

On the back, in slightly shaky letters, is written, "I agree."

Clint puts his hand to her lower back, because he knows she's still feeling the ground out in all of this, trying to understand who Tony is to her right now. She looks over at Clint and without guile or hesitation asks, "Why did we stop?"

Clint does not even consider playing dumb, not with Natasha. He asks, "Truth, or something that will make both of us look good?"

"Clint," she says softly. She's not fearless, Natasha. She puts on a good show, and Clint supposes, from the outside, her mannerisms are very similar. But the slight tilt of her head, the cant of her eyes tells Clint that whatever else, the question means something.
"Because you were sleeping with me because I was comfortable. And while I would have taken it, you deserved better."

She swallows, clearly giving herself time. She doesn't deny it, which he appreciates, since he's right and they both know it, but she can still lie to him, when she really wants to. Instead, she tells him, "When you were taken, the two of you, Pepper was calm in that way she gets, sort of eerie, not...not like us, but maybe close. I stayed with her, the first night. She needed to sleep, and I—we, we were missing something, feeling a loss that wasn't as simple as the fact that both of you were missing."

Clint tucks an errant hair behind Natasha's ear and thinks of the way he often feels like there are pieces of himself, of them, of everything that haven't been correctly assembled. "Nothing's been simple since New York."

She nods a bit in acknowledgment of the sentiment. "She asked what I would do, if you didn't come back one time. And I started to say that I would grieve and I would move forward and it's true, it is. But—"

"No buts," Clint says, because he doesn't want to be the person that takes something from her, not another in the long line of them.

She puts her hand to his chest, shaking her head, a bittersweet, determined light in her eyes. "But I'd regret not having had everything I could have had with you for every moment I could have had it."

Clint feels like he can barely breathe. Natasha leans in, pressing a kiss to the side of his mouth. Her breath catches, eyes steady on his, every invitation he's ever wanted filling them. She whispers, "It's true for all of them, I think, but I know it is with you. If there's still something, then let me have this."

She pulls back a little, and Clint sees something he knows so well and yet is somehow new in her eyes. It is tenderness and bravery and thrill-seeking. It is, Clint suspects, something very like love.

The thing about Natasha is that she doesn't ask for help, or mercy, or basic human decency. But she is asking for Clint's love, and if there is one thing Clint knows, it is this: "There is nothing in the world I wouldn't give you."

He fills his voice with everything she has been to him, every bit of how much he cannot let her go. She seems to hear. Underneath his hands, she shivers a bit, and he can feel the anticipation in it, running through her skin. He can't even consider holding himself back.

* 

Dr. McCoy comes into the kitchen early one morning, early enough that Clint is missing Tony acutely, because it's around the time he would stumble out of his lab, make love to the coffee machine and have to be physically restrained from attempts to re-burrow. Jarvis has an intercom open to Clint's room, because Tony's still sleeping there and having nightmares, but it's not really the same at all.

Natasha's got her feet on Clint's lap. She's eating Apple Jacks—sugary cereals are probably pretty high on the list of things Natasha loves most in this world—and looking over some paperwork. She smiles warmly when the doctor comes in, says, "Hank."

Clint will only admit this aloud on pain of death, but the big brother/little sister relationship Natasha seems to have with McCoy is cute as all get out.

"Natasha," he says, but he doesn't smile back, which is how Clint knows something's up.
Bruce, who has been watching the toaster like that will make his English muffin ready more quickly, asks, "Hank?"

McCoy leaps onto an empty space on a counter and hunches into himself. He's so large it's strange to watch. After a moment, he says, "I believe I have found the solution to our friend's dilemma."

The three Avengers present share a look. It's Bruce who asks, "Why isn't this good news?"

McCoy grimaces. "It will take four to five twenty-four hour periods, and it will be…unpleasant."

Clint glances over his shoulder to see Steve and Phil walking toward them, both of them still in gym clothes. It takes him a minute to pull his eyes away; Steve's t-shirt might as well not be there for the way it has molded to his chest. Steve, the bastard, walks past him, trailing a finger over Clint's shoulder. Clint squeezes one of Natasha's feet and keeps his thoughts totally appropriate. Phil, imperturbable as always, says, "When you say unpleasant, you mean—"

"There is a high likelihood that it will be, ah, excruciating, particularly in the last stages."

Clint, because he's still a little shaken by how it had been watching Tony lose whole parts of his life right in front of him, asks, "Will he remember?"

McCoy thinks for a long moment. "I cannot be certain, but my suspicion is that moving forward in linear age progression will mean that, yes, he will be cognizant and able to retain the memories of the experience."

"Of course he will," Clint says. "Honestly, can't anything ever work out in our favor?"

He doesn't mean it, not really, not when he's sitting there with four of the people he would die for, but it just seems unfair. In the silence that follows this question, Thor appears, still in his pajamas. It's annoyingly adorable for someone who could level Clint with one blow. Thor frowns. "Have we received bad news?"

"Jury's out." Then he asks, "I presume you would tell us if there was some way we could sedate him, or give him painkillers?"

"Indeed," McCoy says. "I am concerned that any extraneous chemical compositions will alter the trajectory of re-growth."

Bruce nods as though he'd already thought of the problem but needed to hear someone else say it aloud. There's a sick silence in the room, all of them too aware of what pain means to remove themselves from sentencing Tony to its mercies.

"I'm going to call Pepper," Natasha says. There's something in her voice it takes Clint a moment to identify, but he thinks she's feeling out of her depth. "And then we need to talk to Tony."

Slowly, very much in his team-leader voice, Steve asks, "You think we should ask him? I know, he's Tony, but he's a kid."

"A kid who understands more than most people will ever manage to," Phil says gently, putting a hand to the small of Steve's back. "I doubt Natasha is suggesting we leave the final decision up to him, but he should be informed. Anything else would be—"

"Betrayal," Clint finishes.

Phil glances over at him, staring for a moment longer than necessary. "I was going to say cruel and
thoughtless, but I suppose that works."

McCoy offers, "If you wish for me to play the villain in this piece—"

"There was a villain," Natasha cuts him off. If her jaw wobbles ever so slightly, nobody calls her on it. "And we killed him. So, thank you, but no. You have—you're giving him back to us. We're already indebted."

"I cannot guarantee success. The arc reactor is a factor which cannot entirely be tested for," he cautions, his gaze upon her gentle, and maybe a little regretful.

"If there's one thing we're used to, Doc, it's crap plans," Bruce tells him, rolling his neck from side to side.

McCoy smiles slightly. "I know intimately of what you speak."

Natasha calls Pepper from her floor, but Clint is sitting on her couch, dealing with paperwork, and she puts the call on speaker. When Pepper picks up she says, "It's early," but she doesn't sound upset or even groggy, just on edge.

In the privacy of this space, Natasha winces. "Hank thinks he can reverse the process. I didn't think you'd want me to wait to call."

"No," Pepper agrees, more of a gasp than anything. Then, more firmly, "No, of course not."

"Pepp," Natasha starts, and the note of hesitancy in her voice is unlike her, but Clint can hardly blame her. Pepper is special for Natasha in a similar but different way from Jane. Natasha learned well to view women as enemies. The ones she allows near her, gives some part of herself to, they hold positions in her world that no male friend or lover can.

"Tasha?" Pepper asks, sounding worn.

Since Pepper was essentially introduced to Natasha in a way which made her suspicious and hostile to Natasha for the first several months in the Tower, she is also, in Natasha's eyes, something Natasha has earned through hard work and diligence. She takes a breath and starts again, "It's going to hurt. Maybe—maybe you should wait to come back."

"Okay," Pepper says the word slowly. "I get that I didn't handle this little loop well. I get that I probably should have put aside my own fears and just been there for him and for you."

Natasha shakes her head. "That's not—"

"But I think you just suggested, in all seriousness, that I leave my husband to go through a terrifying and painful ordeal without me."

Natasha stands stiffly. "Maybe I should stop teaching you how to use perspective as a weapon."

Pepper swears softly, which makes both of them blink. "Sorry, Tash, really. That—that was about my issues, promise."

"You've trusted him to take care of us so far," Natasha says, which is forgiveness and also, wonder, like this has just occurred to her. Something flares in her eyes and Clint suspects Pepper's faith is a turn-on for Natasha.
"Compromise," Pepper says. "I come back when he makes it out of his teens."

Natasha swallows. "You come back whenever you want. We always await your returns. Just...you don't have to do this. It's not a test. And if it was, none of us would care enough to grade."

"No. No, I know."

Clint can almost see the way she is frowning, sad and strong and determined and so very, very alone.

She continues, "But selfishly, when Tony is done with all of this, if he remembers it, I don't want it to be marked entirely by my absence."

Natasha closes her eyes for a moment. "Then come home. You're—we want you back. I do."

* * *

They consider drawing straws for who has to tell Tony, but in the end none of them are really willing to be anywhere else, so they all park themselves in Clint's family-room area—Thor dragging Tony onto his lap, like his cuddles will magically ward off the problem—and try to find a good way to explain the situation. This is Tony, though, so after roughly six minutes of Steve skirting the issue and Bruce looking terribly uncomfortable, he cuts in with, "There's a way to get your Tony back, but it's going to hurt, right?"

Jane, who's been holding hands with Bruce and whispering to him now and then, whips her head up to frown in Tony's direction. "You are our Tony."

"Not yet," Tony argues, and Clint can't tell if he's talking about his age or about going through the procedure.

"Yes," Thor pronounces—and it's hard to disagree with Thor when he gets his pronouncing voice on—"Now and always, Anthony Stark, so long as your mind and your soul inhabit this plane. Your experience is valuable to us, but it is not that which makes us care."

Tony thinks about this. "But adult-Tony is the one the team needs."

Bruce sighs, melodramatically for Bruce., "As an adult, you are an important member of the team. But we need you. And we're...more than the team."

Steve picks up where Bruce has left off, "What he said is correct. We're more. We're, well" Steve shrugs, "family. So you will not make this decision based on thinking we need you to be however many years older. If you choose not to do this, in time, you will create your own Tony Stark, and he will be as unique and significant to us as the one we knew before."

Tony blinks. "I'm seven. I'm pretty sure I'm not allowed to make life-altering decisions at this age."

"Everything else seems to have been left up to you," Bruce snaps. Clint watches as Bruce reels in his own anger. Clint thinks whatever Bruce is going through only has a small amount to do with Tony.

Tony flinches. Clint can't stay where he is any longer. Instead he goes and steals Tony from Thor, who gives him up regretfully, but with grace. "You're allowed to think about this, to take your time."

