The continuation of "Sam Meets the Avengers"! The team reforms after the revelations at SHIELD. Some new members, some old members in new roles, a super spy is resurrected, friends met, enemies identified, revenge had.

Or, shorter, Natasha is really concerned when she winds up being the voice of reason. In any situation. And she has dibs on Fury.

Special thanks to Xogoi_Momo for the 'verse name. I still suck at naming things. <3
This starts around chapter eleven (Phil Coulson) of the last fic. It's mostly the week Sam's in DC, when the Avengers figure out who they want to be when they grow up, and everyone tries to figure out how they'll be going on with their lives after all the new revelations.

(For those who've asked, this is really not Agents of SHIELD compliant, hardly at all. Consider the first season the entirety of what they've been doing; I love the characters but hate seeing them tortured. Same with Fraction Hawkeye; I've taken the good bits and left the bad, as well as the MCU. It's my 'verse, I'll do what I like! Muahaha.)
Revelation is at the Beginning, not the End.

Clint was in his loft in Bed-Stuy shooting targets with Katie-Kate when the emergency ringer went off on his phone. They both froze and stared at it, arrows hanging from their fingers, bows gripped in their fists. They’d been arguing about right versus left handed shooting. Kate was trying to make some point about the human brain, and Clint had been dishing up his illiterate hayseed routine because it pissed her off.

The phone rang again, a piercing shriek that could even wake him up with his hearing aids out.

Shit.

“Barton.” he answered, hoping it wasn’t the end of the world. Again.

“It’s me.” Natasha said immediately. “I’m at the Tower. Melinda May called up and asked for permission to land. Said she has Coulson with her.”

“What.” Clint croaked.

“I don’t know. Get your ass over here.”

He hung up. Kate was giving him the worried look. “Clint? Yo, Hawkeye. You okay?”

Was he okay. Clint wanted to laugh. He didn’t even know if he wanted Coulson to be alive or not. Because if he was, and he’d gone three years without so much as a word… Phil being dead probably hurt less than this. “Keep an eye on Lucky.”

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He could never remember how he got to Manhattan, later. Subway, probably? Maybe he walked, or ran. That time was permanently gone in his brain. By the time he got to the lobby at The Tower, he was close to hyperventilating. He tried to figure out which was worse, Phil dead or Phil alive. Schrodinger’s Phil. He giggled a little hysterically and half-tripped into the private elevator and slumped against the wall. “JARVIS?”

“How can I help you, Hawkeye?” JARVIS had gone on a tear when they met, trying to find a formal title that Clint would answer to. He never tried Agent Barton, so Clint figured Natasha had warned him about that. He hadn’t answered to Mister Barton. They’d finally settled together on Hawkeye.

“Is there a SHIELD team on the way here? Led by Melinda May?”

“The team you refer to has been here. The majority are in the lobby waiting for word. Deputy Director Hill and Agent Coulson are in the main living quarters speaking to most of the Avengers.”

Clint shuddered. “It’s really Coulson?”

There was a pause as JARVIS ran god knew what data, then he confirmed. “His biometrics are not exactly the same, but they are at ninety-seven percent. Given the time since his last visit to the building, it’s considered valid identification.”

Clint tried not to collapse onto the floor at the news. Phil, alive, and not bothering to contact him. For years. “Take me to Natasha’s quarters.”
“Very good.”

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Natasha was torn between staying with Phil and comforting him and finding out WHAT IN HELL, and finding Clint and comforting HIM. Since Phil had a team waiting on him, Sam was there to shrink as needed, and everyone else was thrilled that he was alive, she figured Phil would be all right, at least short term. She left the common room where everyone had convened and hopped in the ‘vator. She needed to alert Kate; Kate had cried a few tears over Phil, too, and was young and pissy enough to seriously go after the head of a major security agency with the intention of putting an arrow in him.

Usually Kate made her proud as hell, but today she just felt tired.

“JARVIS, has Clint arrived?” If not she’d have to go find his dumb ass and that could get even more infuriating than her day already was.

“Yes, Agent Romanov. He is in your apartment. You’d put him on your accepted list, so I allowed him entrance.”

At least they’d have privacy while she ripped Clint’s heart out. Again. Jesus, Stalin, and Trotsky, how did she always get stuck delivering hideous news? Her training was entirely opposite being kind and gentle with someone. She’d thought telling Clint that Phil was dead had been hard, and it was, but this might even be worse.

Her apartment had been made up like a Parisian garret; she assumed Clint had a word with Tony during the build. Inside, she leaned her back against her front door and watched Clint on her couch. He was hunched up, head in hands, and curled in on himself in a way she associated with abused children trying to go unnoticed. (The fact that Banner and Stark also occasionally acted this way was not something she was going to think about right now, thank you.) She hadn’t seen him like this since the months directly after the invasion. Hating that she had no bedside manner, no tact, no real ability to soothe anyone, even those she loved, she slowly walked over and sat on the coffee table in front of him, so they were facing. “It’s him.” She confirmed.

Clint shuddered all over.

Natasha decided going out to hunt down Fury right that goddamn instant would not be productive, and took a breath. “Clint, he didn’t – he didn’t abandon you. Us. Anyone. Fury literally raised him from the dead, and fucked with his memories so he wouldn’t come looking for us.”

At that Clint raised his head and looked at her. “How?”

“I don’t know.” No way good, she thought darkly. If she found out that asshole mage in the Village was involved she was gonna find out how to magically kick someone’s ass. “Whatever it was, it was extensive. He knew almost from the start that there was something wrong, but he couldn’t figure out what. When Stark did his latest data dump yesterday, Phil had his baby hacker get into the servers and spent hours reading old Delta reports. Then he came straight here.”

Clint made a noise that sounded like a sob.

“I know, baby.” Natasha gave in and hugged him. “It’s a fucking mess, but he didn’t deliberately leave you.”

“I don’t even know how to feel about this.”
Neither did she. She really doubted modern psychology had protocols to handle it. “You know I am hopeless at emotional shit.” That got her a snort of almost humor. “Whatever you decide, I will have your back. Always. But. Phil’s as wrecked as you are, Clint. I’m not saying you should run to him and pretend nothing’s wrong, but try not to blame him?”

“Fury.”

“Oh yes. Fury is the one to blame.”

Clint scrubbed his hands through his hair, wiped at his eyes. “Get the vodka.”

Natasha thought about that. Genuinely considered whether it would help anything. She was Russian. Sometimes vodka COULD help. But this time? Given Clint's recent history? “No. You get an Ativan. Then we’ll talk.”
Natasha has Dibs.

Chapter Summary

Natasha had another shot or two. “I haven’t decided what I’m doing to do to Fury yet.” she said thoughtfully.

“What about me?”

“I called dibs.”

“When did you call dibs? I do not remember you calling dibs.”

“When Phil told us what had happened. I said Fury was mine.” Natasha was embroidering the truth just a hair, but dammit, spy, that’s what she DID.

“I wasn’t there.”

“Too bad. You snooze, you loose.”

Chapter Notes

The ‘Clint Barton’ chapter of ‘Sam Meets the Avengers’ happens between the two scenes in today’s exciting chapter. If you're so inclined to get detail. If not, there's no test later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natasha decided vodka sounded pretty damn good, but wouldn't let Clint have any, ostensibly so the medication would have a chance to work. After three or four shots, Natasha sat on the couch with Clint, and he laid down and put his head in her lap. She petted his hair. The two of them had always had this physical… thing between them. When either needed simple physical contact, they knew they could go to the other. Even after Phil and Clint had gotten together, they had been together in the literal sense. Their relationship was so complex it really went beyond explanation. Phil, bless him, had been the only person to come close to understanding it. “Remember that first time I showed up, after you and Phil moved in together?”

Clint smiled through some tears. “You climbed into bed and Phil made you close your eyes until he could put on some boxers.”

“And came back to bed where we were, and went to sleep like having your old girlfriend in bed with both of you was the most normal thing in the world.” She’d already cared for Phil quite a lot, but that night, that easy acceptance on top of everything, had earned her unending loyalty. Now that loyalty was split, between those two men, and she was at a loss how to reconcile it. She hoped there was some sort of peace between them eventually, because choosing between them might just break her.

“You’re way more than an old girlfriend.”

“How many people other than Phil would have seen that?”
They sat in silence a while. Clint had quit drinking but Natasha had another shot or two. “I haven’t decided what I’m doing to do to Fury yet.” she said thoughtfully.

“What about me?”

“I called dibs.”

“When did you call dibs? I do not remember you calling dibs.”

“When Phil told us what had happened. I said Fury was mine.” Natasha was embroidering the truth just a hair, but dammit, spy, that’s what she DID.

“I wasn’t there.”

“Too bad. You snooze, you loose.” It was the first English idiom she’d learned from Clint, and she still delighted in using it.

“What about May?” Clint asked. He and Melinda May had worked quite a few missions together and he couldn’t imagine her staying silent for Fury, not about Phil being alive.

“She didn’t know about the resurrection until yesterday. Fury told her that the two of you broke up while Phil was recovering and it was all horribly painful and not to mention it.”

“And she believed him?”

“Fury.” Natasha said with a shrug. Really it was all you needed to know. The man could spin the most outrageous lies and make them work. Case in point.

“And you got dibs.” Clint complained.

“Damn right I do.” Natasha balanced her shot glass on Clint’s forehead so she could pour more vodka. He obligingly held still for her. “You should talk to Sam.” she announced once she’d put the vodka down and picked up her shot glass in case Clint wanted to do some rage pacing.

Clint didn’t shift around much, but he did wrinkle his brow enough that her vodka would have spilled. “Dude with the wings? Why?”

Considering, Natasha slammed her vodka back. It never affected her much and she didn’t have much else to do today, all things considered. You know, upset her best friend, keep everyone she cared about from committing justifiable homicide, and harangue people she used to respect. “Sam’s a counselor. Runs a veteran’s group or three at the VA, though I’m sure Tony will have him as shrink to the Avengers before long.”

That made Clint sit up. “You. YOU, of all people, are telling me to talk to a shrink.” Natasha’s opinion of psychologists filled a spectrum between outright contempt for their ignorance to confusion at why they didn’t simply use their skill to manipulate people into doing what was best for them. After all, that’s what she did with HER psych skills. Well, the manipulation part anyway. He and Phil were about the only ones Natasha cared enough about to manipulate for their own good.

It was pretty hard to believe, she had to admit. Natasha gave an overly-casual shrug. “We stole his wings from Fort Meade together.”

“Okay…?”
“You know how most men are when they work with me.”

Clint gave a cautious head bob. Yes, he’d seen the big scary military men try to tell Natasha how to do her job. He really, joking aside, REALLY didn’t understand how she let some of them live. Alpha Strike had only sucked up the testosterone after Nat had publicly beat the shit out of Rumlow. (He had enjoyed the hell out of that.) Clint had ‘slipped’ and shot several of them in non-vital spots because their behavior annoyed HIM. “Yeah, he went with?” She let him go with, was more like. And kind of interesting.

“Wanted to see what he was like before people started shooting at us.” She smiled a little, drank more vodka. “He didn’t try to take over, or tell me what to do. Quietly followed along and did what I told him. Didn’t slow me down, didn’t get in my way.”

“Really.” Clint found that interesting. Most men weren’t smart enough to stand back and get out of Nat’s way. And of those who did, the majority couldn’t keep up with her. If this guy did both? Without having his ass kicked first? He might be Avengers material. Both on brains and physical ability.

“At one point he asked if he could carry my purse.”

Clint had to laugh. The guy did sound pretty okay. Not taking himself seriously was a damn fine start to dealing with the Avengers. As well as being a shrink worth talking to. “And you think he’s going to help with this mess.”

Nat shrugged. “Don’t know. I honestly doubt it. But he’s got a way about him, he’s not stupid, and I don’t think he’d hurt.”

“That’s the most positive thing I’ve ever heard you say about a shrink.” Usually she was more about not shooting them and demanding a cookie for it. Phil would actually buy her cookies and hand them over after psych evaluations that didn’t end in bloodshed.

“Talk to him.” Natasha repeated.

Clint looked at the level of the vodka in the bottle, looked at Nat, and nodded. “Okay.” He looked at her a while longer. Strike Team Delta had been a triad, -delta, hello- each of them dependent on the other two. For damn near everything, in and out of the field. What one did affected the other two, always. With that in mind, “I’ll talk to him if you will.”

Natasha sighed. “Fine. If you stay away from Fury and don’t get blinding drunk.”

“Fine. Deal.”

“Deal.”

They bumped fists.

“Can we go spar?” Clint asked. “I need to beat something up.”

“You have never in your entire life beat me up.” Natasha put the vodka in the freezer and grabbed his hand. “You’ll like the gym here.” and pulled him out the door. She’d like to beat something up, too. "Promise, after we beat each other up, that you'll talk to Sam. This afternoon."

"Yeah, yeah."

"And you'll tell him everything. About you two being together."
Clint thought of Phil, thought of having to clean out their apartment after he died, of donating Phil’s suits to charity and feeling like he was going to die himself. "All right, I promise. I’m not doing the goddamn pinke swear."

“Well now I’ll have to beat a pinke swear out of you.”

"Can’t we bump fists again?" Clint asked plaintively.

*

At dinner, Sam had cornered Steve and said they had to talk. Officially. Something had clearly happened that day, and now Sam was going to be a shrink about it. Steve got caught up with dinner cleanup and when he looked up later, Sam was gone. He went down to the public floor and ducked into what Sam was calling his pub. And really, it WAS a more apt description than office, but, anyway. Sam was there staring out the window. “Is now good?”

“Yeah, have a seat. You want a drink?” Sam looked mildly concerned, which made Steve concerned, because he didn’t see that look on Sam’s face when people were SHOOTING at them, so. Concerned.

“Sure. Beer.”

“You’re Irish, right?” Sam asked, getting up and poking around behind the bar.

“Near ’nough.” Steve said, letting the accent into his voice.

Sam grinned and sat down across the table from Steve, plunking down beers in front of both of them. “This ought to be familiar then. Unless you’re used to drinking it warm?”

“Both ways, really.” He took a sip and yes, that was proper beer, not the water he’d had a couple times after he’d thawed. Soon he’d quit ordering it in disgust. “Oh. That’s good.”

Sam grinned. “Guinness. Older than you. Well, the company. Not that specific beer.”

Steve didn’t remember the name, but when he’d been a kid each neighborhood had their own brewery, so that wasn’t surprising. “Nice.” He waited to hear what Sam wanted.

Sam drank and looked shifty.

“Really?” Steve asked. “You took on three helicarriers with me but you’re afraid to TALK?” This century was so damned strange.

Sam kinda chuckled, took a breath, let it out. “So I’m sworn to keep people’s secrets.”

“Yes.” Steve agreed, wondering.

“I need to keep others’, but I need to… hell, I suck at tact, I’m just an Air Force grunt. You got the whole sexual orientation speech when you thawed, right? Gay rights, it’s okay, that kinda thing?”

Not what Steve had been expecting for today’s discussion topic. He wondered exactly what Sam had been told, and by whom. “Sure. Still a ways to go on equality, but better than it was.” By quite a lot. “I have to say I’m unfamiliar with the terminology used now. And if I’m being honest, it was NEVER talked about when I was a kid, certainly not in any sort of tolerant or positive way, so I keep my mouth shut. Don’t want to hurt any feelings. Is that what you mean?” Was someone on his team gay? If he thought about it, counting friends and family and support staff, the odds were high
that someone had to be. Natasha’s history was extremely fraught, so he had no idea what was going on with her and never asked. She seemed like she was asexual, if he understood terms properly. He was also fairly sure that Tony was… not discriminating. Was that bisexual or demisexual or pansexual? This was usually when he shut up. Not for disapproval, but for utter INABILITY to discuss it without sticking his foot in it, and the conviction that it was none of his damn business anyway.

“I’ll just ask, then. Some people around here are gay or bisexual. Probably more than I know of, but I know some for sure. Do you need time to think about that? Talk to me, blow off steam, do some research?”

Oh. Sam was trying to protect someone from Steve’s conservative last-century views. That was, wow, that was really funny. Steve started laughing. He couldn’t help it. The look on Sam’s face – utter confusion – didn’t help him recover, either. “It’s fine, Sam. I’m bisexual myself.” Possibly pansexual? He still didn’t understand the terminology. And so he shut up some more.

Sam’s jaw dropped.

Steve continued to laugh at him, because why the hell not. The idiot deserved it, thinking Steve was socially conservative after all this. “I’d appreciate you keeping this to yourself, because it’s a can of worms I’m not ready to open yet. Not in public. But yes, it’s all right, whatever any of my team is doing. That obvious thing everyone says these days about consenting adults? Eventually I’d like to know so I can support them, understand when there are injuries or other stress. But of itself, it doesn’t matter to me.”

Sam drank some beer and seemed speechless.