Clint's sure Tony's not even aware he's fisted his hands in Clint's hoodie, is gripping it so tightly his knuckles are almost translucent. After a moment, Tony asks, "Will it be like the water? Or more like...like being hit?"
For a second, all Clint sees is the bright whiteness of utter fury behind his eyelids. Then he makes himself take a breath. "I—I don't know. But I imagine as bad, if not worse, than either."

Tony squirms a little, but doesn't let go. "Like what they did to you?"

Clint rubs at Tony's back. "Maybe."

"And you're not—this isn't because I didn't stop them?" The question is asked so quietly, it takes Clint a moment to really hear it, process it. Bruce must catch on at the same time, because he mutters an apology and leaves. Jane, who is biting her lip, scoots over to where Thor is still sitting.

It hurts to swallow. Clint does anyway so he can say, "If you choose not to do this, Tony. I'm going to spend the rest of my life keeping you out of harm's way. And if you do choose to do it, I will do the same, only it will be different. But either way, you've done nothing but show bravery. I wish—I wish things could be different."

Almost too softly to be heard, Tony murmurs, "W—will someone…"

He stops, then, shakes his head once and pulls himself up as best he can while staying full connected to Clint. "I'll do it."

Clint isn't entirely sure what Tony was going to ask, but he has a good idea. "None of us are leaving you, Tony. You won't ever be alone during this. I promise."

Tony's posture folds a little with relief. Clint closes his eyes for a moment to focus all his empty rage on anyone who ever made Tony feel like he'd have to ask for something like that. Then he opens them and stands, bringing Tony right up with him and shifting the kid to his back. "For now, though, wanna make some brownies?"

"The ones with the banana chips and coconut?"

"Well, those are Jane's favorites, so we're gonna have to make a few batches."

"I can convert the measurements," Tony offers.

Clint grins and does his best to catch the eye of everyone else in the room. Steve looks like he fully expects the Tower to be blown up and is entirely resigned to the eventuality. Jane is already halfway to the kitchen, tugging Thor behind her. Natasha is watching Tony and him with an unusual amount of indulgence. Phil looks like a man ready to do battle, so, basically the same as always. Clint says, "To the kitchen it is."

Clint loves his teammates (and their plus ones) more than life itself, truly, but sometimes he wishes they were just a little stupider as a group. Because no more than three hours later, when the brownies are cooling and Clint is trying to force himself to rest, build up emotional strength for the days to come, Phil lies down on Clint's bed beside him, and asks, "The water?"

Clint considers lying or simply telling Phil to back off. While he's thinking, Phil continues, "Does Tony remember?"

It's that Phil has given him the benefit of the doubt, hasn't even jumped to the obvious conclusion that does Clint in. He shakes his head. "I tried to stop them, Phil. Swear to everything holy ever, I tried. I'm sorry."
Phil sits up and Clint can feel he's being watched but he keeps his eyes squeezed shut, like maybe he'll never have to see the blank look of hidden disappointment that's worse than any ass-reaming Fury has ever managed. Phil massages gently at Clint's scalp with one hand. After a moment, he says, "He didn't mention. He only talked about what they did to you."

"Scare tactic," Clint clarifies. "Meant to make him talk when they followed it up on me."

"And you think that means you failed," Phil says, more statement than question, but Clint rolls onto his back to look up and bite out, "I promised myself not to let them touch him."

"Clint." There's exasperation in Phil's tone, with a healthy dose of compassion.

"They're mine to protect, Phil. That's why we put me where I can see everything, where I can make sure nothing sneaks up on them. And that's as full-grown superheroes."

"Ah," Phil says, and Clint knows he's in trouble, because that is Phil's I'm-about-to-play-stupid-to-prove-that-I-am-one-billion-times-smarter-than-you 'ah.' Clint has seen Phil take even Tony to task with it. Phil asks, "So, because I am the one to coordinate and to ensure the viability of these attack-responses, it is my fault you and Tony were captured."

Even when Clint's expecting it, he never manages to have a response. "Phil—"

"Well, I'll let Bruce have some of the blame, since Hulk really is supposed to keep an eye out, or at least listen if one of the others tells him something is amiss. And perhaps Steve, because he's team leader and should obviously know where each of you are at any given moment. Not to mention, Natasha's your partner, even within the unit—"

"Okay. I'm stupider than the rest of the team, not stupid. I get it."

"No," Phil argues, "you don't. You don't for a moment understand that everyone on this team has a responsibility to everyone else, including you. It was a problem when you first started working with Natasha, but she kind of trained it out of you in her own fashion, and I suppose I had hoped the same thing would happen. That's on me."

"Phil—"

"Clint," Phil snaps. "You brought him out of there alive and whole and possibly a little bit mentally healthier than he actually was for most of his childhood. You kept him quiet, you made sure we got the arc reactor, you took care of everything, and you were practically in pieces when we found you. Your guilt is not only ridiculous, it verges on enraging."

Clint cocks an eyebrow, because Phil is obviously pissed. "Verges on?"

"Don't make me schedule a sparring session between you and Thor for the vicarious pleasure of seeing him knock you around like a rag doll." Phil's voice is half-an-octave lower than usual, which is his version of a growl. He's serious. Clint should not, in any way, be turned on by the fact that he will totally follow through. Clint can't help finding the way Phil is both dependable and ruthless at the same time incredibly sexy.

Forcing himself to concentrate, Clint bites out, "We both know, in objectively quantifiable terms that Tony is more important to the team."

"You're right," Phil says easily. "You're not stupid, you're actually fully mentally incapacitated."

Clint tries to roll back onto his side, but Phil stops him with a sturdy hand to his stomach. "What
happens to Natasha if we lose you, Clint? What happens to me?"

Clint blinks. "I—"

"No, let me tell you. Natasha loses the first person to ever believe she was worth something, the person she's waited to keep for herself for over a decade. And I lose the two people who have brought meaning to my life, because without you she'll slip away. Then what happens to the rest of the team? Without you and Natasha, who manages stealth? Who oversees anything?"

Clint's chest hurts. "Did she send you?"

"We might have had a tacit understanding." The hand on Clint's stomach moves in something close to a caress and for a moment, Clint just wants to arch into it, wants Phil to stop talking and start touching. He almost misses Phil's, "She was a little afraid she'd lash out."

Clint swallows. "I don't know how to not feel like this. It's probably the best I've ever managed."

"One thing at a time," Phil says softly. "For now, just, what happened to Tony was not your fault. That's all, just that."

"I'll try," Clint promises.

Phil dips his head sharply. After a second he asks, "Mind if I stay while you rest?"

Clint wishes he were brave enough, sure enough, to ask for more. But he will take what he is given without complaint. He pulls Phil down so he can huddle against the solidity of Phil's chest, feel the strength of Phil's arms around him.

*

Tony wants to start in the evening, so maybe he'll sleep through it. Nobody likes the idea, because if it doesn't work out, it begins with an already-worn child. Tony compromises in the end, by taking a nap the next day and eating a solid dinner before being given the first treatment. They all pile into the TV room and tuck Tony in the middle, asking JARVIS to play "Contact." They have discovered it to be one of Tony's favorites, both for the story and because he can pick apart all the science.

They make it about an hour and a half before Tony begins to shift restlessly, biting back soft whimpers. Steve immediately snaps into action, coming around to kneel in front of Tony. "Hey, hey there, tell us where it hurts."

Tony, who's pinched his eyes shut, opens them. They're wet. "Muscles. Everywhere."

Steve picks Tony up and the rest of them follow him to Tony's room, where he settles Tony on his bed, and looks helplessly at Bruce. Bruce ripples for just a moment, then takes a deep breath and says, "Okay buddy, let me know if this hurts or helps."

He massages at one arm gently and Tony screams involuntarily. Bruce snatches his hand back as though Tony's on fire. Clint swallows back bile and climbs on the bed. He tests whether he can card his fingers through Tony's hair. It doesn't seem to garner any response, so Clint says, "Hey, kid."

Tony's eyes are wide and filled with terror and he asks, "L-like this? Was it like this?"

It takes Clint a second, but then he realizes what Tony is asking. He shakes his head, unsure of how to respond. He doesn't want to scare Tony by suggesting this is worse. He doesn't want to lessen what Tony is going through, either. He goes with, "You're braver than I was about it."
Tony looks as if he's not sure he believes Clint, but wants too badly to take his word not to. Clint can work with that. He says, "Hey, can you tell me what your favorite place in the world is?"

Tony blinks, then arches off the bed, screaming for almost five full seconds. When he relaxes, he's panting. "P-park."

"Central Park?" Clint asks.

"G-good place t-to…learn."

"Learn what?"

"People. N-nature. F-families. Stuff," Tony grits out between pants, his voice more a sob than anything.

Clint thinks about watching the families that would come to the circus from the rafters and has to take a second. He's considering where to go with that information, or if he should just start another line of inquiry, when Tony says, "Clint?"

Clint barely hears the word, it's said so softly. He's paying attention. "Yeah?"

"W-wanted to tell you." His entire face, even his body language is painfully sincere. "Have a n-new favorite superhero."

Clint smiles and bites his cheek all at once. "Oh yeah? Black Widow, by any chance?"

Tony shakes his head, more a lolling from one side to the other. "She's pretty cool, b-but I like Hawkeye."

Clint thinks the world stops turning for a millisecond, and yet, despite the briefness, he feels it. "Tony?"

"Mm?" Tony's back to squeezing his eyes shut, every muscle taut as steel wire.

"Try to remember this for later, okay? Iron Man, he's cool. But he's not my favorite, because it's the guy inside the suit I love best."

"O-okay," Tony agrees. Then, as his face abruptly goes white, "Gonna be sick."

Phil, prepared as ever, hands Clint a waste-liner. Clint looks over at the others, noticing all of them clenching their hands—well, not Natasha, but her signals are similar—all of them looking at Tony's back, like they wish to be rubbing it. Clint feels as helpless as they do. He catches Natasha's eye and the two of them share a look. It's possible they've been in worse situations than this, but Clint can't remember when.

It's going to be a very, very long few weeks.

* *

It takes about thirty-six hours for the first dosage to work completely, leaving Tony fourteen or so, and a trembling, miserable wreck. When it seems like he might be able to bear it, Thor lifts him off the bed and takes him into the bathroom, soaking him in lukewarm water. Tony fusses as much as he's able, flushing from his forehead to his toes and telling Thor to leave him alone, he'll do it by himself, thanks.

Thor does leave him curled up on himself in the bathroom and it's less than a minute before JARVIS
alerts them of the fact that Tony's having a panic attack. Clint goes in and pulls him out of the water and dries him off while talking to him, trying to ground him. Tony's first word, when he's breathing regularly, is, "Fuck."

"Hey," Clint says, and is just relieved that this time, unlike last, Tony knows who they are, doesn't keep waking up to strangers.

Between the pain and the panic, Tony's too tired to protest much as Steve helps him to dress in the flannel pajamas they've made sure to have in his size, keeping up a low buzz of one-sided conversation about classic motorbikes. It gets Tony to smile a little, now and then. Phil changes the bedding while Bruce patiently cajoles Tony into eating mashed potatoes and drinking sports drinks. Natasha and Jane are curled up on the bed in Clint's "guest room," taking the first sleeping shift. Natasha hadn't wanted to, but Jane had insisted and there was a whole breadth of stubborn in Jane. Also, Clint is ninety-nine percent certain she bribed Natasha with the promise of a girl's day out.

Clint takes a quick shower and shoves a protein bar in his face before lying down with Tony. McCoy scheduled the injections to be forty-eight hours apart, or, barring the presumed recovery time, to give Tony ten or so hours of rest between each round.

Tony squirms his way into Clint's arms, blushing and burying his face in Clint's chest to ask, "Is this —"

"I've got you," Clint says, and tightens his arms.

* 

The days turn into a really horrific cycle of rinse-repeat. Pepper gets there just as Tony's entering his thirties. He doesn't know her yet in his timeline, and although they've told kid-Tony about her, she's not familiar on a personal level. Even so, from the first, Tony seems to like having her around. He frowns when she walks in, asking, "What's a pretty girl like you doing in a dump like this?"

Clint points out that these are his rooms and Tony just waves a hand weakly. Pepper chokes on a laugh and says, "I've never been very good at preventing you from getting into trouble, only helping you to get out."

Despite everything, Pepper still knows him best. She knows the names he calls out in his delirium, and exactly when she'll be able to get him to drink. Overall, she has some insight into his younger adult self and can often find a way to comfort him when the rest of them are just hanging on by their toenails. She's also better at bullying Tony into doing as she asks. Granted, Clint thinks it helps that she hasn't been spending time with his little-boy self, but she's always been good at it.

Mc Coy tries getting them to leave when the transition that will require hooking the arc-reactor back up occurs. Clint just quietly says, "You're going to have to take a page from our captor's playbook and knock me out, Doc."

Pepper declines that invitation, and Clint, Natasha, Phil, Steve and Thor hold Tony as his chest cavity comes apart. Bruce and Jane stay with Pepper, since it seems best she not be in the room, Bruce is slightly concerned about his level of control and Jane wants someone there with both of them. Clint cannot even express how glad he is they made that decision. There's never going to be a
day when Tony's screams, the wells of blood, aren't imprinted on Clint's mind.

Thankfully, that session is the worst of it. There are only a couple more injections afterward, and by this time, Tony knows Pepper, even if he's somewhat surprised—maybe a little awed, Clint thinks—by the fact that she's agreed to marry him. She stays with him through the last of it, managing, occasionally, to get him to smile, or at least curve his lips.

Clint stays, too. The others rotate in and out, but Pepper and Clint are there non-stop for the last six days. By the time the tension goes out of Tony's body and his face is the face Clint knows perfectly, he's been unconscious again for a few hours. Clint mumbles, "Are we done?"

Pepper calls in McCoy, who looks Tony over and says, "Our friend is resting. He may very well do so for a substantial period of time."

McCoy slips a liquids and nutrients IV in the crook of Tony's arm and says, "I will inform the others."

"We owe you, Doc," Clint says.

McCoy smiles, a surprisingly impish expression for such a large man. "I have no doubt the time shall come when I need to call in that favor."

When he's gone, Clint starts shaking. He's been fine this whole time, given the circumstances, but now the danger is past, it's like his muscles will not listen to a thing his brain tells them. Clint hears the door open, but his head is buzzing, and it's hard to concentrate, which just makes him feel more panicky.

There are hands on his wrists. Pepper has her hand on his cheek and Phil's grasped Clint's wrists from behind. Phil is murmuring to him and Pepper is saying something about sleep. Clint concentrates on normalizing his breathing, on the calm cadences of their voices, and the effort carries him under.

* *

Clint wakes to Tony grousing about how dirty his hair is. He doesn't open his eyes, just says, "Don't we all know it."

"'Bout time, lazy," Jane says, and Clint opens one eye to see that it is her sitting in a chair beside the bed, poking his stomach with her toe. He catches the foot—even half asleep, his reflexes are probably twice what Jane's are—and tickles until she's screaming for Thor between laughs. Then he lets go and acts completely innocent when Jane's rescuer shows up.

Thor is clearly having none of it, but also too pleased to see both Tony and Clint awake at once to pursue the issue. He offers, "Shall I gather a meal for you?"

Clint's hungry, but for the moment he just wants to know what's going on. He shakes his head and rolls onto his back to look up at Tony, who is sitting against the headboard. "Where's Pepp?"

"I made Agent force her to take a few hours off," Tony says. "How come she listens to him way more than she listens to me?"

It's in that moment Clint catches what he missed seconds before. Tony grumbling is nothing new, but Tony being less than clever? Calling Phil, who only recently graduated to first-name status, "Agent"? That's Tony freaking out. Clint ignores the question and says, "Thor, buddy, think you can find McCoy or Bruce and see if we can get Tony off the IV for a bit?"
Thor proclaims, "I shall be gratified to come to your aid," and goes about the task. Clint understands. Inaction is probably Thor's very least favorite thing in this world and there's been a lot of it recently.

Jane asks, "Need anything else?"

Clint thinks. He pushes himself into a sitting position. "Cap."

She leans over to kiss his forehead, lingering a bit, a finger drawing its way along the line of his neck. "Got it."

Clint swallows a moan and asks, "Shower?"

"You and Cap gonna hold me up?" Tony snarks.

"Yes," Clint says, without blinking or hesitation.

"Barton—"

"It's Clint; don't be any more of an asshole than biology compels you to be, and unless you tell me you're really not comfortable with anyone but Pepp doing this, we're going to do it this way."

"Clint," Tony says, and there's something low and scared in Tony's voice.

Clint tells him, "We're gonna be okay."

"That's the best you can do?" Tony raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Watch it, or I will purposely get soap in your eyes."

Tony's expression suggests he's going for an eye roll, but mostly he just looks lost. It's weird, now, seeing it on a face that's weathered forty or so more years. Clint reaches out and squeezes Tony's hand. He can't say which of them he's trying to comfort.

* *

"This is...not how I imagined getting either of you naked and in the shower for the first time," Tony says, sounding sincerely disappointed. Clint often thinks Tony's sincerity relates directly to his level of exhaustion.

Clint says, "No worries, not a big fan of shower sex," and has to shake off a moment of feeling like a complete perv. He looks at Tony, grown and experienced and does his best to regain his bearings.

"What, Barton? I'm saddened by your lack of sexual curiosity and vigor."

Clint rolls his eyes. Steve, who's adjusting the water, bites back a smile. Clint says, "I'm plenty adventurous, this just isn't a thing for me. Someone always gets water in his nose, if lubrication is needed you're SOL; it's just not sexy."

Tony considers this for a moment and then says, "Cap, we need a tie-breaker."

Steve smiles indulgently and ushers Tony into the shower. There's a moment where Tony resists and Steve stills entirely. Clint says, "Okay, everything's okay," and whether it's the words or just the sound of something familiar, Tony takes a breath and lets Steve prod him the rest of the way inside.

Not to be deterred from their earlier conversation—or, Clint thinks, desperate to keep his mind on other things—Tony, who, given the PTSD probably doesn't even really like shower sex himself,
verbally pokes until Steve says, "I will get back to you when I am appropriately informed on both sides of this debate."

"Oh," Tony says, opening his eyes in surprise. Clint immediately tips Tony's head back to avoid the suds running down into them. Steve smirks a little, and it's all Clint can do not to laugh. Steve's oh-so-innocent right up until he's not. Admittedly, Clint would totally engage in some less-than-satisfactory shower sex if Steve needed someone to help him out with his experiment. Clint has never thought of his type as being the ultimate all-American corn-fed soldier, but Steve's blend of power and restraint is undeniably hot, and Clint thinks he would do all sorts of things he usually avoids if Steve just asked in that straightforward, genuine way he has.

Steve is putting that power to use keeping Tony stable, his large hands careful around Tony's hips, over his ribs. The water is making his hair droop into his face in a way that Clint finds adorable and also makes him want to muss that hair up. Clint thinks he might be a little jealous—and fuck, he really is such a cliché when it comes to Steve—of the water running over Steve's collarbone, his abs, the too-perfect muscles of his thighs.

Tony, despite his shakiness, is distracting as well. Clint has missed him so damn much, the feeling of having him back is like the ache he gets after working out a little too hard. It hurts, but in just the right way. Tony's lost a bit of weight, and there are shadows around his eyes, but the expressiveness of his face has not dimmed at all, the vibrancy of the way he comports himself. The small scars that grace his arms because of his own lack of care when welding or creating reassure Clint that they really do have him back at the same time that they make Clint want to bite and kiss his way up Tony's arms.

Clint flushes when he realizes he's visibly aroused, but in his defense, he is in the shower with two naked superheroes. He's only a man. It's reassuring, though, to glance down and see that Steve is also interested. Tony's not, but then, Tony is still recovering from having his internal cellular structure altered twice.

No sooner have they gotten his hair rinsed than Tony's legs seem to give. Thankfully, Steve is ready to catch him. Steve says, "Steady."

Tony is shaking from the effort of being upright. Clint asks, "Want the water warmer?"

A tiny nod of his head is the only response from Tony. Clint reaches over and fusses with the controls to make it happen. He and Steve work as quickly as they can to get the rest of Tony washed and rinsed before bundling him into a towel. Clint works with Tony to get him in a fresh pair of pajama pants, and then Steve, not really paying attention to Tony's whining, picks him up and puts him back in bed. Someone has changed the sheets.

Pepper and Natasha are in the room and Clint catches the uneasy glimpse Tony throws Natasha, which means she sees it, too. She climbs into bed with him and wraps herself over one side, even as Pepper mimics the action on the other side. Natasha murmurs, "Relax, Stark. It's not as if I didn't have blackmail material on you before." She nips a little at one of his ears, locking on gently with her teeth, and snuggling deeper into his side.

Clint bites his cheek, since Natasha is fucking brilliant at reading people she doesn't know, and not always terribly good at the ones she does. But the comment and her possessiveness seem to hit right, because Tony arches into her for a moment before melting completely between the two women and drifting back off to sleep.
Tony sleeps for seventeen hours and then manages to slip down to the labs when Pepper finally passes out and Bruce walks away for a few minutes to get a drink of water. All in all, it's fairly predictable. Luckily, JARVIS is on their side—read: everyone who's really on Tony's side even if he doesn't see it that way—so when Clint asks, "Vents open?" JARVIS just says, "I shall ensure it, Agent Barton."