Since he was talking anyway, Steve thought with a sigh, “The last time I was… involved… with a man was before the war. There was no way I could risk the Army finding out. It was hidden, and hushed up, and we all denied what we were and we never ever spoke of it. Ever. I knew men in the Army, turned a blind eye to it. There could have been backlash against Captain America for not reporting two grown men choosing to be together. It never seemed right to me, to go after people who want to be together, and never will. For all they talk about closeting now, then was even worse. I’ll probably always seem like a stick in the mud whenever the subject of… this stuff… comes up. I can’t help it. It was how I was raised. You absolutely DID NOT talk about it. People’s physical safety depended on it, even more than now. But it’s okay with me.”

“That time in DC, those two girls kissed in front of us, you stiffened up like my Great Aunt Mary.” Sam reminded him.

“Yeah. Because if two women had done that in 1936 they’d have been arrested, at best. I’ve seen men and women beaten in the street for that kind of thing, Sam. Other people stood by and did nothing. Or cheered. I didn’t care about them, I was scanning the crowd to make sure no one else cared.”

“Wow does that explain a lot.” Sam admitted.

Steve snorted, indulged in rolling his eyes at Sam, and drank his beer.

“I couldn’t figure out how you’re such an easygoing, understanding guy and cared about two women kissing.”

“Don’t. Cared about two women getting the hell beat out of them.”
“So if someone on your team did the same thing...” Sam didn’t ask.

Steve sighed again, at Sam, at himself. “Yeah, I’ll probably poker up and glare at everyone.” And if someone on his team DID act offended or disgusted, well. He wasn’t going to put up with it. He couldn’t imagine that, though. Possibly Thor would be confused, but he was very understanding about different cultures so he didn’t see a PROBLEM coming up.

“Okay. Now that I know, I can deal with it.” Sam said with satisfaction. “None of you people tell me anything and I have to guess at why y’all react the way you do and it’s always like this when I find out.”

“Like what?”

“Never in a thousand years what I expected. I met Tony fucking Stark, expected him to be this really snobby primadonna rich boy jerk and he bribed me to move in with him.”

“Oh. Yeah. Welcome to the Avengers. They could make movies out of everyone’s history and no one would believe them.” Sam was already shocked and confused by everyone’s pasts. Steve wanted to laugh and tell him he hadn’t seen anything yet.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, on Steve's words about choice. Whenever I phrase something like that, I get someone up in my grill snarling that people do not CHOOSE to be LGBTQA or other (often with a fuck you thrown in). And I have to agree. However, most of what you do after that, about it, IS a choice. The guys in the war zone choosing to be together? They didn't choose to be gay but they did choose to take the risk to be with each other. (One I do not judge. I have not been in that situation so I can't say what I would do, but bless anyone who can find some peace in a war zone, is my final word.)

If you want to leave snarling comments about it, you still can, of course.

(The first time I had this discussion it ended with "But he DID choose to put on gold lame booty shorts and dance on a Gay Pride Parade float. That's the choice I'm talking about, that I'm not sure I would make." "...point.")
Chapter Summary

Kate glanced up. “Phil Coulson is a self-sacrificing asshole.”

Natasha thought about that for maybe a second. “Yep.”

“And Clint’s doing the best he can, but he’s a man.”

Nodding, Natasha sat down. “Yep.”

“And right now there is nothing I can shoot that will magically fix this.”

“Nope.”

Chapter Notes

The Rhodey and Kate chapters of “Sam Meets the Avengers” have happened since our last exciting chapter, if you’re trying to figure out the time line. (And good luck to you, because I’M trying to figure out the time line.)

On a personal level, I'm about 35K words into this and think it should wind up being about 60K. (But I thought originally it would be about 20K, so what do I know?) I hope to post a chapter a day, but expect a few missed days due to upcoming holiday travel and other madness.

Clint didn’t sleep much that night, mostly paced around the apartment Tony had built for him in the Tower. He’d pace in the dark, with the lights of the city shining in on him. Then he’d sit, doze off, jerk awake to check with JARVIS that he hadn’t imagined the last twenty four hours, then repeat the whole process. By five he was fed up with the entire thing and holed up in the long-distance range with a couple bows, a thousand arrows, and a pot of coffee. Stark had put a coffee maker and a microwave in the back of the range, asked for a list of suggestions, and said it wasn’t finished yet. If he brought down a couple pillows and a laptop, asked for a decent sized couch, he’d never have to leave again. It was tempting. Nat would let him live in a basement, right? It was a really nice basement.

He’d been shooting maybe an hour, finally getting into that glorious zone where he didn’t think. Nock, draw, steady, release. Repeat. He’d actually talked zen states with Logan once – they’d both been drunk – and he said he got the same around hour four with a punching bag.

Nock, draw, steady, release.

A dog’s nose, Lucky’s nose, better be, poked into his crotch, and an annoying teenaged voice behind him said “So what, you couldn’t even call and let me know you were okay?” (He knew Kate was in her twenties now. He did not care. She was permanently stuck in his mind as a teenager and if she
didn’t like it, she shouldn’t have pulled the shit that she did, that led to them meeting when she really WAS a teen. Goddamn baby vigilantes in thousand-dollar leather jackets.)

He grunted at her. Not in the mood for teenaged drama bullshit today. Not any day, but especially not today.

Nock, draw, steady, release.

Another arrow knocked his away from the bullseye. “Dammit, Kate.” He turned to glare and she grinned at him, holding a crap bow she’d found in the back of the room. A perfect first shot with a bow she’d never used before. He tried not to get distracted by pride, but damn his baby vigilante was good.

“I heard about Coulson.” She said. Because she never pulled punches, even when she was trying to be nice. “It’s really him?”

Clint started to talk, found he couldn’t. Turned back to his shooting.

Kate kicked his ankle.

Without pausing his shots, Clint muttered “Fury raised him from the dead, literally, fucked with his memory. He didn’t remember me, or Nat, or Strike Team Delta, so he didn’t come looking.”

Another arrow stuck into the target next to his. “I really want to shoot Fury.”

“Take a number. Nat called dibs.”

“Dammit, Hawkeye.”

Clint found himself smiling. “Dammit, Hawkeye.”

Lucky, knowing how this would end, went and found a corner to nap in. His humans would be at this for a while.

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Phil was alone, finally. People kept wanting to comfort him, or question him, or hug him. Things felt more right for him than they had in years, but dear God he wished they’d quit hugging him. He sipped tea and stood at the balcony window in the glorious apartment he’d been assigned on what everyone was already calling the Bus Floor. It was a boggling, very very expensive view of Manhattan stretched out before him. He sipped his extremely expensive Chinese black tea and let himself settle a little. The last forty-eight hours had been full of revelations and he was still processing a great many of them. It was so good to know that his instincts still worked. Something had been wrong; all that time, he’d been correct. But dear lord, the things he’d been right about. Nick had been his best friend for decades but he’d never be able to forgive him for what he’d done. Not only to Phil, but to all his friends at SHIELD, most of all Natasha and Clint.

Clint. He was trying not to think of Clint. The instant he’d realized – from Delta reports he didn’t remember writing – that Clint had been the missing piece of his life. Well. Everything had clicked into place and he’d gone from wrongness to loneliness. He was trying to convince himself that this was better. That simply knowing what had happened was healing and would fix things. That getting back together with Clint was not the answer to correcting the last three years of his life. The odds of his relationship with Clint surviving this, well, to be honest, it hasn’t survived. It was dead, wasn’t it? Clint spent three years thinking Phil was dead, mourning, and rebuilding. You didn’t continue from that. Phil would dearly love to start it all over, rebuild from scratch. But who in their right mind
would agree to that? Right now Clint couldn’t even bear to look at him, not that Phil blamed him.

So Phil didn’t really know what to think, and stared out his window. The Empire State was in the way of Central Park. He wondered if Tony would move the building if he complained of the view.

Someone knocked on his door and he allowed his head to thunk against the glass. “Who is it, JARVIS?”

“Miss Bishop, Agent Coulson.”

He’d already given up on getting JARVIS to quit calling him Agent Coulson. He didn’t know if that was Stark’s doing or JARVIS himself and was frankly afraid to ask. “Go ahead and let her in.” Her appearance triggered more half-memories for Phil; she and Clint spent a lot of time together, and she was his apprentice. And… something about vigilantism, and a criminal investigation? “Miss Bishop,” he said politely.

A perfectly groomed black eyebrow rose from behind her purple-lensed sunglasses. “Really, Phil?”

One of the things Phil had found out about himself, post-resurrection, was that his priorities had shifted. He supposed that was normal, as normal as anything got after being raised from the dead. In particular, he gave much less of a damn about his image than he had. “Kate. My memories are still foggy, you know.” He gestured to the living room, where he assumed she wanted to sit and give him hell. “Want a cup of coffee? Tea?”

“No, I’m good.” She seemed to think very seriously for a moment. “Thanks.”

“Of course.” He ushered her through, sat down across a coffee table from her. “Thank you for not bringing explosives.” He paused, considered his memories. Considered Clint, and her long friendship with him. “Assuming you haven’t.”

It was always disconcerting to be stared down by a Hawkeye. Clint had seen far more, literally and figuratively, done more, and was usually much more intimidating for it. Right now Kate was doing a good job keeping up. “I came up here to give you a shovel speech.”

Phil nodded. “I understand.”

Kate stared at him.

Phil waited.

“You’re gonna sit there and let me bitch you out?” She finally asked.

Well, yes? “Natasha told me that you and she got Clint through until he could pull himself together.” He shrugged. “You’ve earned the right.”

Kate jumped up and paced violently. “YOU.” she swung around and pointed an imperious finger. “YOU ALWAYS TAKE THE FUN OUT OF EVERYTHING.”

Phil sipped his tea at her.

With a sound of rage, Kate waved her arms in the air and continued pacing. “I came up here to give you hell. You don’t know what Clint was like after the Battle.” She glared. “Nat and I handed him off between us for WEEKS, because we were terrified to leave him alone. Then he lost his fucking mind and fucked with the Russian goddamn mob and fucked off to BedStuy of all cocked up places and wound up adopting a dumbass fucking dog and buying an entire fucking apartment building and
he was barely getting his damned feet under him when the motherfucking SHIELD thing hit and now THIS.”

He’d gotten horrified about half a sentence in and really what on earth was he supposed to say? How could he fix this? “I am so sorry, Kate. Thank you for everything you did for him.” Mafiya? Apartment building? Dog? Brooklyn?

“AND NOW YOU’RE BEING REASONABLE.” Kate bellowed in reply.

The bottom line was, much though Phil hated it, Kate knew Clint better than he did, now. Three years without a word, without a memory. He put his tea aside. “Tell me the truth, do you think it would be better if I left?” The idea made him want to vomit, but what Clint needed was more important than what he himself wanted.

Kate simply stared. “God damn it.” she finally snarled, and dropped back down into the chair she’d vacated. She rubbed her hands over her face, stared out the window for a long moment, got up and paced some more. “I honestly don’t know.” she finally admitted. “I came up here to threaten your life and tell you if you hurt him again I’d shoot your balls off.”

Something gnawed on the back of Phil’s brain, something about her actually shooting men’s balls off? He decided to take that at face value. “I have no intention of hurting him, but if being here hurts him, I can leave.”

“I honestly don’t know what to do at this point.” she admitted.

Well, that made two of them. “Let me know if you figure it out. Sincerely. I do not want to cause problems for Clint. I’ve done enough of that.”

Kate glared at him some more. “You know, technically, YOU didn’t cause this. Fury did.”

“Natasha called dibs.” Phil felt honor-bound to say.

“DAMN IT.” She stormed out without another word.

Phil sat back in his chair, trying to remember if conversations with Kate had always gone this way. He didn’t feel surprised somehow, so maybe this was normal.

Considering their lives, was normal even a thing?

*

Natasha opened her apartment door – her apartment had actual doors instead of sliding panels, she wondered who’d gotten hold of Stark and talked sense into him – and there, before her, was Kate Bishop, practically vibrating with rage. Natasha stood aside and Kate stalked into the living room, spun, pointed a finger and shouted “YOU WITH THE DIBS ON FURY. DAMN IT.”

“He’s mine.” Natasha agreed, and shut her door calmly. Mostly she’d called dibs because it kept everyone from doing poorly-thought out things that would make the situation worse. Given the reactions to it, she’d been right to do so. Kate paced her living room, clearly enraged. It had been quite a while since Natasha had seen her so upset. She wondered when she’d have time to be upset herself. What was she supposed to do then? Beat up Steve, probably. “You okay there, Kate?”

“NO.” She seemed near tears, swallowed, took a deep breath, then continued “I just saw Phil.”

Ah. As a strong woman, Natasha knew the last thing Kate wanted was to cry right now, so, “I still
“I have dibs on Fury.”

“Bitch.” Kate muttered, and dropped into a chair.

“Yep.”

Kate glanced up. “Phil Coulson is a self-sacrificing asshole.”

Natasha thought about that for maybe a second. “Yep.”

“And Clint’s doing the best he can, but he’s a man.”

Nodding, Natasha sat down. “Yep.”

“And right now there is nothing I can shoot that will magically fix this.”

“Nope.”

“Vodka? Please?”

Natasha shook her head and went to get a fresh bottle out of the freezer.
Mrs Wilson

Chapter Summary

“SAMUEL WILSON. GET YOUR SORRY BACKSIDE IN HERE.”

“Hey, Momma.” Sam said, kissing the woman, Mrs Wilson, on the cheek. “It’s good to see you.”

“You are grounded for the rest of your life.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sam responded dutifully.

Clint had shot long enough that his hands were starting to bother him, and he knew if he kept at it Natasha or Kate – or both – would kick his ass. There’d been quite a few rants over the years about taking care of himself or they would, and yeah. They had done that, more than once. “Tough love” didn’t come close to describing it. When the two of them teamed up, terrifying things happened. Tattoos, hostage situations, violence. Explaining things to police. The drunk tank in Nouakchott (he still wanted an explanation on that because he’d passed out in his apartment in BedStuy). That one time with the chinchillas and the shouting in Russian. Fine. He’d take care of himself. He also couldn’t remember the last time he ate, and return to previous subject. Never again with the chinchillas; they were even worse than the tattoo.

“JARVIS, is there food in my apartment?” He asked, climbing into the elevator with Lucky following.

“Sadly not, Hawkeye. Food can be delivered from anywhere in lower Manhattan, or there is food in the communal kitchen on the main Avengers floor.”

“Take me there then, J.”

“Of course.” And away he went to 103. His life was really fucking weird these days.

He’d built himself a decent sandwich and given Lucky a bowl of water and some high-end organic protein kibble – whoever was stocking the common kitchen was a cooking god with unlimited credit and a fondness for animals – when he heard Tony in the other room, and listened carefully to decide whether he was going to let anyone know he was there. Sneaking down the fire stairs to his floor was always a good option, too.

“Can I get you something to drink, Mrs Wilson?” Tony asked, laying the charm on.

“I know who you are, young man.” said a woman’s voice. It was what Clint and his brother had always called ‘the angry mom voice’ and he started to hunch his shoulders in defense before he even knew what was happening. But Mrs Wilson. If that was Sam’s mother, well, she ought to be good people, right? Sam was a solid, stand up guy who treated women with actual respect. That usually didn't happen on its own.

“Yes ma’am. I’m a complete disgrace, but could I offer you a seat, a cup of tea?” Tony agreed easily.

The voice softened a bit. “No, thank you. I just want to see my boy.”
“He’s on his way. JARVIS, can you-”

“Sergeant Wilson and Captain Rogers are in the elevator.” JARVIS announced quickly.

JARVIS sounded a little intimidated. Clint kinda snickered at that one. The elevator door opened and Steve said “Hey, Tony, what?”

And then the lady’s voice barked out like a drill sergeant – seriously, Clint had a DS back in the day who sounded nicer, “SAMUEL WILSON. GET YOUR SORRY BACKSIDE IN HERE.”

There was a muttered “oh, crap” and some silence.

Clint decided he didn’t want to miss this, and crept to the door. There was a very small, stylishly dressed, dark-skinned woman in the middle of the great room, hands on hips, glaring at Sam as Sam reluctantly plodded into the room. Steve came along behind, looking as worried as Clint had ever seen him. Tony caught Clint’s eye, grinned, and poured himself a glass of his special reserve, settling in to watch.

“Hey, Momma.” Sam said, kissing the woman, Mrs Wilson, on the cheek. “It’s good to see you.”

“You are grounded for the rest of your life.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sam responded dutifully.

“You told me you were done. You said you were going to settle in, work at the VA helping people, maybe find yourself a girl and give me grandbabies.”

Oh damn. Clint tried not to wince at that one. Talk about a guilt trip.

“Hey.” Sam argued, showing some life. “I said the settling down thing was negotiable. I never promised the white picket fence thing.”

“GRANDBABIES.” The woman barked out in her DS voice again.

“Sorry.” Sam muttered.

“And then, then after I see you flying around on the news, FLYING, do you know how many phone calls I took from your aunts, and your sister, and your cousins? And I had to tell them I didn’t know anything because YOU NEVER TOLD ME. Did it occur to you to let me know? That you were going to attack an international security agency? With Captain America? BY YOURSELF? WITH WINGS?”

“It was kind of a stealth operation.”

“Stealth. STEALTH. DO I LOOK LIKE CNN? WERE YOU AFRAID I WAS GONNA CALL UP HYDRA AND SAY ‘Hey, my boy’s going to come by to shoot up your new flying gun things’?”

“No ma’am.”

Tony seemed to be snickering into his drink. Steve looked distraught. Clint took another bite of his sandwich, enjoying the show.

“And after all that you visit New York and you do not so much as call your Momma on the cell phone you carry with you all day.”
“Sorry, Ma.”

“SPEED DIAL, SAMUEL.”

“Ma, I just got here and was settling in and-”

“I LIVE IN HARLEM. HOW LONG WERE YOU GONNA STAY IN THIS SINFUL PALACE OF DECADENCE AND NOT CALL ME?”

“Sorry, Ma.”

“YOUR SISTER LEARNED WHERE YOU WERE ON TWITTER. TWITTER!”

Every man in the room winced at that one. Oh damn, not good.

“I’m sorry about that, Momma.”

“Damn it, Sammy.” She stepped forward to hug him and Sam was immediately there, hugging back and hanging on tight. “I love you, you big idiot. Wings? WINGS? SINCE WHEN DO YOU FLY?” She released him, bonked him on the head, and hugged him again.

“It’s kind of my thing.” Sam admitted.

“How much more went on in the Air Force that I wasn’t told about, hmmm?”

“Uh.” Sam’s eyes glazed over. Steve and Tony looked at each other and exchanged a frantic series of hand signs that looked to Clint like they all meant ‘no, YOU deal with it’. He wished he had a drink but didn’t want to leave long enough to get one. Lucky wandered up beside him, snack finished, and leaned against his hip. He petted his dog and watched things play out.

“Introduce me to your friends.” Mrs Wilson commanded Sam.


Tony nodded. “Yes. It’s a pleasure. A really impressive pleasure. Are you interested in a management position at Stark-”

“Not NOW, Tony.” Sam snarled. Mrs Wilson poked Sam firmly and Sam snapped back to the subject. “Right. Sorry, Momma. This is Steve Rogers.”

“Captain America.” Mrs Wilson said. Interestingly, it did not sound like a compliment. That might be a first. Certainly among friends of the family, so to speak.

Steve had been standing at parade rest and nearly snapped to attention. “Ma’am. Yes, ma’am. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He shook her hand, looking like he wanted to bow over it.

Mrs Wilson glared. “You’re the one who dragged my boy back into all these guns and bad people.”

“Yes ma’am, and I’m sorry, but he played an invaluable role-”

“Oh for crying out loud, Steve.” Sam interrupted. “I volunteered.” He turned to his mother. “Steve tried to talk me out of it, because I WAS out of it. I insisted.”

“We couldn’t have done it without him.” Steve announced, firmly. “He helped us save thousands of lives.”
Mrs Wilson gave Steve a disdainful sniff. For that alone Clint was ready to worship her. Then the woman turned toward him. “And this?”

Sam jumped a little. “Dammit, Barton. Didn’t see you there. You snooping?”

“Spy. Sniper. It’s kinda my thing.” Clint told him. He hurriedly brushed his hands off on his jeans and stepped forward. “Mrs Wilson, it’s an honor to meet you. I’m Clint Barton. This is my dog, Lucky.” At his name Lucky gave a low woof and wagged his tail.

“The archer, from the invasion.” Mrs Wilson shook his hand politely and they nodded at each other. She patted Lucky, who as always looked thrilled to meet a new friend.

“Yes ma’am.”

“What possessed you to take on an army of flying space aliens with a bow and arrow, boy?”

Tony was giggling uncontrollably at this point, and not even trying to hide it.

“Well, ma’am, I’m a little bit crazy.”

Mrs Wilson nodded like she believed him. Huh. That was an interesting change of pace.

* 

Natasha kicked him awake late that afternoon. “WHAT?” He demanded, falling off his couch. Lucky woofed at the disturbance and resettled himself on the chair he’d claimed as his own.

“I need a hand, up on the common floor.”

She had that look on her face, the poker face that didn’t want to talk about anything. If nothing else, Clint figured he should keep an eye on her, so he got up and followed her without arguing. With Nat, arguing only wasted time. He’d wind up doing whatever she wanted, so why pretend otherwise. She finally came to a stop under the arch between the hall allowing access between the elevator and all the rooms on the floor, including the great room. “Boost me.”

The peak of the arch was at least twelve feet off the floor. He made sure he was under the center of it, then cupped his hands for her to step in. She practically walked up him like a stairway – hands to forearm to shoulder, and stood there a long moment. Aw, she’d taken her shoes off; she was being nice. There was a violent shift in her weight, making him adjust for balance, and a thunk. Then she hopped down.

Clint turned to see what she’d done.

There was a scrap of black leather over the door, impaled on one of Nat’s less-favorite throwing knives. Over the door. Like a heroic trophy. Nat read way too much literature.

“Is that-?”

“Fury’s eye patch. Yes it is.” Natasha said with great satisfaction.

“How’d you get it?” Clint asked curiously. There had been plots and dares and bets at SHIELD over the years, and it was generally agreed anyone who ever managed to get it would be worshipped as a ninja, and here it was hanging over their common room door.

“Walked into his office, knocked him down, and cut it off his face.” Natasha said serenely.
Oh DAMN. "I'd have paid to see that."

"JARVIS hacked the security cams and recorded it. It's on your laptop. In the porn folder."

Clint realized he was only beginning to understand how enraged Natasha was by this entire situation, and wanted to hug her. But she didn't look very huggy at the moment. “Do I get dibs yet?”

“No. I’m not done with him.”

“But I wanna shoot him.”

“No.”

“Dammit.”
United by a Common Anger

Chapter Summary

All over the Tower, in rooms that contained Avengers and their loved ones, wall screens silently turned on. After a moment for everyone’s attention to focus, a crystal clear video of Nick Fury’s office popped up and everyone watched, confused, as Nick Fury silently worked at his desk like any other office grunt.

Then Natasha stalked into the office in her field gear, wearing black leather, fury, and sharp edges. Words were exchanged.

In his shop, Tony Stark demanded “JARVIS, lip-reading program, I want a transcript of this, STAT.”

In her apartment, Natasha, sharpening her knives, sighed heavily. “JARVIS, I had not intended this to be public.”

“It is not, Agent Romanov. It is only being shown to the Avengers and support staff.”

Natasha shook her head and went back to her knives. Stark had somehow programmed a busybody. Not surprising, she supposed, given Stark’s own nosiness.

The rest of the people watching the video collectively breathed “oh, shit” and Phil Coulson, who knew Black Widow’s body language as well as anyone, held his breath and hoped he wasn’t witnessing bloodshed.

In his apartment, Clint and Lucky snored in unison.

On the screens, Black Widow – because it was very clear, very quickly that this was an infamous assassin, not the laughing woman who fed her friend’s dog bacon – leaned down into Nick Fury’s face and said something very, very inflammatory, judging from Nick’s reaction. Nick stood, hands up in a placating gesture. He said something, his face calm and cajoling and a little confused. Black Widow replied, with one eyebrow raised.

In the gym, Steve murmured “oh hell, that’s the murder eyebrow.”

“She has a murder eyebrow? I mean, that looks pretty murderous, sure.” Sam tried to reason.

Steve was pulling off his hand wrappings as quickly as possible. “JARVIS, where is Natasha right now?”
In Bruce’s lab, he and Betty stood frozen over a table of printouts, and Bruce said “oh, no, that’s the murder eyebrow.”

“I need to learn that eyebrow.” Betty said thoughtfully.

Tony, watching, rapt, told DumE, “I want to be Black Widow when I grow up.”

On the Bus Floor, Phil and Melinda said in unison, “Oh, SHIT.” Behind them, Maria began laughing uncontrollably. The geeklings all looked confused.

There was no warning. One second Widow was staring down Nick Fury, hands on hips, eyebrow raised, as Nick apparently tried to reason with her. The next was an explosion of motion, of leaps and thighs and twists and then Nick Fury was on the floor, flat on his back, hands up like he was surrendering, still talking calmly. Black Widow knelt on his chest, the tip of her knife laid under his good eye, and leaned forward to speak directly into his face.

“JARVIS, is Nick Fury still alive?” Phil barked.

“He is, Agent Coulson, and unharmed. Except for his dignity.”

In the gym, Sam caught Steve’s shit and pulled him to a stop. “Hang on, let’s see this play out.”

“We can’t let her kill-”

“It’s Nat.” Sam pointed out. “She’d run this on a delay. Whatever happened, it’s a done deal.”

“True.” Steve admitted.

On her couch, Natasha rolled her eyes, shook her head, and got up to make coffee for the ten thousand people who were going to shortly descend on her quiet little pretending-to-be-Parisian apartment.

Nick Fury began to look a little nervous as Black Widow spoke. It was like he realized that she had plan and it didn’t involve any of his input, and it could actually result in his being damaged. The longer the Black Widow spoke, the more nervous Nick Fury looked. When he finally, FINALLY started to look legitimately concerned, Widow ran the knife along the side of his face, tucked it under the strap of his eye patch, and tugged. She lifted the patch off his face with the tip of her knife as he lay frozen, probably worried about any ‘slips’ that would result in further scarring. Then Black Widow stood, spit on him, and exited the office.

The screens turned back off.

“I’m thinking a couple dozen pierogis and a floral arrangement. This definitely is a flowers kind of occasion.” Sam announced.

Steve nodded numbly.

Tony dropped everything he was working on, and went to rummage in the shop fridge for a bottle of champagne.

Pepper, in the executive’s suite, sighed. “JARVIS, please monitor all SHIELD bandwidths for any plans for reprisal, against Natasha or the Avengers in general.”

“Of course, Ms Potts.”

“I want to be Black Widow when I grow up.” Darcy announced to Jane in their new lab space.
“No you don’t.” Jane told her, putting notes in order so they could go shake Natasha’s hand.

“Yeah, I really think I do.” Darcy insisted, still staring at the screen.

“We’re biologists.” Betty told Bruce. “So I think there’s probably a way to work it so I can have her babies.”

Bruce laughed.

Phil and Melinda looked at each other. “Vodka.” Melinda said.

“The good stuff.” Phil agreed.

“Do you think she could teach us… that?” Jemma asked plaintively.

In his apartment, Clint and Lucky snored in unison.

*

Natasha got coffee made and knives put away before the first knock on her door. It was Tony with a bottle of champagne, telling her she was fabulous. Which was rather gratifying, though she’d never admit it. Eventually everyone rolled through except for Clint, who was still asleep in his apartment; she’d checked.

The vodka from Phil had been nice, but she thought her favorite was the enormous flower arrangement Sam and Steve dragged in about halfway through the party. It had been intended for a funeral. The pierogis were pretty good, too.

*

Phil ducked out of the party on Nat’s floor early. He was still a bit amazed she’d been willing to burn her bridges like that, and everyone else milling about wanting to clap him on the shoulder made him twitchy. It was hard, trying to reconstruct all these relationships, and know exactly how to respond to all the people he’d had in his life. He still had no memory of being a drinking buddy to the CEO of Stark Industries though she said otherwise, and he had this strange memory of Natasha in bed with himself and Clint that he was sincerely afraid to ask about. Not because it would offend someone, but because he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

He’d had a quick workout in the small gym on the BUS floor, to try and settle. After his shower, he’d reached for another suit, then decided since he’d given up maintaining his super spy image, that could go too. He pulled on old jeans and a sweater.

“Agent Coulson, Director Fury is on a video conference call, asking to speak to you.” There was a pause. “Demanding, really. It would give me great pleasure to bounce the call to Beijing and hang up.”

Phil had to chuckle. He and JARVIS had always gotten along, since the early days of Stark’s Iron Man project, when JARVIS realized his priority was to keep Stark alive and they’d declared a truce over mutual goals. “It’s all right, I have to speak to him sometime. Can I take it here, in the living room?” The living room had a phenomenal entertainment system setup, and knowing Stark -

“Of course. At your convenience. Take your time. Please.”

Even though his stomach was knotted over telling off his former best friend, Phil again had to laugh. He wasn’t sure how JARVIS was the best, of all of them, at dealing with people. Probably Pepper’s
influence. Since he’d practically been ordered to stall, he went and made himself another glorious cup of tea before settling into an easy chair in the living room and putting his stocking feet up on the coffee table. “All right, JARVIS.”

“As you say, Agent Coulson.” The screen didn’t come on. “Sir and I have an arrangement, if he makes a sign, I cut his video feed. Perhaps if you make a fist?”

“That will work, thank you for thinking of it.”

“Of course.” JARVIS said, and the screen flicked on.

Fury was slightly turned away from the screen, wearing sunglasses. Ha. And snapping at someone. Phil almost said “hey, boss” before he caught himself. What was Nick Fury to him now? Former friend, former boss, a man who’d tortured him in a very real, very ugly way. Phil’s mouth went a little dry and his stomach knotted a little more. “Fury.”

He turned, scowled. “Coulson. First of all, that prank this afternoon was not called for and not appreciated. I’m filing disciplinary actions against everyone involved.”

Well that one was easy to field. “I wasn’t involved in any pranks. And that didn’t look like a prank, it looked more like a death threat. Good luck with going through channels, though. Considering if Black Widow had wanted you dead, you would be dead.” The idea of anything disciplinary sticking to anyone once JARVIS and Stark were through was laughable.

Fury scowled some more. “Yeah, I bet.” he said sarcastically.

Coulson found he didn’t give a damn what Fury thought, and drank some tea in surprise.

“Gather up May and Hill and the rest of the team and get over to the Manhattan offices. I have a congressional hearing next week and with Sitwell out I don’t have any senior staff I can trust. After we’re done salvaging this, you can all have a snit or something.”

And wow, all of a sudden, Phil did not feel bad at all. In fact he may go back up to Nat’s and thank her again for the eye patch. “No,” he said thoughtfully, “I think the problem here is that you don’t have any senior staff who trusts YOU.”

That seemed to haul Fury up short.

“I can’t speak for anyone else, Fury, but I’m done. Now that I’m remembering TAHITI and am getting my memories back? I’ll never follow your orders again. I’m finished with all this.” Done with the military and the intelligence game in general, and very much finished with Nicholas Fury in particular. He’d never be able to blindly follow orders, ever again. He’d need data and to decide on his own if he was going to act, and he hoped he’d come to the right place for that. Given Captain Rogers’ service record, and Tony Stark’s history, he thought he had.

“Look, I needed-”

“Remember those arguments we had? I do now. The ends don’t justify the means. They never have.”

Fury scowled some more.

“You are more than welcome to talk to May, Hill, and FitzSimmons, try to win them back. I don’t think it will go well, but I’m not stopping you. They can make their own decisions. Skye says she came in on my word, and will continue to work with me, and that you can go to hell. Again, you’re
welcome to try hiring her. She’s gotten into the SHIELD mainframes at least twice now, and has been talking lately about wanting to try out some worm program she wrote in a way that would cause, and I quote, “the world to go batshit and bow to her chaos”. So, I’d think twice there. Although I’ll enjoy watching it if you try.” His voice took on an edge. “Not that you seem interested in listening to me.”

“Phil-”

“Coulson to you. Whatever friendship we built was nuked from orbit when I asked you to LET ME DIE and you IGNORED IT.” Oops, shouting voice. Well, Fury wasn’t his boss any more.

Fury sat back, looked a little sad. If you’d known him thirty years and knew which single nerve in his face transmitted sadness. “Fine, take a while-”

“I’ll send over a letter of resignation tomorrow.” Phil informed him. “JARVIS, if you would?”

Forget hand signals.

“With pleasure, Mister Coulson.” JARVIS said, and the screen went blank as Fury jolted at ‘Mister Coulson’. Ha.

“JARVIS, you are a better partner than half the agents I’ve worked with.”

“I find I am quite enjoying the superhero business.”

Dear God, they were all doomed. For the first time in three years, Phil was glad he’d be around. To watch the hell break loose. He’d be joining in. He let himself really laugh, finally, thankfully.
Aha Moment Achieved.

Chapter Summary

Clint stayed where he was and hoped he didn’t explode.

Phil would have stopped him from picking this spot for a nest.

Chapter Notes

Obviously, this coincides with the James Barnes chapter in "Sam Meets the Avengers".

The Winter Soldier coming in is going to get a bit more play than it normally would, because it's one of the turning points to the story.

And also because Bucky is my favorite woobie.

The whole team had dinner on the common floor. Pepper and Stark had ordered in an unholy spread of Italian food for everyone, and it had been a meal that put Clint in mind of barbecues on the roof of his building, friendly and easygoing and informal. Once he’d realized Phil and team Bus was staying on their floor for the night, he felt like he could breathe enough to eat and poked at some manicotti for a while.