Steve, as it turns out, is something of a stress baker. Tony finds this hilarious; Clint finds it useful. Clint takes the banana-nut muffins Steve made most recently, partly as an apology, partly because he's not entirely sure when Tony last ate. When he drops down into the lab, Tony is leaning against Dum-E, curled in on himself and quiet. The second he hears Clint he's getting to his feet, his mouth opens, and Clint says, "Don't."

Tony wavers for a moment, but slumps back into his sitting position. Clint sits on the floor facing him and hands over a muffin. After a second, Tony reaches out to take it, plucks off a bite and pops it in his mouth. "Steve?"

Clint nods, chewing on his own. There's something new about this recipe, he can tell, but he can't figure out what it is. It took him a good long while to eat food slowly enough to even taste it after all the years of borderline starvation. Now he notices these sorts of things but is mystified by them.

Tony says, "So, uh. I guess I owe you one. Or maybe, I dunno, five? Are we good with calling it five?"

Clint shakes his head, and Tony rolls his eyes, "Okay, fine, ten, but that's my final offer. Jeez, Bar—"

"You don't owe me," Clint says. He's using the voice he uses when training the junior agents in advanced systems detonations on the Quinjet. It's meant to inspire an awareness of the gravity of the situation.

Naturally, Tony chooses to ignore it. "Eleven."

"They put you in the water," Clint says, not even sharply, just in a matter-of-fact tone, because things are what they are.

It draws what Clint needs. Tony's eyes narrow and he says, "And they were going to kill you. I was smart enough at seven to figure out you were on my side, you think I'm not now?"

Clint opens his mouth, even though he's not entirely sure how to respond. As it turns out, he needn't, because Tony continues with, "And don't think I don't remember that 'It's my job to protect the team,' bullshit."

"Technically—"

"Fuck that. The point of a team is that we protect each other. That we are each part of a whole."

Clint calls him on it. "So what are you doing hiding down here?"

"I'm not hiding. I'm creating." The lie is half-hearted, though. Clint just waits. Tony makes a face and says, "That kid I just spent several months being? He's not an Avenger."

Clint doesn't even have to think about that. "Yeah, bullshit."

Tony blinks at him and it's Clint's turn to roll his eyes. "You fixed us comms, Tony. You didn't even really know what we'd need them for and you did it. So, bullshit. You are you, regardless of age or
height or whateverthefuck, and you are ours," Clint finishes, the last said with a bit of a growl he can't control.

Tony growls right back, "Because it would be so easy for you, to have the rest of us see you then, learn you without any of your defense mechanisms. That wouldn't be at all mortifying."

There's a part of Clint that still wants desperately to beg for forgiveness for not preventing Tony's experience. He doesn't think that's important right now, though. "You think any of us, any of us, looked at that kid and saw someone weak? Saw someone who wouldn't grow into you? Would it be that way if it were one of us? Would you look at Steve pre-serum and not be able to see a kid who had balls the size of Texas? Look at him and not see someone who would grow into Captain America? Really?"

"Steve's—"

"Nat, Bruce, Pepper, Jane, Phil, Thor," Clint presses. "You'd think less of them?"

"Notice you don't include yourself in that list," Tony says in that tone he has, the deceptively casual one.

Clint lets some of his own exasperation show on his face at that observation. "I'm not claiming to not understand, Tony. I'm pointing out that our perception of stuff is kinda…fucked."

"Eloquent."

Clint just rubs at his right eye with his middle finger. He thinks that adequately covers the maturity level of that response. Tony suppresses a glare, but not in time for Clint to miss it.

"That kid, Tony, who you think makes you less? Who is somehow not worth our time and affection? That kid showed one million times the amount of courage and humanity of most grown people I've met in this lifetime. Cut yourself a little slack and…fuck, trust us just a bit."

Tony's gaze meets his, and for a second the air feels tight, too thick, and then Tony's on his knees, his mouth against Clint's. Clint opens up, lets him in, because he's not confused, thanks, and he's wanted this for so very long. Tony pulls off, his forehead resting against Clint's. "That kid, he would never have been able to have this."

There's a moment, slick and fleeting and gone, where Clint panics at the skin-to-skin contact, gets lost in between child-Tony and the adult right in front of him. Then things click into place, the past sliding into the present, present into the future. Clint never desired the boy, but he sure as hell desired Tony before his time as a child. The experience shifts things, but not in the way he thought it would, not away from the need to touch, to kiss, to rub against, merely with a more entire picture of the person he wants that from. At least, one of the people he wants that from.

"This wouldn't have happened," Clint says, and knows, somehow, it's true. It's either all of them, or none. Maybe Natasha and he would have still managed, and Thor and Jane. It's even possible Pepper would have eventually let one of the others in again. But there would be no falling into each other's beds or arms or laps. Friendship and a type of formed kinship would be the best anyone could hope for.

"Is Natasha going to kill us?" Tony rasps. His mouth is just the tiniest bit open, lips inviting, and his eyes, though troubled, practically sing with mischief and desire.

"Is Pepper?" Clint returns. He wants badly to find the spots that make Tony squeal, make him plead. He wants to give Tony everything he asks for, no matter how large or small.
Tony pauses, then wraps a hand around the back of Clint's neck and says, "Worth it."

Pepper finds them. It's not as if it's tawdry, or even really a secret, so much as something all of them have been afraid to touch for fear of shattering. They've given each other backrubs, chaste kisses, slept in each other's beds and flirted like it might go out of style. Two months before the kid-thing, Tony had changed his will to provide, not only for all of them, but for—Clint had laughed at the legalese (a lot)—their "issue." Clint has always just assumed it made sense for them to do everything backwards.

But Pepper looks as though she's unsure of her welcome, and that shocks Clint out of the haze of arousal surrounding him. Intelligently, he says, "Hey," but Tony, who is objectively one of the smartest people currently living and possibly ever, only comes up with, "Pepp," so maybe Clint's doing all right.

She's in work clothes. Clint vaguely remembers her saying something about a meeting that couldn't be rescheduled. He can hardly look up from her legs, which are at his eye level and seem to go on forever. It's probably for the best, he suspects his reaction to her perfectly pointed chin and the way her hair brushes along her shoulders would be embarrassing. He's worried about fucking up her suit, which probably costs more than Clint's entire wardrobe, but not worried enough to keep himself from saying, "C'mere."

Pepper looks at Tony, who blinks slowly at her. "Wait…are you—are you asking if I want that?"

Pepper sighs and steps out of her shoes, which Clint takes as progress, even if she doesn't come any closer. He takes a moment to appreciate the arch of her feet. She says, "This thing happened to you, Tony. This thing which made you vulnerable and frightened and unsure and I disappeared."

Tony nods, "Which, if we're being honest here, I appreciate. I mean, it's a little weird for me that I'm back to wanting to rip the clothes off people I've been hero-worshiping and substituting in for parents for a little while now. I think if I had to reconcile that with someone I've actually been in an ongoing sexual relationship with, I'd probably feel even crazier than I do right now."

"All right, so we're on the same page. You weren't the only one I ran out on, Tony."

Clint is still processing that comment when he realizes they're both looking at him, now. He says, "Oh."

Tony snickers. "Kissing makes you stupid."

"Wasn't that far to go," Clint mutters.

Tony punches Clint's shoulder. "Don't make me sabotage your quiver, Barton. You know I'll find a way to do it that just pisses you off and doesn't affect any of the rest of us."

Clint isn't really paying attention to Tony, there's too much resting on whatever he says to Pepper. He desperately wishes Phil was here, or Jane, or someone with less emotional trauma and more insight into others than he has. After what feels like way too long, he says, "We weren't exactly there for you, either."

Pepper frowns. "What?"

Clint shrugs. "Your husband, and, so far as we know, only family, turned into a kid and we let you go deal with corporate shenanigans. Nobody's finest hour, is all I'm saying."
"You didn't, though," Pepper says slowly. "I talked to Tash every day, and Phil, Steve and Bruce more days than not. You all made sure to check in, to—"

Clint just raises an eyebrow, because Pepper's smart enough to figure out she's the pot in this instance. She laughs a little, not her real, happy laugh, but something close to her relieved one. Clint asks, "Now will you come here?"

She accedes to the request. Tony and Clint tuck her between themselves, and start up just about where they'd left off. She tangles her legs with Clint's, one toe brushing against his calf, and he stops breathing for a moment, before Tony presses his mouth over Clint's and gives him air.

Clint nips at Tony's lips, one hand scrabbling to find the other man's shoulders or arms, anything to hold onto, to anchor himself with. He finds himself gasping, "She's so, I mean, you're, too—"

Tony chuckles before taking Clint's mouth over again. Clint's free hand finds its way to Pepper's hair and he can't stop brushing his fingers through it, silk and gold and rubies. Clint knows this isn't supposed to happen, gets that circus-cum-street trash doesn't get the CEO with exquisite collarbones, but he拖 his tongue along them anyway. He will take this for as long as he is allowed it.

And Tony, genius billionaire ex-playboy philanthropist, who is alive and well in spite of Clint, is letting Clint slip a hand underneath the hem of his shirt, letting Clint rest his fingers against the warm skin of his stomach, softer than Clint's, but still muscular. Clint knows he's taking what's not his, but he's always been just a bit of a thief on the side.

Tony, as if reading Clint's mind, says, "Yours, Clint," his voice rough and when Clint brings his mouth back up for more of him, the gentle friction of his facial hair has Clint sinking further into Pepper, trying to pull her into him, pull both of them.

She says, "Sh, sh," even though he hasn't spoken, her lips brushing his earlobe and Clint wishes she'd bite, but doesn't know how to ask. With Natasha, his need for just a little something harsh, something grounding, is easy to get across, but Pepper isn't like them. Pepper doesn't kill, she controls and runs and perpetuates.

She must know something is off, though, because she asks, "What, baby?"

Clint can't help that his fingernails arch into Tony's skin, but Tony just makes a pleased sound low in his throat, which makes it a little easier to ask, "Bite?"

Tony shudders, Clint can feel it through Pepper, feel it under his palm, where their legs still touch. Pepper's teeth are sharp and fierce and Clint suspects he'll beg for them again before this is over.

The first thing Clint does after leaving the two of them is to find his way to Natasha. It's not hard; JARVIS is perfectly willing to say where she is. Steve and she are sparring, and Clint, who's already worked up enough from probably an hour or so of making out, has to close his eyes for a moment, get himself under control. When he opens them, Natasha is looking at him, her expression contemplative, but not angry. Clint says, "Hi."