Everyone was having second helpings of dessert and arguing over what movie to see, and Clint was considering slipping down to his apartment to walk his dog. The lights dimmed, came back up, and the wall screen flipped to a view from a security camera. “Code red, one block out.” JARVIS said. He glanced up and immediately recognized the Winter Soldier from news reports and Nat’s descriptions. He stood in tandem with her, and they both ran for the north stairwell. It was farthest from the common room, and the one they’d figured was used least, at least on their floors.

“Wait.” Steve got in before he gave up and followed them.

In the center of the stairwell they’d strung a kevlar rope down all one hundred and five storeys, down through a pretty significant opening left as the stairs spiraled around the walls. Leave it to Stark to build spacious fire stairs. They’d color coded railings with spray paint to keep track of the floors. Clint zip-lined down to his floor, and as he jumped off, Nat zipped past and jumped off at hers. Above them, they heard Steve swear explosively at the equipment – Clint and Nat had set it up entirely for themselves, using their own methods and favoring unique gear. Steve was good, but he wasn’t good enough to decipher Delta Strike’s personalized rigging methods. Not with a time limit.

Phil could do it without a thought, Clint remembered, and made a note to mention the zip line to him and get him the proper gear to use it.

Clint ducked into his apartment, grabbed his quiver, his bow, and his glove. He told Lucky to stay (Lucky snored at him) and ran back out to zip line down the rest of the floors. He passed Steve, jumping down the stairs landing to landing, somewhere around the thirtieth floor.
“You are going to explain this equipment to me, Barton!” he bellowed.

Clint saluted as he zipped on past.

His hearing aids crackled. “Hawkeye, I apologize for the intrusion, but these have a receiver in a frequency I can transmit to. They are one way. If you do not want data this way, blink your eyes twice.”

Clint widened his eyes, as open as possible, until he reached the ground.

A second later, Kate burst up from the basement stairs where the range was, carrying her bow with a quiver over her tee shirt. “What the hell?”

Clint turned to slam through the lobby doors into the atrium where Barnes would be entering the building. Assuming he was going for the executive entrance and not the massive public entrance with a fucking shopping mall full of people in it. He hoped to hell that was locked down, and was really glad it wasn’t his problem. “Winter Soldier, on his way in. Take position on the northwestern corner of the third floor balcony.”

“Got it.” She nodded once and ran for the elevators, jumping into the car Hill and May stepped out of.

“JARVIS, does he look like he’s making for the executive entrance?”

“It does, Hawkeye.” Well, that was something. May was directing the staff of the coffee shop and the regular night security and reception, maybe ten people total, to get the hell out.

He turned as Steve stalked up behind him. “I need up in the girders to get a good sight line. Toss me.”

Steve looked up; the atrium they were in was about ten storeys high, with balconies on three curved sides and the fourth a wall of windows that allowed in sunlight and a view of the city. They were one-way; the other side was a live LED display and ran Stark Industries advertisements all day and half the night to the city outside. Through it all there was a superstructure of steel beams painted to be as invisible as possible against the light and sky of the windows.

“Sure.” Steve told him, cupping his hands.

“Woot.” Clint had to say when he was in the air. It was better than a spring board with the circus. He landed lightly on a girder about four floors up and ran along it to the wall, where he’d be perched directly above the door. He strung his bow, nocked an arrow, and glanced around.

Hill and May were off to one side, guarding the elevators. Smart. That’d keep Barnes from hopefully getting into the rest of the building. It was safe to assume that JARVIS had them locked down, but simply getting into an elevator shaft could lead to a lot of mayhem. (Ask him how he knew, heh.) Pepper was with them. Nat had implied that Pepper was augmented somehow during Stark’s tango with AIM last year, so he decided she wasn’t his problem. Iron Man and War Machine were on either side of the door, Kate where he’d told her to be, and Bruce opposite her. Good. If they needed Hulk, he could hop down. Otherwise he’d be out of the way. For all Bruce was a tree-hugging hippie, he was damn good at strategy when he wanted to be. Best kinda tree-hugger, for sure.

“He’s coming to us. We let him come.” Steve told them all in crystalline surround sound. Clint figured JARVIS was boosting the signal and refining it for clarity. He’d have to talk to Stark and JARVIS about new aids if this was possible. “He is to be taken alive, and as unharmed as possible. Meet force with force, avoid being harmed if at all possible, but for God’s sake, do not go on the
As usual Steve had the best idea, so Clint settled himself as much as possible, mentally locating a coil of rope in his quiver for getting down quickly if he needed to. Nat would be ghosting around somewhere in her full tactical gear, and since she and Steve were the only ones who’d ever survived going head to head with this guy, he was going to leave them to it.

Then Barnes walked in. He shrugged out of the backpack he was wearing and casually sat it down on the floor DIRECTLY UNDER CLINT, then walked to the middle of the lobby, knelt, and put his hands behind his head. Clint watched Barnes and tried to find another nest somewhere near, at the same time. Nothing. So he stayed where he was and hoped he didn’t explode.

Phil would have stopped him from picking this spot for a nest.

It was the first time in three years he let himself think that, and miss Phil’s voice in his ear, keeping him notified of the thousand things he needed to know. Like when he was being a moron.

“JARVIS?” Pepper asked, and when did she get to be in charge? It was her building and not the time but okay, later, he was asking. Also JARVIS seemed to be piping in everyone’s voices so he could keep track of what was going on, and he clearly hadn’t been appreciating JARVIS nearly enough.

“Scans indicate Sergeant Barnes carries no weapons, though his prosthetic arm could be classified as dangerous.”

No shit, Sherlock, Clint thought to that, but still kept watch on Barnes’ hands in the hopes he’d have some warning if Barnes decided to detonate anything in the backpack DIRECTLY UNDER HIM.

“The backpack?” Pepper asked. Clearly Pepper was now Clint’s favorite person and he was making her pancakes or martinis or whatever she wanted for breakfast tomorrow.

“No explosives, no chemical or biological ordinance. Three handguns, all unloaded. Six knives. Personal effects.” Okay! So this time Clint wasn’t gonna die, or even need stitches for being a moron. Excellent learning experience, never do it again. He went back to paying full attention to the rest of the room. Everyone seemed to have relaxed, and Steve was hugging the scary Soviet-programmed assassin and the back of his neck was starting to itch.

When Natasha walked in the front door below him, gun drawn, and held it on Barnes’ head, he was so glad to see her he wanted to swing down and kiss her. Finally, someone taking this whole thing seriously. Barnes, at her direction, got back down on his knees, and SASSED NATASHA ROMANOV ABOUT SHOOTING HER. TWICE. Dude was either insane or had balls of steel. Possibly both. Probably.

Pepper was cutting a deal with Barnes for him to go in the Hulk Tank. Steve and Stark weren’t taking over. That was exceedingly odd. But still not his problem. He kept his arrow on Barnes, at harmony with Natasha and Kate. At least if Barnes went off, the three of them stood half a chance of stopping him.

Instead, Barnes peacefully went up to the Tank and let himself be locked in. Stark popped up his visor and said “holy shit” for all of them. That had been an unexpected end to the evening.

Steve ran for the stairs – up to the Tank no doubt. Natasha was giving orders like the only sane one she was, so Clint walked out to the center of the room, lashed the line he had around a stray girder, and slid down it to where Nat and Sam were. Sane was a good spot to be. He bet it was nice there. He was gonna try that out. Natasha was talking about subconscious triggers and he winced a little; he
remembered the early days when a couple of hers got set off and hoo boy he did NOT want to go through that again. His jaw had finally quit aching when the weather changed. But that was easily fixed. They’d do what they did last time.

He told them both as he landed, “I know a guy who knows a guy. Got it covered.”

Natasha knew exactly who he meant and looked relieved, but of course Stark had to clank over like a robot monkey and ARGUE. “Does your guy know Charles Xavier? Because that’s who I’m calling in.”

Funny he should mention. “As a matter of fact, yeah.” He went out to Xavier’s school every year or so to give the kids tips on fitting into normal society, or if not that, how to fake your way out of trouble. Natasha always went with him, and often Phil would go too if he had the time. He’d known a load of mutants in the circus, and every damned one just wanted to be treated like a person. Which was reasonable, no matter how you looked at it. There were a lot of good kids out there. He bet they’d get a kick out of meeting Captain America. And he bet he could talk Steve into going.

“How do you know Charles?” Stark sorta-whined. Clint was wondering the same thing about Stark.

He indulged in an eye roll or three. “You do realize at least half the staff of his school in Westchester was in the circus at one time or another. And look at me, The Amazing Hawkeye.” He struck a pose after, because fuck all you people, AMAZING HAWKEYE. THAT’S RIGHT BITCHES HOW MANY OF YOU HAD YOUR OWN POSTERS, HUH? Well, okay Steve had, but Steve didn’t whine at him.

Nat and Sam took off then, and Stark looked up at the girders, eyes following the rope Clint had come down. “Why is there a rope in my atrium?”

“I had to get down, didn’t I?”

“Then how’d you get up?”

“Steve threw me.” It had seemed so reasonable at the time, but now that he said it, he sounded just a wee bit like a maniac. Strange, how much of his life always came out sounding that way.

“But there’s a rope hanging from the ceiling of my shiny executive entrance.” Stark whined. “I use repulsors to get up there, Pepper will kill me.”

“Oh, for shit’s sake, Stark.” Clint climbed back up hand over hand; he’d picked this specific rope with climbing in mind so it went easily. Once up on the girder, he untied it, coiled it, and put it away. Then he walked the girder over toward the balconies and jumped to the second floor, rolling to absorb the impact.

“Hey!” Stark shouted.

Clint looked over the rail. “What?”

“That… THAT WAS NOT NORMAL!” Stark shouted.

Oh, so, what, Avengers-worthy then. Good god, the man flew around in a billion dollar flying suit he built himself. “Circus, remember?” Clint flipped him the bird and left him sputtering. He had to go see a guy about a voice in his ear.
Memories, There and Not.

Chapter Summary

“Do you mind?” Clint asked. “I can leave, if-”

“No.” Phil interrupted. “It’s good to see you.”

Chapter Notes

Extra long chapter today. It was long chapter or mess with the pacing for hours and I have a germ, so enjoy the long chapter.

Due to the germ and the long chapter, there may not be a chapter tomorrow. We’ll see.

Also, HTML is Satan.

Phil and his crew had finished eating – Pepper had sent down enough Italian to feed an army – when the lights dimmed, came back up, and JARVIS announced in his Iron Man voice “Code Red, one block out.” An image flashed on the screen of someone walking along a New York street.

“Jesus fuck, Winter Soldier.” Maria announced with her usual eloquence. She grabbed her holstered handgun off the coat rack, and tossed Phil’s to him in a single motion.

Melinda was pulling on her flack jacket and stepping into combat boots, also near the door of their main room.

“Both of you, downstairs. Leave the take-down to the Avengers, try to keep him contained if they need the help. Get all bystanders out. Ask JARVIS about weak points.” Phil turned to his geeks.

“All three of you, safe room. Now.”

Skye and Fitz leapt to gather up equipment, computers and the like. Not one of the three of them even thought of a weapon. Phil tried not to shake his head at them.

“Oh, now, the statistical odds of him even getting into the main building, let alone-”

“Jemma.” Phil said more patiently than he would with anyone else.

She reluctantly picked up a tablet. All three left for the decadent main bathroom that JARVIS had mentioned had armored walls. Which explained the dammed sofa in there. As well as the flat screen on the wall. The door slid shut and Phil could hear bolts slamming into place.

Three less worries, then, for the moment. He wondered if they’d live in there, if he asked them nicely.

Phil finished buckling his holster over his sweater and turned to the screen in the main room.

“JARVIS?” There was a ding, then the screen separated into four views of the executive lobby
downstairs. All the on-planet Avengers were there except for Natasha. If Phil knew her at all any
more, she’d somehow gotten out of the building without anyone noticing and was even now circling
around to get behind the Soldier.

He watched, barely breathing, as Barnes turned himself in. Part of him was trying to figure legalities
and secrecy and how to sell the whole thing to the government to keep Barnes alive and out of jail.
The other half, well. He let himself smile a little when Rogers grabbed Barnes and hugged him tight.
To think this legend may wind up with a happy ending. That was something.

Then Nat walked in with one of her Brownings out, and Pepper took over. That was odd. That was
VERY odd. Rogers and Stark were both standing by and letting Pepper Potts bring in the Winter
Soldier. He was going to have to ask a lot of questions about that. Soon. His memory was still
damned foggy and entirely missing in places, but this seemed extremely out of character for both the
public figure and the private woman he’d read several Level Nine profiles of.

Barnes went peacefully to the Hulk Tank and allowed himself to be locked in and wow, how about
that for a crazy night. He watched a moment longer, Rogers and Hill arguing at the security station
outside the Tank, and in the lobby, Clint and Stark were sniping at each other while Nat rolled her
eyes. It was all so normal. He wanted it to be his normal. He hadn’t planned to stay on when he’d
first come here, but working with everyone, seeing what they could do, yes. He wanted this. He
wanted to stay in the game, if he could work with people he trusted. For the first time he felt like he
had real purpose again, instead of going through the motions of old purposes.

Phil shook himself and went to let the geeks out of the safe room.

“Coast is clear, AC?” Skye asked, as if she hadn’t watched the entire thing on the screen in there.

“As clear as it’s going to get. This entire building is now a primary Hydra target, for as long as it
contains Barnes. You’re all welcome to leave.”

All three sort of snorted at him. There was definite eye rolling.

“Och now,” Fitz said in a heavier accent than usual. “How’m I supposed to get me hands on that arm
if we LEAVE?”

“I’m rather interested in the neural interface being used.” Jemma agreed.

“It can’t possibly be pure Cold War mechanics, can it? Gotta be a computer in there, don’t you
think?” Sky mused.

“Oh, almost definitely, with the neural processing. I can’t imagine how mechanics alone would-”
Jemma agreed.

“Excuse me.” JARVIS announced. “Doctors FitzSimmons and Ms Skye are requested in the labs.”

“The arm?” Skye asked.

“Indeed, Ms Skye.”

“Hot damn. Summoned to take apart a hyper-advanced cybernetic arm by an AI that’s more human
than most people. I fucking love this place.” Skye pumped a fist in the air, and all three ran for the
doors.

It slid open and Clint was on the other side, one hand raised to knock, the other holding an armload
of gear of some kind. “Oh, hey.” He said weakly. “Can I come in?”
All three geeks glanced knowingly between the two men. “We have business in the labs.” Jemma said kindly, and shoved the other two out the door.

“Do you mind?” Clint asked. “I can leave, if-”

“No.” Phil interrupted. “It’s good to see you.”

Clint moved further into the room, and took a good look at Phil. “You too.” There was an awkward pause and then he muttered “Oh, dammit,” stepped forward, and pulled Phil into a one-armed hug.

Phil put his arms around him and rested his head on Clint’s shoulder. He inhaled, and the scent of Clint, yes. That’s what had been missing. “Hi.”

Clint gave a rusty chuckle and stepped back a little, but kept his hand on Phil’s shoulder. “So. Winter fucking Soldier turned himself in. Not something you see every Saturday night, now, is it?”

“What a time to be alive.” Phil admitted, regretting it when Clint winced a little. He indulged in one more quick hug, then stepped back. “Have a seat. Want a drink?” Casual, casual, do not flip out on the guy.

“No, I’m good.” Clint sat, then stood, dropped a couple harnesses and some other assorted equipment on the coffee table, and sat again more definitely. “Nat and I ran a zip line down the north stair well; after tonight it’s probably going to become common knowledge.” He nodded to the table. “Some gear to get you started. We color-coded the railings, the usual, do you remember?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Phil said reluctantly, sitting opposite, cautiously.

Clint did his sideways head-bob that wasn’t a yes or a no, more of a ‘dealing with it’ acknowledgment, which he DID remember.

“Sorry.” Phil told him quietly.

“No.” Clint said a little sharply, then took a deep breath. “Don’t apologize for the memory stuff. It absolutely isn’t your fault. I’ll send you the color code. Just… I gotta move.” he proceeded to pace. “Down in the lobby tonight, Winter goddamn Soldier in my sights, with a potential bomb under me… I’m still processing all this, but next time we do anything like this, I want your voice in my ear.”

Slowly, slowly, Phil let himself breathe again. “You trust me for that?”

“More than anybody.” Clint paced some more. “I still don’t know, hell, anything. Don’t know how to feel about this. But Jesus, Phil, you were always the best and we need you. I do know that. I know those two things. That I’m damn glad you’re still in the world, and you’re the best handler on the planet. We need you.”

“Can I hug you again?” Phil asked. To hell with his old image and everything else. To hell with all of it. If he could have this again, Strike Team Delta, the support of the two most remarkable people he ever knew, he would burn his pride, his image, whatever it took.

Clint hauled up short. “Uh. Yeah.”