Steve looks between the two of them, frowns a bit, and says, "I'm just going to—"

"Stay," Natasha commands and Steve stops practically mid-way through his first stride. Clint watches as her body language shifts minutely, a tell her expression won't give him. He reads a lot in the position, thinks maybe she's unsure of how she's feeling. She's mad, definitely, but he thinks she's afraid too, and more than anything, curious. Then, in a not-quite-purr, Natasha asks, "How does
Stark taste?"

Clint, if he's being honest, is a little surprised she doesn't know. She'd been assigned him as a research subject for all intents and purposes, and Natasha is nothing if not thorough. He doubts Tony would have put up too much of a fight, not then. Clint says the first thing that comes to mind, which ends up being, "Like electricity."

There's a pause, but then Natasha laughs, and Clint watches out of the corner of his eye, noticing the way Steve can't take his eyes off her. Clint wonders if Steve sees Natasha the way he does, as stealth and simplicity and perfection, or if Steve has artist words for it, artists thoughts that do her more justice.

She interrupts his train of thought, asking, "And Pepper?"

"Wind and water," Clint says, not even understanding, but knowing it's the right answer.

Softly, Natasha prompts, "And I?"

Clint is bombarded by sensations, thoughts, words. He settles on, "Chocolate with chilies."

Her blink is slow. He knows that response: whatever she was expecting, that wasn't it. Clint tilts his head toward Steve. "Your turn."

They hold each other's gaze for a moment, before Natasha slinks over to Steve and says, "Cap," before pressing onto her toes and taking his mouth for her own. Steve makes a sound Clint can't identify and Clint shakes with the need to touch himself. He doesn't.

She is gentle with Steve in a way she rarely is with Clint, certainly never was in the beginning. But then, Steve does not even move to touch her until she finds his hands with her own, places them on her waist. Clint thinks he'll be gentle with Steve, too, see how it feels.

She pulls back with a smile, nipping at Steve's lips when he unconsciously does his best to follow. She looks over at Clint. "Steel and blueberries."

It's completely nonsensical, so, of course, it makes perfect sense to Clint. He murmurs, "And me?"

Her smile deepens. "Dandelion greens."

Unexpectedly, Steve cuts in. "I want to try."

Sometimes, when he wants, Clint can be a good little soldier. He stands his ground as Steve approaches, Steve touches broad, fingers to Clint's jaw lightly. And if Clint leans in just a bit to meet Steve partway, he thinks he can be forgiven his insubordinance.

* *

The next few days make Clint think of Legos, with everyone clicking neatly into place with the nearest block, and broken apart only to form a new structure when desired.

He eats curled against Bruce on the common-room sofa for breakfast at one point, taking off Bruce's glasses when he's done and taking the chance to run his hands through Bruce's hair, get his fingers tangled, the way he's wanted to for so long. He spars and then cleans up with Phil, but not before pinning him to the mat, feral and happy when Phil doesn't even try to push him away, just arches into him, pure muscle and heat and a neck Clint has wanted to lick since he met the man.
He pulls Jane out of her lab and out for walks when the weather is nice, the two of them holding hands, him kissing the delicate arch of her knuckles now and then. He falls asleep on Thor while watching the news and wakes up to the harshest and most arousing shoulder massage he's ever received. He sits in Pepper's office and does backlog paperwork in between bringing her coffee and tea, kissing her ears and her knees. He even lets Tony ogle him while he's shooting on the range, lets Tony stand way too near, and holds onto Steve for a two-hour bike ride where they pretty much go nowhere. Clint doesn't give a shit, too high on the feel of Steve's chest beneath his fingers, the muscle play of his back amplified by Clint having his cheek pressed to it.

They are arguably the best three or four days of Clint's life, and while that doesn't mean much when put up against his childhood, he's had Phil for the better part of a decade and Natasha going on seven years, and Clint has plenty of memories he's decidedly unwilling to give up.

It's not even light out going into the fifth day when Phil gets a call and tugs his way out from where he is playing pillow to both Natasha and Pepper.

Clint wakes the moment Phil moves; he's sure Natasha does as well. On his other side, Bruce is still snuffling sleepily into Clint's chest, so he stays as stationary as possible until sure he needs to move.

Predictably, it's only a few seconds before Phil softly says, "Cap?"

Steve asks, "Assemble?"

"Reports of what might be fire demons over the Hudson," Phil replies.

"Fire demons?" Tony grouses. "That's not a real thing. How is that a real thing?"

Phil pulls Tony out of bed and onto his feet and says, "I'm just the messenger. Go put on something flame-retardant, say, a suit made out of advanced metal alloys."

Clint is already dressing by this point, trying not to be turned on by the fact that Bruce is definitely watching him. Well, him and Natasha, but that's not really helping. Bruce says, thoughtfully, "The Other Guy doesn't really like fire. It can't be smashed."

Steve pulls the cowl over his head. "We're going to have to go with a 'dunk' command in that case."

Bruce tilts his head. "Yup, he can get behind that."

Thor—who can do that thing where he's in the World's Largest Set of Sponge-Bob Squarepants Pajamas one second and in full battle gear the next—grins and booms giddily, "Let us dunk to our heart's content, then!"

*It doesn't quite go that way, in the end. Oh, Hulk gets to dunk a fair bit, which makes for a happy green ball of rage, but Clint loses track of Steve for approximately twenty seconds and the next thing he knows, Steve is biting back a scream of pain over the comm. Clint locates him, sees him on the ground and decides that being lookout is doing fuckall for the group. "Widow? Think you can find hydrants in that building behind you?"

He's barely finished talking before Tony's diving for a building, his speed indicating his level of Pissed Off. Meanwhile, Clint uses an arrow to rappel himself down near to a fire hydrant. Phil, seeing where he is, says, "Thor, I need you to do your best to lure as many of them as you can toward the southwest corner two blocks to your rear."

Clint is too busy working with Natasha and Tony to set up their ambush to have any idea what Thor does to make that happen, only that he's clearly recruited Hulk's aid. There aren't really that many of
them, maybe forty or so, and they fight in clusters. Clint hasn't seen one go out on its own since the Avengers arrived. Hulk has already drowned several, so they can pick off most of the rest with concentrated bursts of fire repellent and well-aimed water. A few flee, which Clint suspects portends Absolutely No Fucking Good, but he needs to get to Steve too badly to care just then.

Phil is with Steve by the time Clint can get there, the others following him, since he is the one who knows where he's going. Steve's conscious, lying half in Phil's lap. He blinks up at the others and croaks, "Hi."

There are third-degree burns down the entirety of his left leg, and Clint can see they're actively healing, even now. He really doesn't want to know what they looked like immediately upon injury. He doubts any non-superhuman would have survived. Natasha goes and sits down on Steve's side, taking his hand in hers and squeezing. "Want us to move you back to the Tower, or just wait?"

Steve shudders, biting the inside of his cheek and closing his eyes. Bruce appears, soaking wet and wearing only a pair of jeans that are far too big for him. Clint doesn't ask where they came from. Bruce looks Steve over carefully and says, "I think we'd better wait a bit."

"Medics?" Phil asks him.

Bruce hesitates for a second, but then shakes his head, looking exhausted and apologetic. "Won't be able to do anything waiting it out won't."

He goes and sits down next to Phil and strokes Steve's hair a bit. Clint goes to take Steve's other hand. He wishes Tony were near enough he could reach out and touch him as well, reassure himself Tony's fine. Tony's in the suit, though, and even if he wasn't, Clint hasn't earned that right back yet, despite them all acting as if he has. Besides, Steve is the one hurt and Clint needs to concentrate. He tells Steve, "Sorry."

Steve looks over at him for a moment before his eyes slip shut again. "Mm?"

"I was…Nat had some coming up from behind."

Steve manages to open his eyes just long enough to roll them. It's weird seeing Steve do it, he might be quiet, but he's also straightforward and considerate and mostly really only mocks Tony, and then only when he absolutely deserves it. Tony laughs, the mask flipped up so that the sound is real, but there is also concern in it. Clint understands. It's easy to understand that Steve will be fine, but impossible to feel it with him lying in a dirty street, much of his skin scorched beyond repair. Really, Clint thinks, it is impossible for any of them to believe they will not lose the others, not when they all mean so much.

There's a moment where everyone is caught up reminding themselves that Steve will heal, that is what Steve does. Thor breaks the tension by mussing Clint's hair and saying, "I shall head back, inform the others. Food and drink will await you upon arrival."

If there has ever been a time in Clint's life when he's come home to a waiting meal, to people who were waiting to be with him, make him feel better, he can't remember it. His hands tighten over Steve's involuntarily. Steve just squeezes a bit harder in return, but not hard enough to hurt. Steve is careful with his strength, in every sense, but especially so with them. Clint almost wishes he'd push every once in a while.

* *

Steve's skin has regenerated and he's sleeping the worst of the injuries off within hours. Thor and
Tony had gotten him cleaned up when they could move him, bring him back. Bruce is resting beside him, the tiredness that usually comes over him after a transition finally winning. Clint is torn. Part of him wants to stay, keep Steve in his sight. The other part of him is about to come out of his skin.

He stays until he's considering whether he can scale the walls. Then he disables the elevator and pulls himself up the shaft to the roof. By the time he's there his arms are angry and some of the worst of the frenzy has bled off. Thor is there as well, which is not terribly unusual. If there's anyone who needs the sky more than Clint, it's Thor.

Thor smiles over at him, a small smile for the man, nothing more than a greeting. "Has Anthony disappeared to craft you fire-extinguishing arrows yet?"

Clint's sure his confusion is showing on his face. "Huh?"

Thor's smile deepens a bit. "He was speculating upon such a project."

If Clint were any less tired, he probably would have realized the inevitability of that before this moment. As it is, appreciation floods him, because yeah, that would have made him a whole lot more useful in this scenario.

Clint looks over when Thor says, "He has been more...devoted since returning to us."

Clint feels anger burn low in his stomach. "He was always devoted."

Thor blinks and then frowns. "That is not what I meant. He—it is as though he feels there is something for which he must atone."

Clint rubs a hand over his face. It's easy to forget Thor is older than the rest of them, stronger, in many ways. And that, underneath his cheer, he takes that seriously, is probably the most protective, even putting Steve in the mix. Clint says, "He think he needs to re-establish his usefulness. That all we see is a child in need of care, taking away time and resources."

Thor frowns. "We cherished the child Stark."

Clint hates talking about nature versus nurture with Thor, because underlying every conversation is Loki, but the only thing to say is, "I doubt our months with that kid really could overtake all the years he was told something else." Clint pauses. "Even our Tony, he's, um, he's fairly focused in the areas he really believes he has worth to us."

Thor does not look at Clint as he says, "Not unlike other members of this team."

Thor has his own issues, though, so Clint takes the admonition as it's meant, gently, and says, "You could drag him away, you know? I doubt he'll put on the suit."

Thor's smile returns a bit at that. "One can never be certain."

"True," Clint says, smiling back. "But go make him have some fun anyway."

Thor rocks on his feet a bit. "And you will remain here?"

"Phil will come pull me away in a bit," Clint tells him. And if he cannot find the courage to go to Tony, he wants someone with him. Pepper's in town, hasn't really left much since Tony's 'return,' so that's probably already taken care of, but there's no harm in making certain. "Or he'll send someone. He's just giving me time."
Thor considers this for a moment before stepping into Clint's space. Clint has thought a lot—an embarrassing amount, actually—about the way Thor would feel if they ever did something more than cuddle, if he would feel overwhelmed by Thor's perfection, or if it would just feel right. Clint has never really been about being held down or up or held at all, but Thor's strength, the steel in every part of him, kind of makes Clint want that desperately.

As if reading Clint's mind—and, well, it's possible there are things Clint doesn't know about Asgardians--Thor nudges Clint's legs just a bit wider, fitting one leg between them. He presses Clint into the nearest vertical surface and doesn't even have to do anything besides keep his leg where it is to trap Clint there. Not that Clint is really interested in going anywhere, ever again. Clint tips his head, torn between the desire to close his eyes, to just feel and to keep them open, to drink in the visual of Thor so close, there for him and him alone. The breadth of Thor's palm cups Clint's neck as Thor leans in to initiate a kiss, and Clint is pretty sure Thor's cheating, using several centuries of seduction techniques to make Clint pliant, when really, all Thor needs to do is crook his little finger. When Clint is just worked up enough to fall over at a touch, wants nothing more than to be on his knees, Thor walks off. Clint calls, "Cocktease."

Thor laughs and stalks away like a fucking jungle cat.

Clint's nightmare wakes them all up two nights later, which is surprising because Clint has long trained himself out of screaming in his sleep. There were a goodly number of years in his childhood when waking up anyone in the near vicinity was likely to mean, at best, a serious beating. The nightmare itself is quotidian; he's guaranteed one or two a week. He normally spends the rest of the night in the gym on level 53 when he can't just roll over and go back to sleep. This time, he wakes up to his own frantic screaming for Tony, Phil's voice saying his name, loudly and calmly, and Natasha murmuring at him in Italian, which is her favorite language because it was the first she chose to learn of her own accord. She wanted to read Dante in the words he'd picked, not words others had decided fit him well enough, wanted to listen to Verdi without aid of subtitles. Clint only knows a few words of Italian here and there, but he tries to anchor himself in her words.

However, it's only when Clint realizes he's screaming that he can hear Tony saying, "Hey, Clint, hey."

He catches sight of Jane blinking sleepily, concern writ large across her face, of Steve consciously breathing slowly, the way he does when something's upsetting him. Clint manages to swallow down the fucking mewl that wants to come out of him, along with bile. "S—sorry."

Clint's not sure how it happens—Tony must climb over Thor and roll past Pepper, or something—but Tony is sitting in front of him. Clint has the horrible feeling he might have been screaming Tony's name. The suspicion is pretty much confirmed when Tony says, "I'm right here, Robin Hood," the nickname soft and unusually careful.

Clint mumbles apologies, like his mouth isn't certain how to form other words. Tony says, "Jesus," but still, Clint just keeps on until he runs out of breath. Aside from Tony holding both Clint's hands, the others are all touching him, he thinks, a finger or a knuckle or a palm all fitted somewhere to his skin. Clint can feel himself teetering on the edge of hysteria and forces himself to calm. Once he's managed to slow his breaths and heart rate, though, the drop is intense, and he can only force out another, "Sorry," before he's drifting back to sleep.
When Clint awakens, the light filtering through the mechanical blinds is soft, dull enough he knows it's not late. He can feel Thor wrapped around his back, can also sense Thor's awake. Phil is talking, low and smooth, but there's too much space around Clint, too much air between Phil and him. Clint grunts, "Any of you sleep after my late night party?"

He opens his eyes and sees Jane is asleep, curling into Natasha, who is running her fingers through Jane's hair. Thor sits up, bringing Clint with him, gently, but in a way Clint knows struggling against will be useless. Thor states, "There was much necessary discussion in the early morning hours."

"Fuck," Clint says, and brings a hand to his face, rubbing vigorously. Then, with a sense of panic, "Tony? The others?"

"We decided small group sessions were best," Phil says, as if this is some kind of training exercise. "I should—Tony. I should talk with him." Even if Clint has no idea what the hell to say, how to make the situation better for either of them.

"And say what?" Natasha asks, her fingers never pausing. She doesn't sound angry, just curious, but Clint knows that can be when she's most dangerous. The problem is, sorry really isn't enough in this instance. It's just not. Tony is right: Clint can only begin to imagine the kind of psychological damage he'd be facing if he'd had to revisit his childhood, had to let the others see him like that, had to remember the others seeing him that way. Someone visited Clint's worst-nightmare-he-never-knew-he-had on Tony and he'd…watched. Clint takes a breath, trying to clear the rush of panicked helplessness that crowds his mind every time he thinks about this.

"Maybe. Um, maybe I could talk to Dr. McCoy. About a vaccination, or something. And then we wouldn't have to worry."

"There is more than one way to enact a regression of years, Clinton," Thor says. Thor is still always a little surprised when nobody but him seems to know these things. This time, he's obviously not happy in the knowledge.


He makes himself look at her. Makes himself ask, "If it had been you—if you'd ended up seven and," Clint puts a hand to his stomach, because he doesn't know the details, but he knows enough to know what he's asking, "trapped and scared because of me, what the hell would you want me to say?"

Jane's awake now, possibly because Natasha has fisted her hand in Jane's hair. She's slowly extricating herself in order to sit up and lean into Natasha. Natasha pulls her hand away the instant she realizes what she has done, but does not relax again until Jane's resettled in her vicinity. Meanwhile, Jane's attention is on Clint, looking at him like he's grown a second head. She says, "Tony ended up trapped because they managed to disable the connection from the arc reactor to the suit for a minute, long enough to break him from it manually while he was essentially dead in the water. We figured that out a couple of days after we got you guys back, and Bruce and I don't even understand that much about the suit."

Clint shakes his head. "Without the suit, Tony is a civilian. It would be the same as if you were on a consult and we were captured. I'm our best weapon at that point. It was my responsibility—"
"To do your best," Phil breaks in.

"My best wasn't—"

"If," Natasha interrupts sharply, "if it had been me who was injured and sick and unable to win against the present odds, and you who ended up a child, seven, so...the group home? If that had happened, what would you want me to say?"

Clint opens his mouth, then shuts it. "It wouldn't have happened if it were you."

She rolls her eyes. "It has, Clint. Belgrade. And you would have thought I was some blushing rose the way you carried on until you got your own fucking way."

Clint does not let himself close his eyes, because if he does, he will see what they did to her to try and make him talk. It had been a relief to him when they'd tried it the other way around. He shakes his head. "You drew them off me for so long I thought—"

"And you drew them off me the second you could. The second. I thought about talking," she admits.

Clint blinks, because she's never told him this. Phil pulls her and Jane a bit closer, so that Natasha is buffered on either side. Thor's fingers find their way inside Clint's t-shirt, his knuckles skimming the skin of Clint's stomach. Normally Clint's pretty sure he'd be hard as a rock from the simple motion. Right now it just feels calming.

Natasha smiles, but it's bitter, jagged. "Everything they did, I wasn't even there, wasn't even paying attention except to keep track of you and then you did the one fucking thing that could have broken me."

"I don't understand." Clint feels incredibly grateful for Thor's arms around him, keeping him up. He doesn't think he'd be able to manage, otherwise.

"Remember how I wouldn't speak to you for six months afterward?" Natasha asks.

Clint can hardly forget. Those months had sucked. She continues, "It wasn't because you so-called-'let' me get hurt. It was because I was furious at you for taking what I could have, for being brave and kind and so stupid when it came to me."

Clint frowns. "I love you." It's not some big admission, some moment they're having. She knows that. He's told her, in words and gestures. Sure, it took him a while to remember the words that went along with what he was feeling, but he's loved her in one way or another for years now, and Clint's never been wise about holding himself back, not with people he's cared for. It isn't that he doesn't know better, it's simply that there are some lessons he's too backward to learn.

She nods. "And I love you." It is maybe more of an admission from her, but only because Natasha is a dancer in all things: she prefers spins and pirouettes to a plain walk. She keeps going. "And you love Tony. And Tony loves—"

"Tony," Clint breaks in, "will take whatever he can get. If we've learned nothing else from this experience, I'm pretty sure we covered that."

"You're so different, in that sense," Phil says dryly. Clint acknowledges the point with a tilt of his head.

Natasha just repeats, "Tony loves you. And what he has memories of, memories colored by having a seven-year-old's perception of the world, is of you being tortured for him. If you think he is mad, can
you only imagine what he thinks?"

Clint shakes his head. "I told him not to talk."

Phil, Jane and Natasha all roll their eyes at that. Clint's pretty sure Thor does too, but as he's behind Clint, there's no certainty. He sighs and leans back against Thor. "So, um. Group sessions, huh?"

"Your personal with Tony is in a few hours. When everyone's taken a nap and possibly a shower and eaten something," Phil says, no room for argument in his tone. Clint has no desire to argue. He hopes these next few hours last forever.

*

Pepper delivers Tony to the kitchen, where Phil has not-so-subtly left Clint. Clint is sitting on the countertop, taking the occasional sip of his coffee, nibbling on handfuls of Honey Nut Cheerios. Tony comes and takes his own handful, completely in Clint's space one moment, not at all the next. Clint is trying to think of how to explain his side of things in a way that hasn't been said when Tony asks, "You know what I wanted more than anything in the world when I was a kid?" Then, "The first time, that is."

Clint's uncomfortably aware of how many guesses he can come up with. "Uh. A pig?"

It gets Tony to smile, if not laugh. "Good guess, high on the list, but no."

Clint tucks his knees against his chest and rests his chin on them. Then, because it's only fair, he offers, "I wanted a mom. She didn't have to be perfect. There was this act in the circus, family of tumblers, and they yelled at each other all the time, but one time one of the kids fell, broke his wrist, and they took him straight to the nearest hospital, even though none of us were insured. Probably gave a fake name." Clint shrugged. "Then, I mean, I would see her check up on the kid even though he wasn't working. She would brush his hair out of his face, sometimes."