Phil was there without processing how, and held on. Those solid, strong, incredible arms he’d always admired came up and wrapped around.

“So I take it this is okay with you.” Clint asked.
“Yes.” Phil said with the first easy laugh in days.

“Good. We need to get the whole team together—”

“Gentlemen, I apologize for intruding.” JARVIS said quietly. “Sir is becoming obnoxious in his demands for Mister Coulson’s presence in the conference room on the Avengers’ public floor and I fear he will soon break in.”

“Stark.” both men snarled at once.

Phil stepped away. “I’ll go deal with this – probably logistics on dealing with Barnes. And will put together the meeting for everyone. With luck we’ll get to it tomorrow.”

“Good. I’m going to go check in with Kate.”

“She’s become a terrifying combination of you and Natasha over the last few years.” Phil commented easily as they got in the elevator.

“You have no idea.”

*

Phil walked into the conference room, and was immediately handed a cup of coffee by Natasha. Maria was there too, and Tony was stalking around the room, poking at his phone and arguing with JARVIS. “Yes, Stark?” he asked in as dry a voice as he could imagine.

Stark stopped moving, and turned to stare. “You aren’t wearing a suit.”

He rolled his eyes. “I can still kick your ass if I need to.”

“I never doubted it. So.” Stark dropped into a chair at the conference table and looked at the other three as they sat. “The goddamn Soldier downstairs in the Hulk Tank.”

“We live in interesting times.” Phil observed, glancing at the screen on the wall showing a live feed of Rogers and Barnes eating in the Tank. Somewhere in the back of his mind, ten-year-old Phil was shrieking with joy at being involved in this.

“What do we do with him?” Stark asked baldly. “We turn him over to any government agency on the planet, he’ll be dead or in the wind by morning. Or back to Winter Soldiering. Steve would frown us to death.”

“Ideally, if we could reveal him as Sergeant Barnes and have him become a presence BEFORE the Winter Soldier connection comes out, we could manage things well enough to keep him out of a cage. Probably. With really excellent lawyers.” Phil said thoughtfully. “We can say he was found on ice in a Hydra lab. It wouldn’t even be a lie, exactly.”

Stark gave an eyeroll at spies’ definitions of lies.

“Do we really think there’s a cage on earth that would hold him?” Maria asked seriously. “There’s a reason the Soviets and Hydra kept him on ice, and there is no way Steve would tolerate it for a second.”

“The instant Hydra finds out he’s here, they’ll come for him.” Natasha told them quietly, as deadly serious as Phil had ever seen her, which was quite deadly enough. “Start preparing for it now. It will happen. Possibly the Soviets as well, we’ll have to wait and see, but Hydra for sure.”
“It’s Russia now.” Stark reminded her.

She openly laughed at him. “No it isn’t. Not in the guts of the government. It’s the same as it ever was, with a happy new face on the surface to keep the rest of the world at ease. Putin was KGB his entire life. That sort of indoctrination doesn’t float away on happy clouds.”

They all drank and looked at each other.

“Stark.” Phil hesitated. “Tony. Are you all right with having him in this building? It has to be asked. And no one will hold it against you if you say no.” There had been a lot of horrifying crimes in the Hydra files he’d skimmed, but JARVIS had quietly shuffled Tony’s parents’ deaths to the top of the list when he’d asked for a summary.

Stark snorted into his coffee. “So you say. Steve would definitely hold it against me.” He looked up at the live feed, watched Barnes for a long moment. “First thing I did when the files were released, and again with JARVIS hacking SHIELD, every time, I looked for Stark Industries, Dad, and all related files. He was into a lot of secret shit over the years, more than I can even imagine. I knew sooner than almost anyone else that Barnes killed Mom and Dad and I was ready to shoot Barnes on sight, Steve’s opinion be damned.” He brooded into his coffee.

“What changed?” Maria asked quietly.

Tony glared at Natasha. “You got that damned file and gave it to Steve. He brought it here and asked JARVIS to translate it. And I saw what they did to him.” He looked at the screen again. “The Ten Rings had me for three months, and if I hadn’t escaped I’d have given in. Sooner than later. I knew it, too. That’s why I risked my life on escaping rather than keep waiting on Rhodey.” he mused. “Barnes was held for seventy years. And they did a lot more than waterboard him.” He shook his head. “Never thought I’d ever again consider waterboarding no big deal, but after that file?” He shook his head again, for once wordless.

“So it’s live and let live?” Natasha asked skeptically. She liked to find people’s soft spots and lean on them delicately. Kept everyone honest, or at least kept her in the loop on what people were thinking.

“More like let him live in the Tank until I’m convinced he’s safe enough to let out.” Tony told her. “That’s gonna take some serious convincing. And for Steve’s sake I hope to hell none of us have to shoot him. You seemed on the same page, down in the lobby.”

Natasha gave a half nod. “I am. The fact he came in means he’s probably shaken his conditioning. But there could be a hundred triggers buried in there and who knows what would happen if he gets set off.” Not to mention that Barnes probably had a personal to-kill list longer than hers had been. All those decades of acquired skill, the deadliest assassin in the world, it was all still there at his disposal to do anything he wished with. “Is it better or worse to have the greatest killer humanity ever created be self-directed?”

As she’d expected, no one had an answer to THAT question. Neither did she.

“So keep Barnes here and get him on his feet.” Phil said.

“Looks like it.” Tony agreed. Life was a twisty bitch; bit you in the ass every time you thought you were clear.

“And when Hydra shows up?” Maria asked.

Tony scrubbed his face with his hands. “Right. JARVIS, initiate Operation Circle the Wagons, put the word out.”
“Very good, sir.”

“Heightened security?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah. Now. Who is gonna go drag Thor’s girlfriend in here? She has not been friendly toward Stark Industries, even though we’re paying her.” Stark looked at Natasha hopefully.

“I know just the guy.” she grinned back.

“Before we hand out assignments,” Phil told them all, “we need to schedule a meeting, ASAP. Logistics around here, who is in charge of what, how we’ll assess threats, deploy, internal logistics, and someone can explain to me why in hell Pepper Potts negotiated with the Winter Soldier tonight while you and Rogers stood by and let her.”

“Oh yeah, that’s a good story.” Stark agreed. “Everyone should probably know that.”

Probably.

*

After everyone else had wandered away, Tony sat in the conference room, drinking coffee and watching the security feed from the Hulk Tank. Steve and Barnes had finished eating, finally – it would take a billionaire to pay their grocery bills – and the two were hunched over the table from opposite sides now, having an intense discussion. The topic could have been anything. SHIELD, Hydra, brainwashing, decades on ice, there was a lot of dark and rutted road between the two men now. Seventy years spent in hell for the one man, for the other, gone in the blink of an eye.

Or, knowing Steve, it could be about post-modern impressionism. Having spent more time with the guy, Tony wouldn’t rule it out. Steve had really strong opinions about post-modernism.

Shit, shit, shit. He was still reeling from finally, FINALLY knowing that his parents’ deaths had been deliberate. He’d wondered for years, pretty much from the instant it happened. And the guy who did it? He couldn’t even blame him. But the people who created Barnes, who primed him, and sent him after an innocent woman whose only mistake in life was to marry an utter bastard in the defense industry, oh, he was going to find them all and burn it down with extreme prejudice for that one.

Somewhere, there was gonna be evidence that Obie was playing with Hydra. Oh, Obie would never commit to the ideology, that was so limiting. But there was money to be made. Barrels of it. So JARVIS kept on data-mining his way through SHIELD’s servers, and Tony was currently finding locations of old SSR paper depots he intended to raid when he had a minute or two.

Behind him, the door opened and he turned. It was Rhodey. “Hey.” He said quietly, waving a hand at the half full coffee pot.

“Hey” Rhodey said back, their customary greeting, and came to sit with Tony. They watched the screen for a while in silence. Finally, “quite an addition to the superhero house party you’ve got going.”

“Not the first guy I’d have put on the guest list.” Tony agreed.

“You okay?”

Tony shrugged. What was “okay” these days? Did it even have a definition? He wasn’t actively having PTSD symptoms right this minute, that probably counted as okay.
“No one would hold it against you if you moved him to a different facility, at least. I’m sure you’ve got one somewhere.”

“Steve would go with him. And Steve is going to need the rest of us to get him through this, however it ends. Even if it’s a movie-worthy technicolor happy ending, getting there is gonna be a bitch.”

“So he stays here.”

“Guess so.”

“Not your usual.”

“Remember when I came crawling out of the desert, after everyone else had given me up for dead, full of conspiracy theories, PTSD, and superhero aspirations? You and Pepper were there to prop me up until I could stand on my own again.”

“It’s hard to forget.”

“Yeah. I remember it too.”

They both sat in silence for a long time, staring at the screen, seeing other things.

Chapter Summary

“You saw what went down in DC.” Clint concluded.

“Yes. On the news. And I know we’ve BEEN a target out here, but now I feel like a duck with a bullseye painted on my ass.”

Chapter Notes

The Jane Foster chapter of "Sam Meets the Avengers" happens between the second and third scenes in today's exciting chapter, if you're trying to follow along.

Clint had been looking forward to some actual sleep that night, after all the Winter Soldier excitement. He’d gotten Kate into a cab home with Lucky instead, because instead of hugging his dog, he wound up alone in a mini-jet late late late Saturday night (more Sunday morning) to go get Thor’s girlfriend and her lab assistant from New Mexico. Jane had refused to have anything to do with SHIELD, had only taken Stark Industries’ money reluctantly, and after the dark elves in London (Clint had caught that one on TV in his loft, hoping the phone wouldn’t ring and drinking a beer to Thor when he spotted him), Jane had gone back to New Mexico and refused to say much of anything to anyone. Selvig worked in the Tower in New York and apparently contacted Jane every day on their joint project and regularly told her to come in for her safety. Jane stubbornly did what she wanted.

JARVIS, Clint’s co-pilot for this trip, had explained it all before they sat down outside of Puente Antiguo on a hot, quiet night, dawn not quite breaking in the east. Clint hadn’t been there since Thor had headed back to Asgard; he’d watched the Destroyer Incident through a scope because he’d been too far away to use his bow. SHIELD had paid plenty to put the town back together, and he couldn’t really see anything different as he walked the short distance out of the desert to the front door of the car dealership that Foster was again using as a lab. Though it made his spy heart sad to be so obvious, he knocked on the door and waited.

There was some movement inside, and a curtain flickered, and the door was thrown open by a tiny brunette woman who was not Foster. “Thank THOR.” the woman exclaimed, and jerked him inside. “Hawkeye, right?”

Not as expected, but workable. “Yeah. I’m here to-”

“Rescue us, yes. Thank you for coming.” The woman was young, really young, with long curly brown hair, cat-eyed glasses, and an intelligent look in her eye. “Humor me a minute. Security question. What was Thor’s favorite food when you guys went out for schwarma after the Battle of Manhattan?”

Clint could see the wisdom in verifying his identity, but how the hell was he supposed to field random questions? “Uh. I don’t remember him saying he had one. He plowed through a huge pile of
it while discussing how happy he was to find ‘spit-roasted beast’ was a thing on Midgard.” He thought some more. “And he thought the amba sauce was ‘strange but tasty’.”

The woman laughed. “Yeah, you’ve met Thor.” she held out a hand. “Darcy Lewis. Lab assistant, physicist wrangler, political scientist.”

“That’s quite a combination.” Clint had to say, and shook her hand.

“Right? How many poly-sci students have a prince from an unknown civilization on an unknown PLANET drop almost on their head? My master’s thesis was redacted by like seven different countries, I quit counting the spy organizations. It was hilarious.” She looked toward the back of the large main room of their lab. “Jane’s been in the zone for about a week now. Something about either elves or extremely low frequencies. After London I don’t wanna know. She is not going to want to budge.”

“You saw what went down in DC.” Clint concluded.

“Yes. On the news. And I know we’ve BEEN a target out here, but now I feel like a duck with a bullseye painted on my ass.”

Oh good. Someone smart. He could DEFINITELY work with that. “Yeah. Stark and Coulson sent me.”

“I thought Coulson was dead.” Darcy said rather blankly.

“So did we.” Clint said as easily as he could. Darcy gave him a look that said she wasn’t fooled, so he plowed on. “We want to take both of you back to the Tower, set Jane up with a lab, give you guys apartments. You’ll be about a million times safer there.”

“Plus I’ll be in New York, land of the Met, Madison Square Garden, and the UN. I am all in favor, but Jane isn’t gonna go for it.”

“I’ll be bad cop.”

“You’re very brave. Good luck with that. I’ll go pack us some clothes. What’s going to happen to all the equipment?”

“Stark’s sending someone from Malibu to get it, haul it all to the New York labs.”

“Heal. Bad-cop to your heart’s content. Once I get a couple bags thrown together, I’ll do good cop. With luck we’ll get her out to the car without having to tie her up.” She held out a fist.

Clint bumped it with his. “I have a mini quinn jet.”

“Cool, maybe the lure of new technology will work on her.”

*

It didn’t work.

For a while, Clint had worried that he actually WOULD have to tie Jane up, but eventually Darcy lost her temper as well, and with both of them shouting, Jane agreed to come. Clint was pretty sure her plan was to bitch out Stark and go straight back to New Mexico, but having seen Potts and Stark in action, he knew Jane didn’t stand a chance. And that was before the rest of the team got involved. No one was going to stand by and let Thor’s girlfriend get killed, all else aside. Steve’s sad puppy
eyes guilted the WINTER SOLDIER, so good luck on that, Doctor Foster. Anyway, his job was to physically get her ass to New York and he was doing it. After that it was above his not-being-paid pay grade.

Jane sat in the back of the jet, working on her computer. Darcy, after trying twice to make peace, gave up, left her there, and came up to sit in the co-pilot’s chair. “I’m gonna pretend I’m the Black Widow.” Darcy announced.

Well, Clint considered, she had the build and the brains, but lacked the indoctrination and – from the looks of it – the childhood from hell. “Good luck with that.”

Instead of getting huffy, like most of the women in his life (so many huffy women, dear gods, all the women), Darcy laughed easily. “Where’s the dashboard speaker on this thing?”

She was going to get along well with Stark, may Pepper save them all. “There’s a bluetooth to the communications gear; it was set up with briefings in mind. You can probably get it to play music.”

“Awesome.” She hunched over her iThing for a while, and eventually some classic punk came on over the speakers. He must have looked surprised, because she explained. “You look like a punk kind of guy. Second wave punk, or country, and after all this time in New Mexico I cannot take any more country.”

Worked for him. “Best punk band of all time?” he asked.

Darcy looked delighted, and sat back, getting comfortable. “Well now, that’s awfully complicated. There’s so MUCH punk, you know? And are we talking first, second wave? Musicality? Or this new stuff that’s claiming to be punk but has way too little rage? Like, the Police were great and all, but nothing will ever top the Sex Pistols for pure rage.” She poked at her iThing for a moment and ‘God Save the Queen’ blasted out. “And stuff like the Vandals. Is it punk, or oi? I get so confused.”

“Crossover.” Clint answered automatically.

“Confusing!” Darcy countered cheerfully. “Punk’s about rage, rage is not confusing, it is rage.”

“Run Oi to the World after the Sex Pistols are done.” Clint told her. They were gonna discuss rage in Christmas music.

The flight back went a lot faster than Clint had expected it to.

*  

“Debrief.” Clint repeated in disbelief.

“Yes.” Phil knew he’d get some pushback on this, but he wanted to know what had enraged Foster. Having dealt with her himself, he thought he knew, but still.

Steve, in casual clothes and language, sat at another side of the table, putting hot drinks in front of all of them. “Sure. We’re trying to keep track of what all’s going on. Someone needs an overview.”

Phil caught the look on Clint’s face, the one he got when he was dealing with bureaucracy. “Short description of what happened in New Mexico, for crying out loud. We don’t need an opera in three acts.”

Steve grinned at that, and a small, teenaged part of him squeed and went ‘eee, I made Captain America smile!’ and he needed that part of him to shut the HELL up already.
“Uh. Right.” Clint was clearly tired, and trying to get his brain in gear to think in terms of a mission. “Got out there at whatever local time, ask JARVIS.”

“I can provide an itinerary.” JARVIS agreed smoothly.

“Thanks, JARVIS.” Steve said easily, the guy born in 1918 dealing easily with the most advanced technology on the planet. Phil let himself boggle for a microsecond, as he always did.

“Right.” Clint agreed, with a casual wave toward the ceiling. Phil wondered when everyone had gotten so casual with JARVIS, really wondered at what seemed like a genuine friendship between JARVIS and Clint. He shook it off as Clint started talking. “Landed in the desert near their building, walked in. Darcy, Ms Lewis, how formal am I being here?”

“First names fine, name-calling not.” Phil allowed.

Steve grinned into his coffee again, Phil’s id squee’d again, Phil kicked himself again.

“...Darcy pulled me inside and was on the same page as me immediately. Probably before I got there. She’s got a master’s in political science and is a news and history junky, so she knew exactly why I was there and was all in favor. If we’re keeping track of personality traits, Darcy is solid on common sense and practicality.”

She really was. Her behavior during the Destroyer Incident had been exemplary. After, he’d tried to give her an application to SHIELD and she’d yelled about her iPod while shredding the application and throwing it at him. He’d liked her for that. “She is good in a crisis.” he told Steve. “Biggest worry would be running into danger to help someone.”

“Common failing around here.” Steve agreed.

“No joke.” Clint agreed. “Foster was in deep research mode, I have only ever seen Tony that far gone before, and impossible to budge. It took both of us yelling to get her into the jet.” he turned to Phil. “I actually did start out nice, it’s just that she didn’t notice until the nasty shit started.”

That meshed with Phil’s own dealings with Foster.

Clint shrugged. “So we loaded up what we could, Foster bitching all the way, Darcy running interference between us, and away we went. Spent the ride home arguing about punk music.”

“Punk?” Steve asked curiously.

“Pop tunes like the Beatles, with rage.” Clint said, apparently used to explaining music to Steve.

“Oh. That might be interesting.” Steve said.

Phil assumed the meeting was over then, and sat back to watch THIS discussion. He was still putting together team relationships. “You’d like it, if even half your history is true.”

Steve grinned. “Bar fights and getting punched in alleys?”

“I’ll have Darcy make you a play list.” Clint agreed. “We done here?”

Phil realized he actually wanted to stay, talk about music, and simply hang out. He’d spent the last three years avoiding social interaction, doing what he had to and then going off to his office to hide out and pace and brood over things that weren’t right.

“So.” Phil heard himself say to Steve, “anyone played The Clash for you yet?”
“I don’t think so?”

Clint grinned at both men. “Oh, we gotta fix that. JARVIS! London Calling, please. Original recording.”

“Very good, Hawkeye. The song, or the entire album?”

“Let’s start with the one song.”

The resulting music appreciation lesson with Steve was the most pleasant hour Phil had spent in a long time. Teaching Captain America about punk music. He’d never imagined that in his wildest dreams. When teenaged him squeed quietly at the back of his mind, this time he just let himself smile at it.
“Who is the doctor here?” She demanded.

“Well, actually,” Banner started apologetically.

Jemma’s nose went up further. “Who is the doctor here with actual experience treating patients, and a bedside manner? Yesterday you threatened to glue both of Tony’s hands to his bum if he didn’t quit burning himself.”

We’re having a bit of a detour on our story about Phil and Clint, into Bucky territory. Mainly because he’s one of my favorites, but also because there IS plot development going on, I swear.

After the huge brunch and then the ridiculous debrief that turned into listening to a lot of music, Clint went back to his apartment and finally, finally got some sleep. He found “took Lucky” written on his bathroom mirror in purple lipstick. He kind of snorted at the message, brushed his teeth, and fell into bed. It had been a long couple days and he tended to run until he hit a wall, then sleep like the dead until nightmares or emergencies woke him back up again.

He got in maybe two hours when Natasha strode in and barked “DELTA CALL.” and he was out of bed and reaching for his boots before he even processed that he was awake again.

“What? What the hell, Nat?” It had been a long time since she’d pulled that shit on him and he was currently standing in his bedroom in boxers and combat boots, hands on hips. NOT. FUNNY.

“The geeks have been scanning Barnes’ arm pretty much since he walked in the door, and now they want to poke at it. Coulson and I decided we’d provide some security.”

“You just want a chance to stab Barnes.”

“Maybe. If I get a chance.” She shrugged. When he stared at her a while, she finally admitted “OKAY, I would enjoy it but I’m not going to randomly stab him.”

Great. This weekend kept getting better and better. “Go away, I need to get dressed.”

“Oh please.” she said, and flopped on his bed.

“What’s the setup?”

“Well. Everyone is wisely afraid to let Barnes out of the tank, and saved us an argument over letting him into Stark’s shop.”
Clint shuddered, thinking about Barnes with access to all those tools. “Not on my watch.”

“Right, we said about the same. So FitzSimmons, Stark, and Banner want to take a closer look. They’re going to go into the Hulk Tank with one or two of us for ballast, while you sit outside with an arrow on the door in case of escape attempts.”

“Uh huh.” That only sounded about half as insane as their usual plans, so he figured it might even work. He grabbed the sturdiest bow he had with him in the Tower (his collection was over in Brooklyn) and slung his quiver on. After a minute he added his P30 handgun and a couple knives. “Think I need body armor?”

“Don’t know, but no one else will be wearing any. You’d look like a wuss.” Nat had her little Walther she kept for when she’d be working indoors, with jeans and a sweater. And probably a dozen knives he couldn’t see.

“Right, let’s go get this over with so I can go back to bed.”

“You hell raiser.”

“You bet.”

* *

When they walked in the anteroom to the Hulk Tank, there were at least a dozen people milling around. Not just the geeks, but Pepper Potts, Sam, and Steve, of course. Hill was off to one side, arms crossed, scowling. Also with her service pistol. In the Tank, Barnes was looking a little… huh, he looked nervous. Clint thought about the medical history the Winter Soldier must have, nearly threw up, and decided dude had a right and he would never mention it.

“Here.” Tony handed him a bunch of arrows held in one fist like a bouquet of flowers.

“What the hell?” Clint asked. They had large percussive points, and were painted green on one side.

“Half doses of the Hulk tranquilizer darts we normally use.”

Huh. “Ooookay. I was just gonna pin him to the wall with some broadheads.”

Tony gave him an odd look. “I never know when you’re kidding.”

Clint gave him the broadest smile he could and Tony walked away shaking his head.

“More subtle than your usual.” Nat observed.

“Hey, I can be subtle.”

“You really can’t.” Phil told him, coming over. He too was in casual clothes – jeans and a sweater – with a holstered sidearm. It gave Clint a jolt to see it was a Smith & Wesson instead of the ancient Glock he’d always used when running with them. “I’m going in the Tank. I want you two out here on containment. I’m reasonably sure he’s on the level and means to cooperate, but he could get triggered by God knows and I want to know for absolute sure he’s contained so I can worry about the safety of the others in the Tank with us.”

“But-” Nat started.

“But you’d dearly love a chance to stick a knife in Barnes and I don’t blame you, but let’s do it this way, please?”
It was so much like their old give-and-take, hashing out who did what on an op in a bickering kind of style, Clint kinda wanted to hug both of them, and settled for smiling a lot. “Okay. I’m going to get an actual nest then, against the far wall.” Nat just grumbled and took up a place between the door of the Tank and the observation area where everyone else was hanging around.

* *

Phil was not wild about this idea, but he knew that the arm Barnes had installed on him needed to go, for a multitude of reasons including the drugs it was pumping into him. FitzSimmons insisted they needed to be in there and while they both had showed a surprising adaptability, the fact remained they had no field skills and May rated their hand-to-hand at “worse than my five year old nephew, the one who falls down stairs a lot”. Fitz was loaded down with an array of sensors, and Jemma was armed with a tea tray. Literally. She had a tray with teapot, two tea cups, and a plate of cookies. Phil reminded himself that her approach to everything was unconventional and effective and to keep his mouth shut at least until she failed or was in actual danger.

“I am going to go in and talk to Sergeant Barnes. You three—” she said with her nose in the air to Fitz, Stark, and Banner, “are going to bloody well stay out here until I give you the go ahead to come in. Is that clear?”

All three men immediately started arguing.

“Who is the doctor here?” She demanded.

“Well, actually,” Banner started apologetically.

Jemma’s nose went up further. “Who is the doctor here with actual experience treating patients, and a bedside manner? Yesterday you threatened to glue both of Tony’s hands to his bum if he didn’t quit burning himself.”

Stark actually giggled.

Banner held his hands up in surrender.

“Okay, I’ll give you that one, kid,” Stark allowed, “but there is no way in holy hell we are sending you in there alone.”

Before she could say anything, Phil calmly announced “I’ll be going in.”

“So will I.” Steve said behind him. Phil wanted to argue, but the truth was, Steve – and Banner in Hulk mode – were the only two of them who stood a chance, hand to hand in an enclosed space. Natasha had survived as much by knowing when to run away as when and how to engage. Steve’s presence would likely make Barnes feel safe, as well, and that was definitely something they could use.

Phil caught Fitz’s eye, then Jemma’s. “If I tell either or both of you to get out, you WILL. We can argue about it later. Is that understood?”

“Of course, sir.” Fitz said politely.

Jemma shook her head at all of them as if they were mad and picked up the tray. She went to the mic and asked “Sergeant Barnes, is it all right if I come in? I’m Jemma Simmons. Captain Rogers and Agent Coulson would like to accompany me.”

Barnes blinked at them for a startled moment and then said “Sure.” Barnes was sitting on the giant
couch against one wall, and Jemma strode in and sat down a polite distance away, setting the tray on the table in front of them. As she poured tea for both of them, she calmly told him “you understand that today we only want to do some scans, and I perhaps might want to poke at you a wee bit. We’d love to drain those drug reservoirs but have to understand how to do it safely first. How do you like your tea?”

“...half a sugar. Please.”

Phil and Steve took up positions in corners of the room, and after Phil glared a bit, Steve stayed silent and let them talk.

Jemma poured, gave the tea to Barnes, and nudged the cookie plate over. “May I ask you some questions?”

“All right.” Barnes put the tea down and didn’t touch it again, watching as Jemma drank hers.

“What can we do to make this more comfortable for you? Is the room too hot? Too cold? We can change the lighting quite a lot, and still see what we’re doing. And scent is very triggering for memories. Is there anything bad? Or good?”

Barnes leaned back and stared at her for a long moment. Jemma smiled at him, sipped her tea, and ate a cookie, waiting. “You are not at all what I expected.” Barnes finally admitted.

“Given your history, I would hope not.” Jemma said gently. She waited some more, poured herself another cup of tea.

“The. The temperature is all right. The light is all right, but if we could avoid shining anything bright in my face, that’d probably save us all some trouble.”

“Of course.” Jemma said gently. She turned to the observation wall. “Fitz, can you dim the lights a hair, bump them further into the red end of the spectrum?”

Fitz gave a thumbs up to show he’d heard, and after a moment, the lighting shifted. Barnes visibly relaxed a little. “I...” he finally took a very small sip of the tea, blinked at it, and sat it back down cautiously. “I’ll do better sitting straight up than laying down or reclining.”

“That’s very easily done.” Jemma said calmly in agreement.

“And... no restraints.”

“I will flay anyone who even thinks it.” Jemma said with steel in her voice.

Barnes looked at her sharply, and seemed to believe her. He nodded slowly. “Can we start with the scans and not-touchy stuff first, ease into it?”

Jemma smiled. “Of course. Just stay where you are, drink your tea.” She glanced over at Fitz, and the rest of the science brigade walked into the room. “They can scan you right there. Let me know if you’re uncomfortable, we can change things up, or take a break.”

After that there was a lot of tech babble and movement, but everyone kept a wide berth and a reasonable volume level. Barnes continued to relax in infinitesimal stages, which Phil would have thought impossible. He had to remember Jemma’s real skill was people; he had so few around him with true people skills he tended to forget. (Natasha being able to manipulate anyone into anything did not count, in his view.) Stark was even behaving, silent and efficient, and had to conclude that Pepper or Jemma had talked sense to him.
When the tech scans had been done, Jemma tossed Stark and Fitz out again. Barnes grinned a little at that.

“Doctor Banner and I would like to take a physical look at your arm, hands on.” Jemma finally said. “Ideally, we want to drain those drug reservoirs. But first we want to see about your pain response and nerve involvement, to see if it’s possible without harming you.”

“If it hurts, it hurts. Get the drugs out.” Barnes told her.

Jemma turned that steely look on him this time, and shifted things around to sit down in front of him on the table. “See here. I took an oath to do no harm, and I am going to bloody well do no harm. There are a dozen options we can try on your pain response before we have to be barbaric about it.”

“They don’t work.” Barnes told her hoarsely. “I’ve tried them all. Pentothal, ether, every opiate imaginable. Street drugs. Doses that should have killed me. Sooner or later you’re going to have to dig in. Get it over with, do it now.”

“We are a little more advanced than that, Sergeant Barnes. Let’s at least try them. At the very, very least we can figure out where the pain sensors are in the arm and try to work around them.” Her voice softened. “How bad is the pain?”

Barnes gave a low laugh. “It only hurts when I’m out of cryo.” Jemma waited. “It’s… I think they wired it so the pain would stop me, when I tried to remove it. It… it worked.” He glanced at his shoulder idly, though there wasn’t anything to be seen with his tee shirt on. “My memories are spotty but I think most of the scarring is from me.”

There were horrified noises from both rooms, but Jemma didn’t even blink. Phil reminded himself to tell her how amazingly well done this was, after.

“And when it was damaged?”

“Yeah, it would react as if I was trying to tear it off.”


Barnes nodded.

“Fitz and I have developed a neural disruptor, based on some other technology. What it does is disrupt the signals the nerves send, confuses them. We’ve tried it on the entire lab staff including myself, and on Captain Rogers. We get a fuzzy feeling, but no pain. Sometimes it isn’t entirely effective, but it never caused pain for anyone.” Banner handed her a small strip of electrodes on tape, with wires trailing away. She showed it to Barnes. “We’d like to try it on you, see if it minimizes the pain. It will sit on your skin, nothing at all invasive. I’d be happy to demonstrate it on myself first, if you’d like to see how it works.”

“It worked on me, Buck.” Steve spoke for the first time. “Whole arm went strange. It didn’t hurt. And the feeling went away as soon as they pulled it off.”

Barnes nodded cautiously. “We could try that.”

“Can you take your shirt off? Or would you rather we cut the sleeve off.”

Barnes thought about that. “It… it might be best if you cut away what you need to, and leave the rest of the shirt. That would be… different.”
“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Jemma patted him on the knee, then caught Rogers’ eye and jerked her head. He came over to take her place in front of Barnes, sitting on the table. “Talk.” Jemma commanded, picking up a small pair of safety scissors and cutting carefully up the sleeve of Barnes’ tee shirt.

“Remember Flash Gordon?” Rogers asked. “All that wild future stuff?”

Barnes snorted. “And now here we are.”

“Here we are. Stark has a robot. A real robot, you can talk to him and he reacts, follows simple commands. He’s kind of cute.”

Out in the observation room, they heard Stark shout “HEY!”

Jemma turned and gave him the glare of death and he immediately went silent. “Now, Sergeant Barnes—”

“James.” Barnes interrupted. “You’re gonna be cutting my clothes off, we’re gonna be on a first name basis.”

“Very well, it’s Jemma for me, then. We’re going to tape these on, it will simply feel like tape being stuck to your skin, nothing odd, all right?”

“All right.”

They watched as Jemma’s deft little hands took strips of electrodes from Banner and laid them around Barnes’ implant, about four inches back.

“All right, we’re going to turn it on now, and you WILL tell me if there is any pain, will you not, James?”

“Yes ma’am.” he muttered.

There was a low hum, and Barnes froze for a long moment, then sort of shuddered and melted into the couch. Everyone in the room watched intently, waiting for mayhem, but there wasn’t any. “It… it doesn’t hurt.” Barnes said in wonder. “Not even the background stuff that never went away.” He looked a little teary, but Rogers did too, so that was all right.

Jemma leaned around so he could see her. “Good.” She smiled happily. “Do you want us to tell you exactly what we’re doing, or do you want to ignore us and talk to Captain Rogers?”

“I… ignore you.” Barnes said, wonder still in his voice.

“Very good. All we’re going to do is look and prod with our fingers. If we do anything else, we’ll tell you.”

Barnes nodded.

In the end there was a great deal of prodding, and comparison of scans to actual hardware, and by the time they were ready to try to drain the reservoirs, Barnes had fallen asleep. “It’s very common for people with chronic pain to collapse in exhaustion if the pain is suddenly controlled.” Jemma told Rogers gently. “We really should get these drugs out of here, but we don’t want to do it without permission.”

Rogers nodded. “He already agreed for you to do it, more than once. He agreed when you told him it
was the point of this, today. And again when you started talking about pain. And he’s told me often he wants it gone. Go ahead and do it, I’ll be ready for it if he wakes up. But I don’t think he will.”

“Captain Rogers,” Jemma said, “given James’ history, it would be very wrong to do anything to him without permission first.”

“I understand. I agree. Completely. But I know him, and I’m saying, in his mind he already gave you permission.”

“Go ahead and do it, Jemma.” Phil told her quietly.

She glared at all of them for a long moment, and then went to work with Banner. “If this ends with him not trusting me, you will all suffer. Badly.”

Phil believed her. From the looks of it, so did Banner and Rogers.

Chapter End Notes

When I started writing this in November I thought it would be a quick 20K word get-together fic centered on Phil and Clint. It's now turned into an ensemble beast and I'm at 45K words thinking (hoping) it'll end up being about 70K altogether. The story ends at the end of the week, when Sam returns to New York in “Sam Meets the Avengers”, and then we start with a REAL story when Thor returns to Midgard.