Tony nods slowly. "I wanted my dad to see me. To feel like I was actually there, and the things I did mattered and I was someone to be proud of. Barring that, I really wanted a friend."

The early existence of Tony's AIs makes heartbreaking sense in this context. Clint wonders if he would have done the same thing given the skills and materials. Probably: he'd had more than one full-fledged conversation with his bow. He's still figuring out what response Tony's looking for when Tony asks, "You know what you talked with little-me about, the first time I was willing to have a conversation?"

Clint tries to remember. "Things around then were a little hazy."

"You answered my questions, believed me when I challenged you to try me, gave me the truth, acted like I was adult enough to handle it. You did your best to make me feel better. The second time, you made my favorite things a central tenant of the conversation."

"Tony—"

Tony cuts him off. "You'd already given me what I wanted most, and we weren't even out of captivity yet."

"You should never have had to want it," Clint says. "Never had that...never had your memories taken, never been put in that position."
"Yes, well, our captors were kind of assholes. So hard to find quality, caring captors these days." Tony crunches on a few more Cheerios. "And I didn't stop wanting friends just because I grew up and my dad died."

Those are both valid points, but Clint really doesn't give a shit. What matters is, "I brought you home terrified and in need of a friend, Tony. And not in the normal way."

"And I brought you home nine-tenths dead, Clint. Because I was seven and I couldn't think through the fear the way I made myself do in Afghanistan, the way that's become rote. I didn't actually have my first kidnapping until I was nine, which I think they knew."

"First?" Clint can't help asking, then waves his hand. "Nevermind." He ignores the memory that threatens to swamp him of de-aged Tony, suspicious and wary, informing him Stane wasn't going to pay.

"No kidding, nevermind. You gave me hope of survival, you saw me, you got me to people who gave me everything I'd ever wanted until you woke up and just added onto my fucking overflowing cup." Tony's jaw flexes. "Don't you get it? I got to have months of being a kid and actually got to be a kid. Mortifying, yes, but also...also a second chance. You, on the other hand, have new scars on over eight percent of your body."

Clint is silent, considering, for long enough that Tony hops up on the counter beside him. Softly, he says, "Clint."

Clint bites his cheek before saying slowly, "When I was a kid, all I wanted was to be rescued, really. I mean, rescue in my head always came in the form of a mom, but the point was that someone took me away and kept me safe and gave a half a fuck."

"Sure," Tony says, in that way he has when he's only talking to keep the other person going. It's rare to hear, but Clint is all too familiar with it now.

"After—well, before Phil and SHIELD but after the circus, as an adult, all I've ever wanted was to be the person who rescued others. Like some kind of...I don't know. Psych'd know. Just. The junior agents and civilians and everyone, I just wanted to, um, I guess do for others what I couldn't do for me?"

"Mm," Tony agrees easily enough, without censure in his tone.

"And then...then I got you guys. I thought, maybe I thought it was funny, in some ways, that I'd finally gotten what I wanted when I'd spent so long pretending I wasn't even interested anymore. But it didn't change the way I approached things. If anything, it just made it more important for me to never let you guys out of my site, never fucking fail."

Clint swallows. It hurts his throat. "When I realized you were there with me, I—it was like keeping a mission parameter in my head: stay alive to keep you safe." Clint just manages to keep his breathing from speeding up, harsh and ragged. "They put you under the water, Tony. You weighed all of two pounds soaking wet, and you were a kid and I—you know what I thought?"

Tony shakes his head. Clint laughs, but that hurts, too. "That at least you couldn't remember. At least there was that, since I could do fuckall about the situation."

After a few seconds of silence, Tony asks, "You've never played chess with Natasha, huh?"

"What?"
"I suppose for you it would be sparring, or mission planning, or being her sniper, something along those lines."

"Tony—"

"Know how many times I lost to her as a kid?"

Clint shakes his head. He hadn't kept count. Tony says, "Neither does she. Thirteen. Out of fifteen games played, and one was abandoned. You know why I know and she doesn’t?"

"You're more numbers oriented?" Clint guesses.

"Because I was the only one who felt like I was failing her. She wanted a game with someone who would make her think. As a kid, in my mind, that meant winning against her. But that was just skewed seven-year-old perception."

Clint understands the metaphor. "This wasn't chess."

"No, but I wanted a hero, and I got one, Clint. And the only reason you can't see it that way is because nobody fucking bothered to show you what heroes looked like as a kid."

Clint doesn't have a response for that, so he stays silent until Tony's turning toward him, pulling him out of his balled-up posture, pressing their lips together. The kiss is a question, a point of connection, at least at first. Then Clint falls into it a little, and Tony takes what he wants, slow but sure in his explorations, until Clint is shaking underneath his hands. Tony draws back and says, not without a bit of a waver in his voice, "Next time, I get to be the hero."

Clint's next breath is a sob, but Tony doesn't call him on it. Clint says, "As opposed to every third time?"

"Well," Tony smiles, his lips curving against Clint's, "I can't help that I'm good at what I do."

Clint sobs again, silently, but with his whole body. Tony says, "Tell me what to do. I don't—"

Clint fists his hands in Tony's shirt and says, "Just... just don't leave."

Tony wraps his hand around the back of Clint's neck and says, "I can do that. I'm—yeah, we're good."

One mission and two completely unrelated events unfold over the next three days. The mission is straightforward: they've got a Hydra cell just below the Canadian border pretending to be American Militia. Their intel is solid, and the worst damage they take is when someone manages to broadside Iron Man with armor-piercing rounds. They don't penetrate the suit, but there are going to be serious bruises for weeks, Clint knows from roughly relative experience.

The first of the—perhaps not completely unrelated, since seeing Tony pale a little any time he moves isn't doing anyone favors—other events is that Clint adopts a pet pig. He has to drive upstate to get the little guy. He's a Vietnamese Potbelly, less than a year old, and his rescue name is Pepper. Clint confides, once they're in the car: "We're gonna have to change that buddy, sorry. Someone else got dibs."

By the time he gets back to the Tower, he's pretty fond of Charleston, "Charlie for short, yeah?"
The pig doesn’t seem to mind. Clint has good memories of stopping outside Charleston in the winter months, when the Southeast was warmer than anywhere else reasonably within their circuit. Clint had been treated to a few instances of true southern hospitality around those parts.

He knows damn well the pig is too little too late. Why he hadn’t thought of it when Tony was still a damn kid is beyond him, since he spent three-quarters of his days worrying about what would make Tony happy, and the last quarter discussing it with the others. Not that he would have said anything about it, not without Tony telling him it was okay.

He's also honest with himself to know that part of it is as glad as Clint is to have Tony back safe and sound, he misses having the kid around. Kid-Tony needed Clint in a way nobody ever has. A pet is possibly a stupid substitute, but it's the best Clint can think up.

He takes Charlie to right outside Tony's lab and has JARVIS announce his presence. Tony looks over and sees him through the glass, his face a comical mixture of surprise and suppression of excitement. He doesn't even take his goggles off before coming out to them. Clint says, "Tony, meet Charleston. Our new mascot."

"Are we going to put him in a flapper dress and teach him moves?" Tony asks, even as he's taking off his gloves and reaching out for the pig.

Clint hands it over. "I've been told pigs are pretty fucking smart."

Tony smiles, the kind of smile he only ever wears in private. He looks at Clint for a long moment. "You didn't have to, you realize?"

Clint nods. "I—I kinda think I just needed to rescue something. Easy win, or, I dunno."

Tony's smile deepens. "Should we go introduce him?"

"Maybe leave the goggles and the gloves in the lab."

"Yeah, point."

The second entirely unrelated event is that Fury manages to pin Clint down and order him into an eight-hour meeting with Dr. Miene from psych, and Daylin and Hayashi from HR, whose job is evidently to regularly update the handbook. The four of them spend the eight hours hashing out new guidelines for age-regression instances, since that section has been considered outdated for the better part of a decade, but nobody with practical experience had come around to help update it.

Clint doesn't mind the other three staff members, they're all professional and intelligent and perfectly pleasant people to spend eight hours with, but by the end of it he really can't help climbing into the vents and going to the most remote parts of HQ, where nobody will ever think to look for him.

Nobody but Phil, who, no more than an hour after Clint has made his escape, strides into the middle of the hall and says, "Your cell is in this area. Are you?"

Clint sighs and finds the nearest access panel to tumble out of. He tells Phil, "I quit."

"Mm," Phil responds. "I'll expect your letter of resignation by 0700."

Clint makes a face. He hates writing. Reading he's gotten okay at, can do for pleasure, but writing is a whole different skill, and he basically sucks at it. It's why Phil and Clint have had codes for all kinds of things for years. Clint only has to write, "7, 19, and 4," and Phil will know that the intel was good, but the planning for the nest was terrible, and target had been acquired anyway. Clint says,
"Maybe it can wait."

Phil does not respond to this one way or another, just asks, "Wanna get some dinner?"

"Yes, please." Clint hasn't really eaten since the bagel he grabbed from the commissary before the meeting. There'd been a half hour break for lunch, but all Clint had felt like at the time was a gigantic cup of coffee.

Phil smiles knowingly, and steals a kiss. Clint has been hoping he would, has prepared, and so is able to latch onto Phil's shoulders and deepen the kiss, keep it going until he needs to come up for air. Phil groans a bit, shortly, and then takes a deep breath, regaining his iron control within seconds to ask, "Katja's?"

Clint whimpers. "Oh fuck, I really do love you."

Phil says, "I know," and Clint wants to tease him, but, at the same time, Phil's kind of cooler than Han Solo, if that's possible. He settles for whistling the Darth Vader theme all the way to the car.

Café Katja is a hole in the wall that serves the best Austrian food Clint's been able to find this side of the Atlantic. It's bone-deep, meat-and-potatoes comfort dishes and Clint would totally throw off the team and marry Katja if she were a real person. (Maybe.) It is also always packed inside the small space, so it's a bit of a shock to walk in and see a relatively small crowd.

It's more astonishing that the people who are there are all Clint's friends and collected family, and they're wishing him a happy birthday upon walking in—exuberantly. It catches Clint off-guard for two reasons. The first is he's never really had a birthday party, let alone a surprise one. He's had a few birthday dinners since coming to SHIELD, when he wasn't on mission and someone else (Natasha or Phil) who knew wasn't on mission. He's not really sure what to do with this level of celebration.

The second, more pressing issue is: "It's...not my birthday."

He says it quietly to Phil right before he's engulfed by people offering to buy him a drink. He orders one of the Belgian beers on tap for the evening and settles at the bar, bemused but not displeased by people coming to him, giving him attention and a little extra dose of fondness in their own way. When Tony manages to make it to the bar, Clint repeats, "It's really not my birthday," because this has Tony's fingerprints all over it.