So yeah, have another longish chapter of the quickie filler fic before the real story starts. Oy.
“The Incredible Nightcrawler, ladies and gentlemen!” Clint called in what could only be described as a ringmaster’s voice. The small, dark blue man who’d been in the center of the other three stepped forward, raised his arms in a pose, then swept a stylish bow, his tail at a jaunty angle.

Darcy, Clint, and Natasha applauded.

Chapter Notes

More scenes I wrote because I love the characters. I'm sure you'll all muddle through somehow. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clint was at his stove the next morning, wearing nothing but a ratty pair of sweat pants, drinking coffee and frying eggs. It wasn’t early. He’d slept the clock ‘round and now his joints were stiff and he hated life. Natasha swept in with no warning. “What NOW?”

“Stark called Xavier yesterday. Xavier wants to come in today via Nightcrawler Express but would like the two of us to, in Charles’ words, ‘oversee things’.”

Clint turned off the heat under his eggs and laid his head on the counter to have a pity party. The feel of all his vertebrae sliding and popping did nothing for his mood. “By us you mean me, and by ‘oversee’ you mean threaten to break the arms of anyone in this building who is remotely rude about mutants.”

“I will do the threatening, and the arm breaking. I’m sure Logan will be happy to help. You’re on security for the teleportation. You know Kurt doesn’t trust just anyone, not for that. Have you been drinking this straight out of the carton?” She held up his orange juice.

“Yes.”

“Pig.” She drank it anyway. Out of the carton.

“Who’s coming, besides Kurt and the Professor?”

“Logan and Hank.”

“Hank.”

“Yes.” Nat grinned. “Hey, we live with a Hulk, why should they freak out about a big fuzzy blue guy?”

“I’m more worried about Stark’s response to teleportation.”
“Yeah, that’s gonna make him flip his shit.” Nat agreed cheerfully.

He didn't mind the teleporting mutants, the space aliens, or the sorta mind-wiped almost-fiancée, but he had NOT signed on for hysterical genius billionaires. Fuck his life.

*

Everyone relevant (other than Steve and Bucky, who’d slept the night before curled together like puppies; there were photos) was in Stark’s lab, so that’s where Clint and Nat went. Phil was dressed casually again, leaning against a wall, watching all the geeks sharing each other’s data and ideas on the Winter Arm, as they had begun calling it. Clint went to lean against the wall next to Phil. Clint didn’t really want to hammer on Phil’s memory, but he needed to know stuff, so he dredged up what little bit of tact he had.

“Do you need a briefing on the visitors coming in today?”

Phil considered that for a moment. “I have vague memories of a school full of mutant children?” Was that right? It seemed very strange, but given what he’d been doing the last three years, certainly not impossible. And he imagined the children would desperately need a safe space. The difference between a villain and a hero, often, was safety in childhood. He wondered if Xavier took donations.

Clint grinned at him. “Yeah. We’re getting the head of the school and three… I guess we could call them staff members, today. Four adults, none of the kids. Which is too bad, the kids are fun.”

Phil reminded himself that Clint grew up in a circus and this was his ‘normal’. “Are they… what’s the word, extreme? mutants?”

“Two of them are. Kurt is dark blue and has a tail, and is scary-looking but a sweetheart. I’ve known him since I was a kid, we headlined a circus together for a while. He’s one of the most purely good people I’ve ever met.”

Phil thought he might have memories of Clint hugging someone with that description, and sharing a beer with him?

“The other,” Clint went on, “is Hank McCoy. He’s a geneticist, I’m not sure if his mutation was at birth or a lab accident. It’s beyond rude to ask that stuff, of course. I think he’s coming along to meet Banner more than anything to do with the Winter Soldier.”

“And he’s blue?” Phil had to ask.

Clint laughed. “He looks like Sully from Monsters Inc. Or the other way around. He did a favor for someone at Pixar ages ago, and they made a friendly monster who looked like him in the movie. I think they did it to try and, what’sit, normalize him, but now instead of people being afraid, he gets mobbed by children who want to pet him and call him ‘Kitty’. I think he preferred terrifying everyone.”

Phil laughed. Everyone in the room turned to stare. He rolled his eyes at them. Natasha looked pleased and amused, Stark looked downright disturbed. Everyone else went back to work. Phil watched as Clint stepped to the center of the room and his body language subtly shifted as he took over.

“Listen up, please.” Clint said calmly. “We have Doctor Charles Xavier incoming, ETA about half an hour.” He pointed at Stark before Stark could say a word. “They will not be coming by car, so don’t worry about parking passes. JARVIS?”
A screen flashed a picture of a distinguished older man in a wheelchair and a suit Phil really liked. He thought it might be McQueen. One of the English tailoring houses for sure, anyway.

“The professor will be traveling with three companions. First is a… bodyguard, yeah, let’s call him that, James Logan. Goes by Logan. Soft spot for kids, and not much else. He once swam to Cuba for cigars, so I don’t suggest arguing with him about it; if he feels polite he won’t light it. Stark, do not fuck with him, he has zero patience for bullshit and will key your Audi like you would not believe.”

There must have been an inside joke there because Natasha, beside him, snorted. This time a photo of a rangy, disheveled, muscular looking man chewing a cigar popped up. Phil was sure he’d seen the man somewhere before. Perhaps more than once. Not worked with, he didn’t think, but the guy tended to show up when there was trouble? Well, mutant bodyguard. Who knew where he’d been or who he’d worked for. He certainly looked capable of ending any trouble. Or starting it.

“Bruce, you’ve had dealings with Doctor Hank McCoy, right?” Clint asked.

“Absolutely. Brilliant guy, we’ve been in contact for years. One of the few who didn’t cut ties or throw me under the bus when the accident happened. He’s coming today?” Banner asked happily. Betty Ross and Jemma Simmons also perked up at the name.

“Yep. I think he wants to meet you guys. I don’t see how he’d be useful with Barnes, but I’m sure if there’s something he can do to help, he will. Thing is, you know how you’ve only read his papers and emailed him? He never goes to conferences. There’s a reason.”

A photo popped up of a large, VERY large… blue… furry… guy… popped up.

“Holy shit.” said Stark, who apparently had a stock phrase for surprising events.

Phil studied the photo. This one wasn’t ringing a bell, at all. He glanced around. Lots of surprise, but no horror. Outright curiosity from Jemma, Banner, and Doctor Ross.

“It is NOT polite to ask him if he was born that way or if it was a lab accident.” Clint said sternly.

“Last, is a PERSONAL FRIEND of mine, Kurt Wagner. I know him from the circus. He is the nicest guy you will ever meet, and if any of you upset him I will personally shoot you IN THE ASS, with a BARBED ARROW. We clear?”

Silence.

“ARE WE CLEAR.” Clint barked out in a voice that made everyone jump. There were nods.

A photo went up and, well. To be blunt, he looked demonic. Yellow eyes, blue skin, a tail? What? And the look was distinctive enough, “do I remember him drinking with Clint and telling old circus stories?” he asked Natasha quietly.

She grinned. “You do. He really is a nice guy. His mutation… he could get away with literally anything he wanted. Literally. From stealing the Hope Diamond to high-profile assassinations. And he doesn’t do much but protect the kids at Xavier’s school. He also teaches World Religions and likes to argue philosophy.”

Fair enough. If Natasha respected him, he was a solid guy.

Everyone had gotten done gaping and Clint had reminded them of their manners and was moving on. “Okay. At ten AM on the nose, these four men will arrive in the common room on the Avengers floor. We have all got to be the hell out of the way, so Nat and I will be guarding the entrances.”
“How??” Stark demanded.

Clint was really smiling now. “Kurt teleports.”

“No fucking way.” Stark replied.

“You can watch from the door.” Clint told him. “Kurt has to know where he’s going and that includes where people are. He almost never jumps into somewhere he’s never been before, but he’s trusting me to keep people the hell out of his way. I will be doing that.”

“HOLY SHIT.” Stark repeated. “JARVIS, full sensors on, record, everything possible.”

“Of course, sir.” JARVIS agreed.

“JARVIS, Kurt asks me to apologize in advance for any trouble he causes with your sensors. Electronics really don’t like him. We’ll be on the phone ahead of time so you’ll have some warning.”

“Of course, Hawkeye. I will personally thank him, but please do pass along my appreciation for his kindness.”

“Will do, JARVIS.” Clint agreed.

“I am now going to go make arrangements. If you want to come up and be scientists, you can, but stay the HELL out of the common area. Understood?” Clint told everyone. “This is a big act of trust for Kurt, and he is trusting ME and if nothing else, remember BARBED ARROWS. And your manners.”

“Understood.” a few people mumbled, along with other affirmatives.

Clint swept out. Curious, Phil followed along with Natasha.

*

Up in the common room, Clint started moving furniture out of the center of the room, and Phil stepped in to help; knowing Stark it was custom built, and HEAVY. “I don’t remember this…?” Phil half-asked, cautiously. He wasn’t sure where the boundaries were, for questions or much else.

“No, Kurt doesn’t do this very often at all, especially not at this distance. He’ll probably be exhausted. They wanted to do this fast and on the down low because of the whole Winter Soldier thing. Even with that, I don’t think Kurt would do it if I wasn’t here on the incoming end to make sure everyone was safe.” Clint snorted. “I’m probably the only person not at Xavier’s school who he’d trust to do this.”

Natasha was rolling up rugs and piling them to one side, creating a large, slate-floored expanse. “Plus the room’s pretty damn big.” she added. “He’s also had bad experiences popping up near jumpy people and getting shot at, or worse. There was an, uh, knife incident, the first time we met.”

“I don’t doubt.” Phil could only imagine having someone who looked like Kurt suddenly appear, particularly if it was a high-adrenaline occasion to start with. He was VERY glad Clint had warned them all.

“Crap.” Clint muttered to himself, and pulled out his phone, dialing on speaker. Phil thought it was because a phone against his ear messed with his hearing aids. Pretty sure. Maybe because it made it easier for Natasha to eavesdrop. He could see that, too.
“Stark Industries, office of scientist wrangling, head wrangler Darcy speaking.” said a saccharine-sweet voice on the other end.

“Nice.” Clint told her. “Can you do me a solid?”

“For the loan of your vinyl collection, I will do anything you want.”

“Your unending devotion is enough. Can you run down to the coffee bar at the executive entrance, get a pot of their best Viennese and a side of cream? Put it on my account. Bring it up to the common room.”

Natasha leaned in. “Put it on the Avengers Guests account.”

“Will do, Wonder Twins!” and the line went dead.

Darcy. The only Darcy that Phil was coming up with was Foster’s minion, and Darcy Lewis, force of nature, teaming up with Hawkeye... His blood ran a little cold. Yes, for all the age difference, they were a good match. He hoped they didn’t burn the world down by accident one weekend after too many tequila shooters. “You and Darcy?” he asked as neutrally as possible.

“Yeah, she’s great-” Clint broke off and stared at Phil. “NO. Noooooo, not like that. Only ever spoke to her starting, what, yesterday? When I went to get her and Foster. We share a love of music and telling The Man to fuck off.”

“You are The Man.” Natasha told Clint. Clint faked a punch at her and they scuffled.

For all he had designs on Clint himself, that really wasn’t less disturbing, considering the two of them as good friends. “Don’t get drunk and accidentally burn down the world together some weekend.”

“If only.” Clint muttered.

Natasha burst out laughing. “Don’t worry on that account, Phil. Hawkeye here has given up drinking.” She put an arm around Clint and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

Clint looked more disgusted than anything else, so he carefully said “...oh?”

“The Natasha Romanov and Kate Bishop quit drinking program.” Clint told him. “Never, ever have them decide you need treatment. Ever.”

He looked at Natasha’s grim smile and let himself chuckle.

Clint looked up as the elevator dinged and half a dozen scientists got off, Darcy bringing up the rear carrying a bamboo tray holding a coffee pot, some odds and ends, and a plate of pastries. “They had a couple kinds of strudel, and with the Viennese coffee, I figured why not. Someone around here will eat them.” She went through to the kitchen and sat the tray on the counter.

“Cool, thanks.” Clint considered a moment, then raised his voice. “Idiot bystanders, you can stand in the entryway or the kitchen. Pick one, and do it now.” There was some shuffling around between areas. “Now. You will stay where you are until you have the all clear. Understood?” He glared around the room until everyone nodded or told him yes.

Phil took up a position next to Natasha, leaning against the wall near the scientist holding pen; he knew she was prepared to jump in and stop anyone from moving into the room, as he was.

“And here we go.” Clint muttered to himself. He poked a few buttons on his phone, then held it up
and turned a slow circle.

“Panoramic shot.” Natasha told him softly.

More speakerphone, then someone answered with “Yeah, what.”

“Got the image?” Clint asked.

“He’s looking at it now. Get the hell outta the way.”

“I’m now back to where Natasha is, standing next to her.” Clint told the voice, moving accordingly.

“Got it. He’s game. We’ll be there in a sec.” The line went dead.

There was a long, breathless pause, and then a legitimate ‘poof’ with black dust, and four men had arrived, Wagner in the center of the group. Phil was sure he heard Stark squeak. Foster was muttering at a tablet, and Darcy was pouring coffee.

“The Incredible Nightcrawler, ladies and gentlemen!” Clint called in what could only be described as a ringmaster’s voice. The small, dark blue man who’d been in the center of the other three stepped forward, raised his arms in a pose, then swept a stylish bow, his tail at a jaunty angle.

Darcy, Clint, and Natasha applauded. Everyone else looked shell-shocked.

Welcome to Avengers’ Tower.

Chapter End Notes

We will probably be having another skip day tomorrow; things here are fraught with the holidays and bogged down with things to do as well. I JUST WANNA HIDE UNDER THE COVERS AND WRITE SILLY FAN FIC, DAMMIT.

Take care of yourselves out there, geeklings.
Chapter Summary

“Did you hear a thing I said? Resurrection? Unknown status? Not human?”

“I cook dinner with a scientist who turns into a Hulk. Not to mention the supersoldier, the space alien, and Tony fucking Stark roaming around. I am here to tell you, Tony is his own category of life form.”

Chapter Notes

Apparently my method of coping last night was to dig in and write about 5K words, so enjoy. Someone needs to come over here and bake cookies, though, if I'm gonna keep up the writing like this.

Xavier went to take a look at Barnes, who was the priority. Clint went along to provide security, and Natasha mumbled something about looking after someone in DC and disappeared, as she was known to do. Phil went to his apartment and paced a hole in the floor, not even knowing what to hope for.

He took a moment to make tea when he remembered his manners. Then he went back to pacing.

Then there was a knock and Xavier wheeled in, followed by the bodyguard, Logan, and wow, he was big. Six four easily, and unlike most men that large, he looked like he knew how to fight, and didn’t simply rely on his size. “Thank you for coming.” he told both of them. “Would you like some tea?” some memory pinged faintly, and he asked Logan cautiously, “or… a beer?”

The man grinned and suddenly looked much more friendly. He stepped forward to shake Phil’s hand, and said “maybe when we’re done, thanks.” He paused a moment, really looked at Phil, and kind of smiled. “You don’t remember me.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Phil should be getting used to this.

“You came out to the school a couple times with Clint and Natasha. Taught the kids self defense, situational awareness. You always treated them like kids.” He smiled. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re not dead.”

Phil didn’t know quite what to say, and settled for “Thank you. So am I.” That got him a chuckle.

“The Professor wants to talk to you privately, so if it’s okay with you, I’ll have that beer with Kurt and Clint upstairs.”

“That’s absolutely fine, thank you.”

“Thank you Logan.” The Professor said, and that was that. He wheeled into the living room area of the floor and Phil poured him a cup of tea. “I too am glad you’re still with us, Agent Coulson.”
“We’ve met before.”

“We have indeed,” he said smoothly, and took a sip of tea. “You usually call me Charles. We’ve been indebted to you for many years, for quietly sending mutant children to us.”

Huh. They must be friends then. “First name basis it is, then.” he agreed, and sat down nearby.

“I’m afraid I have to ask some hard questions before I look at your memory.”

That sounded ominous. “All right.”

“Do you know what was used to… for lack of a better term, resurrect you?”

“No, I don’t, I’m sorry. I’ve seen it referred to as alien technology, and we’ve been chasing something called Project Centipede, through experimental labs, that might be related, but we aren’t sure.”

Charles nodded thoughtfully. “At the school, I have a device known as Cerebro. I can use it to track mutants. I can also see baseline humans, of course, but there are so many of them, they’re very hard to distinguish.”

“Of course.” Phil tried, politely.

“There is a third variety of human, distinguishable from the other two. Beyond that, I haven’t ever been able to find out much about them. I haven’t investigated diligently, I’m afraid. I was unwilling to target another minority group like mutants have been targeted.”

Phil waited.

“Since we’ve last seen each other, you have shifted into that third category.”