"It's your three-quarters birthday," Tony says, stealing Clint's fork and a bite off of his plate. Normally, Clint would wrest back the fork and promise retaliatory blindness—he can be kind of possessive about food—but he's too busy thinking. All he comes up with is, "That's not a thing."

"I had a theory," Tony says. "And like all my theories, this one was brilliant. Even Natasha said it was brilliant."

Natasha, who has just claimed Clint's other side along with Pepper, likely prompting that comment, says, "I said it wasn't the stupidest plan you'd ever conceived of."

"Same difference," Tony tells her. He's right. Pepper laughs, and even Natasha allows some of the warm feelings she has for Tony show on her face.
"The theory?" Clint prompts.

"That part of the lapse of communication we've been having is because you've never gotten a chance to be treated like a kid, do stupid shit, like three-quarters birthdays, have someone hold your hand on a rollercoaster, see a cartoon in a movie theater, anything, really. I think you think you know what a good childhood should be like, but I remember being a kid, Clint. I overheard you having a serious conversation with Bruce and Jane where you were concerned allowing me to eat sugary cereal would rot my teeth but denying me it might be something all the other adults in my life had done. You would have thought making me eat Chex Mix instead of Cinnamon Toast Crunch was akin to child abuse.

"And every time Steve or Phil or Thor asked you if you wanted to join in on something we were doing, whether it was crafts or boardgames or playing terrible softball, you clearly wanted to and you were just as clearly worried you wouldn't do it right when there was no right or wrong. We just wanted you around. I did, in particular. So, maybe you have some conceptual idea of what being a kid should be like, but it's not…there's nothing real about it for you."

Clint turns his glass counterclockwise and tries not to feel like every emotional scar he's ever accumulated is on display. "There was a barker at the carnival. He couldn't really do much because barkers were fairly easy to find and Trick and Swordsman…" Clint shrugs. "But he used to bring me things, sometimes. Cotton candy. One of the stuffed animals from the concessions that was missing an eye, couldn't be sold."

Arms snake around his waist and Clint startles, aware he's more tired than he thought if Jane can sneak up and rest her head in between his shoulder blades. She mumbles, "Love you," and it has no edge to it, it just a declaration of truth. In that second, Clint is blindly, fiercely glad they have Pepper, Jane and Thor, who are wise and experienced in their own ways, but have not grown barbed-wire fences around their emotions by way of self-defense.

Clint squeezes one of Jane's hands. Tony says, "Well, thanks for proving my point, I guess."

Clint feels like the center of positive attention in a way he's not used to, certainly, and he loves that all of them took the time to do something for him, but, "So, a birthday beer?"

"Mm," Natasha hums. "But what is a birthday party without cake and ice cream?"

Her tone is ironic, reflective, and Clint remembers asking her the same question on her first birthday after she'd defected. He hadn't known the answer to the question then, and he doesn't now. He wonders if she thought he had known, wonders what he would have said if she'd actually tried to come up with an answer.

Pepper, who has sidled up against Tony, says, "We let Thor and Steve be in charge of picking out the cake."

Clint has yet to get over how guileless Pepper can make herself seem. He manages, "That should be ___"

"Educational," Tony finishes.

"Yes," Clint agrees. "Yeah."

Tony flies them out to Six Flags Magic Mountain on a day with perfect weather, and Clint's pretty sure if anything is asking for earth to be ambushed by flesh-eating squirrels the size of blimps, this is
it. To everyone's surprise, the day goes smoothly. Tony all-but pushes Clint onto every single one of the eighteen rollercoasters.

Clint kind of hates how predictable it is that he loves the freefall moments, could drink up the sky when the ride is climbing to its pinnacle. Natasha goes on one of the inverted ones with him and sucks his fingers into her mouth just as they hit Zero Gravity. Clint cannot explain how it is he manages not to come right then and there.

Pepper holds his hand so tightly on one of them he loses feeling in his fingers, but there's something perfect about the sensation, about Pepper needing him like that. Jane is crazy-ass motherfucker who literally has no fear, so she ends up on the worst ones with him, the two of them giggling like three year olds.

Phil goes on one, and Clint realizes it's mostly to play footsie with him and drive him up the wall in a way only Phil can manage. He stays calm the entire ride, and Clint knows it's just because the ability to do so makes Clint want to do anything to break through his placidity.

Thor is polite, but unimpressed. Evidently this doesn't quite live up to actually flying. Bruce isn't sure about the effects on his alter-ego, and chooses to stay on the ground. Steve wraps his arm around Clint's shoulders when they're on a ride together, like they're about to get pinned, or something. Clint soaks up the contact.

Tony steals Jane away sometimes, or shunts Jane off to Natasha, depending on the ride. Tony manages entirely logical and intelligent monologues in the midst of rising and falling. At one point, Clint catches on that Tony's contemplating whether the mile-high club can be accomplished on a roller-coaster. Clint leans over far enough to make his, "Don't tempt me," heard.

Tony just gets a speculative look on his face.

* *

Clint isn't sure who starts the list, although he has a sneaking suspicion it is Phil. Phil is good at organization and dealing with problems that are not concrete in ways that allow them to be worked through as though they were. That said, it could also be Pepper, who is smart about group dynamics and good at verbal communication.

The list is posted next to the shopping list they all pencil things into whenever necessary. It is on an 8x11 sheet of printing paper with the typed words, "Things I Wanted as a Kid and Couldn't Have/Do."

The first answer is in Pepper's elegant, clean script. It reads, "Roller skate."

The first weekend with appropriate weather and a swath of time when they're all relatively free—it takes months—they descend upon Central Park, each with brand new skates of his or her own. Natasha is, unsurprisingly, a natural, and she spends a lot of time skating backward, holding hands with Jane or Steve or Bruce, none of whom can seem to find their center of gravity while on wheels.

There are scraped knees and hands and bruises everywhere by the time they get back to the Tower. Bruce patches them all up, and they spend the evening kissing it better.

Bruce's messy scrawl admits, "Go to a kid's science museum."

Tony is all over that, which is how they end up in Columbus at the Center of Science and Industry for a full two days. Two hours in, Clint has to agree that the list is pretty awesome.
Jane wants an Easy Bake Oven, which ends up creating everything from the cake mixes that come with it to all kinds of wild gourmet recipes—mushroom flan, anyone?—she finds on the web. They have an Easy Bake cook-off one night. Jane wins with pecan ice-box cookies, but everyone agrees that Clint's red-velvet cupcakes are a close runner up. Clint is no stranger to working with less-than-ideal cooking implements.

Thor's involves some serious effort, since it's an Asgardian game evidently considered unbefitting for certain crown princes to play. Clint can't exactly figure out why, because there's nothing that seems inappropriate oremasculating to his Earth-raised mind, but he doesn't really care. The game involves a fair amount of hiding, and Clint is ace at that. He wins almost as often as Natasha.

Steve writes, "Play on a Little League team."

Phil sets up an intramural baseball season for SHIELD. Pepper and Bruce are in charge of snacks, and Thor makes encouraging signs. Pepper also, as it turns out, is something of a ringer. She grins when they all stare at her after the first game and says casually, "I forgot to mention college softball, hm?"

Jane, on the other hand, is terrible, but enthusiastic. Tony spends a lot of time pissing off the umpires. Steve sends numerous balls too far to be recaptured, and begins showing up to games with his own set for replenishment.

Tony finally settles on, "Someone to show up to school fairs."

It's a little harder to figure out what to do about this, but the next time Tony's presenting at a conference, the eight of them surprise him by being in the audience. They take him out for milkshakes afterward, and if the reward they give him when they get back to his hotel room isn't exactly the kind of thing you'd give a child, well, he doesn't complain.

Natasha waits a long time before choosing, "See a real ballet. And have treats during intermission."

It's a revelation to precisely nobody when they have to set up a rotation for Natasha to have someone with her at each ballet because Tony purchases season tickets for the top four companies in the world. It means she sees a show nearly every month, except in the summer when the companies break for the season. Clint wonders if she will tire of it, but instead she seems to just look forward to it more each time.

She finds new things in classics she has seen and picks apart contemporary pieces in all their details. It's one of the very few times she talks about color and light and beauty. Technique is something Clint is used to hearing about from her, but this is different, her tone suffused with just a bit of awe and so much more appreciation.

Phil, after some prodding, says, "Well, since meeting Captain America is off the table, I'm having to do some serious thinking."

He finally decides on, "Go to a comic book convention."

Jane squeals, "Oh! Me too!" and the two of them end up attending four smaller cons before Tony grabs up tickets for all of them to Comic Con. Clint's entirely positive that if they keep up the tradition, Earth will totally be decimated one year while they're all at panels of their own choosing, but he figures that's a problem for a few years down the road.

Clint is the last to narrow his choice down, the options ever tantalizing. He sort of feels like Phil: his greatest desire was a family, and the others needn't do anything to make that happen. He'd often
wanted his own bed, his own space, but he has his own damn floor, now. He'd wanted clothes that fit, and blankets that were warm and all sorts of basics, but he's already swimming in luxury.

Nobody pressures him about it, but he can feel the others waiting. And then, one day, noticing the decorations that have gone up around town, Clint knows what he wants. He writes, "Go Trick or Treating."

Tony actually claps his hands upon reading it. "What are you going as?"

Clint has thought about this and come to only one conclusion. "An angry bird. The blue one."

Tony's eyes widen. "That's genius."

It's rare for Tony to admit something like that, so Clint grins and annoys Tony until he reveals he's going as Sid Vicious. Clint muses, "I should have predicted that."

"Wait till you see the bike I'm making for the occasion."

Clint does more than see it, he rides the bike with Tony for most of the evening as they traverse the neighborhoods, the others dropping in from time to time, depending on which area they're in. When the two of them finally go home, they haven't been recognized once, and they have enough candy to feed a small city.

The lay out their bounty on the table and everyone picks out their favorites, Halloween cartoons playing in the background. Natasha and Pepper drag Clint and Tony into Tony's shower, which can easily host that many people, and clean them up.

The sugar high keeps them all up late into the night. The next morning, when Clint stumbles into the kitchen, desperate for some coffee, there's a new sheet of paper up, blank, with the title: "Something You've Always Thought Family Should Be."

Clint sits down at the table just in time for Phil to walk in and drop a kiss atop his head. Pepper pads quietly in his wake, Thor, less quietly. Slowly, each of them filters into the kitchen. Tony, once he's stolen Clint's coffee and provided Clint with a fresh cup, writes underneath the title: "This."

Works inspired by this one: [Offish][1] by rabidsamfan

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