They both sort of stared at each other. “Maybe the third group is people who’ve been dead?” After all, being dead days and brought back was odd, but people’s hearts were re-started all the time.

Charles shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. Perhaps. It only seemed fair to let you know.”

More complications, just what his life needed. “Thank you, I appreciate it.” Knowledge was power, maybe. Hopefully.

“You don’t know anything about what was done?” Charles asked cautiously, again.

“No. A few code words I’ve been trying to chase down. Once things settle here in the next week or so, I’m going to go back to it. With the resources here I might find something I hadn’t yet.” With JARVIS’ ability to hack the SHIELD servers. He doubted Stark would mind.

“I’ll wish you luck. And would appreciate any data you are willing to share. As well as offer my help, if you need it.”

That was probably a hell of a lot of help, Phil reflected. “Thank you. I’ll keep you in the loop.”

“Now then.” Charles said with a calm smile. “If you could lay on your couch, perhaps? I need to lay my hands on your head.”

“Oh.” Phil’s brain was blank at that. “Of course.” He slipped off his shoes and stretched out.

“Do I need to caution you, my friend, that brains are complex things?”
Phil sighed. That didn’t sound like good news. “No. I’d love a miracle, but I think I’ve already used up my quota.”

“That’s the spirit.” Gentle hands touched on the sides of Phil’s head and, not knowing what else to do, Phil laid there and tried not to think of anything incriminating. Or horrifying. “Oh, my dear, you HAVE been through it.” Charles murmured, closing his eyes and concentrating. Eventually he sat back and reached for his tea again. He looked weary.

“Would you like some brandy in that? Or perhaps some straight scotch?” Phil had to ask. Guy was here to do a favor and it was wiping him out. Regardless of the answer, he deserved some thanks.

“That would be quite nice, thank you. Brandy, if you’d be so kind.”

Phil rose and headed for the kitchen. “Regular, which of course is the extra good stuff thanks to Stark, or would you like some umeshu that May drinks?”

“Umeshu would be a treat.” Charles said with a smile.

Melinda would kill him. Phil grabbed the bottle, took it back out. Charles tipped a healthy dose into both their cups, and they drank it straight.

“Now then.” Charles said after a long moment. “The brain doesn’t write memories into a single space, like a memo on a chalk board. Therefore wiping them away again is, to be honest, nearly impossible. However, to continue with the chalk board analogy, you can wind up with random patches missing, which make putting together the whole again very difficult.”

“So it’s there, but it isn’t.”

“Put simply, yes. It seems a great deal of your conscious memory was destroyed. That would be the things we can deliberately recall. An inventory of your closet, for example.”

Phil nodded.

“Sensory and emotional memories, those aren’t so easy to pinpoint within the brain, and nearly impossible to remove.”

“So these last three years, when I felt like something was missing, horribly wrong-”

“You were missing Clint, and Natasha, and the rest of your loved ones, yes.” Charles gazed into Phil’s eyes for a long moment and said softly, “I’m very sorry.”

“We can’t fix it.” Phil croaked, pouring himself another slug of brandy.

Charles went back to straight tea. “With your permission, I can do what I can to link the memories back up, conscious and sensory and emotional. The memories of your resurrection, the trauma that you do remember… there is more there. It is worse.”

“Great.” Phil didn’t need any more nightmares and cold sweats and sudden dread for no apparent reason.

“I would understand completely if you are resistant to the idea, but I could, if you will, repress the resurrection memories that haven’t surfaced yet.”

“I was tortured.” Phil stated. It was the first he’d ever said it out loud.

“Yes.” Charles said softly.
“And there’s worse I’m blocking out. You’d help me keep blocking it out.”

“Yes. Though I’d understand if you’ve had quite enough of people messing about with your memory.”

Phil felt his eyes get wet, cursed his damned emotions. “Well, you see,” he said hoarsely, “the big difference here is that you’re asking my permission first. What do you need me to do?”

“Lay back down on the couch. Think of the good moments you’ve had with your team, these last three years.”

“All right.” Phil did as he was told, and hoped for the best.

* 

After the meeting with Charles, Phil felt a little – a lot – raw and went down to the coffee bar. It was probably the last place anyone would look for him, and would get him out of the way of both teams and the teleporting of the school staff back to Westchester. And he needed to get the hell out of that apartment. He got a chair in a corner with his back to the wall and a pot of excellent tea, tried to enjoy the sunlight, and watched people come and go. The lobby only served the Avengers floors and the Stark executive floors, so the traffic was far more light and rarefied than it would be if he went over to the main lobby. THAT was situated in two floors of shops behind the main entrance and was generally a zoo during business hours.

He was amusing himself guessing the designers and costs of the men’s suits he saw going past when Clint exited the private elevator, spotted him almost immediately, then went over to the barrista to order. Unable to help himself, he played his ‘can I remember’ game he’d been torturing himself with, guessing what Clint would order. If memory served – and it really didn’t – he’d get something decaffeinated, usually tea. Because… he prodded his brain a little angrily. Because coffee messed up his aim, even the decaf?

Clint came over, settled next to him with HIS back to the wall, and put a plate of pastries on the table. “Hey.” he said, doctoring his… something green and not coffee.

“How are you doing?” Clint asked unexpectedly.

Phil gave him a look.

“Okay, Charles may have mentioned you could probably use some company, but I was planning to come find you anyway. Bad news?” He hooked a foot under Phil’s and started peeling the paper off an enormous muffin.

“Indifferent news. I guess.”

“No instant fix?”

“No.”

Clint did his shrug-head-bob move when accepting information at face value. “I’ve been told several times that brains are complicated. Including every time you dragged my ass into medical over a concussion.”

He thought he remembered a few of those. “A guy can hope.”
“Yeah.” Clint sighed, bumped his shoulder against Phil’s. “Still glad to have you, though.” Phil looked over in surprise, and Clint grinned. “Never thought I’d have the chance to do pastries and tea with you again. It’s pretty damned awesome.”

Given his current project to dump the secret agent image, Phil just went with what he was thinking. “Even though I don’t remember most of our damned lives?”

Clint gave a surprised blink at that. “Well, sure, that kinda sucks, but I’ll take you, alive, any way I can.”

“Sorry. Bad day.”

“Yeah. No worries.”

“Did you ever hear of a Project TAHITI, before or after I died?” Phil had to ask. With Charles’ revelations, the investigation felt more urgent than ever. He needed to find out what he was before he could move on with his life in any way.

Clint’s eyes went even sharper than normal, and he leaned back in his seat, clearly thinking hard. “PROJECT Tahiti. Like a thing, not the place.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m more visual memory; for the sneaky shit we need to ask Natasha. She’s a fucking encyclopedia. But Tahiti. We were never there. Nobody ever wants to get up to shenanigans on nice Polynesian islands thousands of miles from anywhere strategic. Not since World War Two, anyway.” He paused, still thinking. “French protectorate. It’s possible the French might try to hide something there, but what? Anything beyond a think tank, they’d have to haul in equipment and supplies from Australia and SOMEONE would have noticed that.”

Phil listened in amazement as Clint didn’t even attempt to hide anything from him. Three days back from the dead and Clint had thrown in with him, no questions asked. He sighed. Full disclosure in return was going to be horrible, at best. “TAHITI is the code name for whatever they did to resurrect me.”

“Huh.” Clint seemed to think about it some more, shook his head. “Yeah, still got nothing. We need to put Natasha on it. She’d really enjoy having a project to be ruthless about right now.”

“I was going to have JARVIS hack the SHIELD servers.” Phil admitted.

“That is not like you.” Clint said in surprise. “But a damn good idea. Natasha, though, she’d track down the dead site stuff that isn’t on computers. Or we could talk to Tony. As I understand it, he’s been digging through the servers anyway. And knowing him he’s got a plan to find paper files going back to the SSR.”

“Tony.” Phil repeated, surprised Clint was on a first name basis with him. Last he remembered clearly, he’d been ranting on the phone about being Stark’s security detail while Clint laughed hysterically on the other end. “I’m not sure the world’s ready for the two of you being friends.”

“He’s a futurist. I didn’t really get that until I started hanging around here. He’s always six steps ahead. So he probably had a plan in place for this last month. And if you think the two of us are bad, you should see it when he and Steve are on the same wavelength. It’s kinda scary. Mayhem happens. I’d be terrified except it’s Steve.”

Phil had to snort at that; he was one of the few people who’d ever seen Rogers’ unedited service
record. He was very definitely about the spirit of the law, rather than the letter of it. “Stark and Rogers teaming up at all is pretty terrifying.”

“They may be more effective than Team Delta and you know I don’t say that lightly.”

That WAS concerning. He hoped Rogers really did keep Stark in line, but he did not discount Stark’s ability to talk anyone into anything. “Thank God Stark never went into politics.”

Clint gave one of his rare peals of laughter at that, one that had heads turning. He ignored them and bumped his shoulder to Phil’s again. “Yeah, that would be some mayhem, wouldn’t it?”

They drank and ate sugar for a while. Phil wondered how long he’d have to work off the calories in the gym, and decided he didn’t care about that, either.

“So what’s going on, Phil?” Clint asked softly after Phil’s second danish.

Phil gave a grim ‘ugh’ at that. “Going on with what?”

“Brooding in public? In jeans and a sweater? Plowing through danishes?”

“Oh, that.” He glanced over and Clint had a bit of sugar on his lip and he wanted to lick it off. He looked away. “I said to hell with my secret agent image, about the time I realized I’d been resurrected against my will. Priorities shifted around a bit.”

Clint didn’t seem to have much to say to that, poking at an empty sugar packet.

“How about you, Clint?” Phil finally asked. This was probably going to lead to information he didn’t want, but he couldn’t help asking.

“Oh, me.” he shrugged again. “You know, I kept thinking, for a long time, what I’d be willing to give up, to have you back. Almost anything, really.” He turned, smiled, looked away again. “Turns out you were out there all the time, and what I should have done was hunt down Fury and gut him.”

“Natasha has dibs.” Phil said, since he couldn’t think of anything else.

“You know she only did that to keep the rest of us out of trouble.”

Ah. Phil had always wondered if Clint saw through some of Natasha’s behavior. Apparently he did.

“I’m not really… back.”

That got Phil a piercing look from those beautiful eyes. “How do you figure? You’re right here, aren’t you?”

“With no memory. No idea what was done to me. Xavier tells me—” he broke off at that, gave a subtle look around. No one seemed to be paying them the least attention. “-he tells me I’ve gone from baseline human to something else. Something HE can’t identify.”

“Wow. It really has been a shit day for you, huh?”

Phil gave a dry laugh that sounded more like crying, even to him.

“So we investigate, figure out what the hell’s going on. With your geeks thrown into the mix, shouldn’t be that hard.”

“And then what? What if we find I’m… I don’t know, inhuman? Some LMD variation Stark’s never seen? Or the resurrection job isn’t stable and I drop over again?”
“The last one would upset me.” Clint allowed. “But, c’mon, Phil, most of this is the same shit we always dealt with.”

Phil let himself glare at that. This was NOT the same.

“Oh, it is too. We were constantly getting shot at and exposed to unexplained anomalies and KNOWN anomalies. I half expect to wake up some morning randomly turned into a Hulk or a dragon, myself.” He continued, in a softer tone, “How much exposure did I have to the Cube, while I was doing security? And Loki’s spear? Whatever the hell that was, it was unknown and NOT safe. My brain might run out my ears tomorrow.”

Phil wanted to insist it wasn’t the same, but, maybe it was? Was there a scale for unknown weirdness exposure? “You got alpha weirdness radiation. I got gamma.”

“So you say.” Clint grumbled. “Your memory may be toast but at least you recognize friend from foe.”

Belatedly Phil remembered the full report of Loki taking control of Clint. “Shit. Sorry.”

“Yeah, well. I guess now you owe me a favor.”

Phil simply stared for a long moment. Clint had his poker face on, but he was up to something. Even not remembering the practical jokes themselves, he remembered Clint’s reputation well enough. “I do?”

“Sure, I’m cheering you up.” Clint said as insincerely as possible.

“Right. That’s what this is.”

“Absolutely. So. Favor?”

“What’s the favor?” Phil asked warily. “I am not rappelling down five floors to draw dicks on the windows of Stark’s main lab.” Clint’s eyes lit and damn it, Phil should have remembered to not give him any ideas. “Do. Not.”

“That might be another favor.”

“Clint.”

“Oh, fine. I want a date. If you’re willing. See how things stand between us, spend more time together. This has been nice. All things being equal.” Very softly, he admitted, “I’ve missed getting coffee with you.” They’d always called it ‘getting coffee’ even though neither one of them actually drank coffee most of the time. Go sit in a shop somewhere, drinking something hot and eating sugar, that was their thing. Or had been.

“Did you hear a thing I said? Resurrection? Unknown status? Not human?”

“I cook dinner with a scientist who turns into a Hulk. Not to mention the supersoldier, the space alien, and Tony fucking Stark roaming around. I am here to tell you, Tony is his own category of life form.”

“Clint...” they stared at each other a long moment. “Deploying the puppy eyes is against the Geneva Convention.”

“Eh, US was never a signatory. Come on, we’ll do something calm and public and pretend to be
normal. If I can. I’ll pretend I’m under cover. Usually I don’t draw too much attention that way.”

And really, there was only one answer he was going to give. “All right. Yes.” The smile he got made it worth it, even if it all went to hell later.
Chapter Summary

“We may get lucky and she’ll have something to go ON the kasha.” Phil answered. “If not...” he held up the bowl. “I’ll call it a garnish.”

Clint suspected Phil was remembering more than he realized, but then Russian Breakfast with Nat grumbling at them about the mornings she didn’t GET breakfast were pretty hard to forget. “Please let it not be leftover borscht and sashlik.” he mumbled, and knocked on the door.

Chapter Notes

More from Clint's POV, for youse who are fans of that.

The next morning, Clint got a text from Natasha around seven while he was still laying in bed. He was getting damned tired of these wakeup calls, especially when he was sleeping badly. At least she wasn’t in his room yelling at him this time. “Delta meeting, my apartment, one hour.” Clint kinda chewed on his lip to avoid getting teary over a damned text message, because he hadn’t gotten that one in three years and he’d never thought he would miss a text message until now. Even if it was too goddamn early. The three of them had run on a pretty informal chain of command; Phil answered for the two of them and was in charge in the eyes of SHIELD, so they’d both deferred to him on the obvious stuff. But one reason they’d been so successful was because each of them had the brains to listen to whoever had the most skill and experience at whatever the topic was. And since Natasha’s expertise was sneaking around and killing bad guys with great malice, he was kind of curious about the topic of today’s meeting.

In her apartment. At eight in the morning.

Oh hell, they were gonna have to eat Russian Breakfast. He HATED Russian Breakfast.

If he hurried he could run down to the coffee shop and get pastries to take along. She’d see through him in a skinny minute, but unless she was in a really terrible mood she’d let him get away with it. And there’d be something to eat besides boiled buckwheat and tears of regret. Or, worse, leftovers. Natasha’s leftovers.

He jumped out of bed and grabbed his jeans. Quickly.

*  

Clint got back upstairs again just in time, and ran into Phil standing in front of Nat’s door, holding a bowl of fruit. “Oh sure, HEALTHY breakfast.” he muttered. Still better than the goddamned buckwheat, though.

“We may get lucky and she’ll have something to go ON the kasha.” Phil answered. “If not...” he
held up the bowl. “I’ll call it a garnish.”

Clint suspected Phil was remembering more than he realized, but then Russian Breakfast with Nat grumbling at them about the mornings she didn’t GET breakfast were pretty hard to forget. “Please let it not be leftover borscht and sashlik.” he mumbled, and knocked on the door.

Nat opened it, wearing an apron, which was exceedingly ominous. “Hi, guys.” She waved them toward the kitchen/dining combo, where she had quite a spread set out on the counter top. They put down their own offerings and took in what awaited them. Blini, latkes, salmon, black bread that might have been from the bakery she liked in Brighton Beach. Honey cake. And syrniki, the little cheese dumpling-things that were Phil’s favorite. As well as an assortment of jams, butter, and sour cream to go with.

Clint’s stomach dropped, and active dread set in. Nat was trying to TALK THEM INTO SOMETHING, POLITELY. They were all doomed. So doomed. Nat poured tea for Phil and he saw she had the samovar out and that smelled like her really good imported tea and THEY WERE ALL GONNA DIE. He dropped into a chair at the table without getting any food, braced himself physically and mentally, and demanded “Oh, Jesus, WHAT?”

“Eat something.” Nat told him, and flung a dumpling at his head. He caught it. It was still warm.

“YOU COOKED.” Clint accused.

Phil, in the middle of making up a plate for himself, looked a little startled, and glanced between them cautiously, serving spoon frozen in mid air. “Is there a problem?”

“Yeah!” Clint waved the dumpling. “SHE COOKED! She only cooks for us when we’re injured, literally starving, or she’s talking us into something.”

Phil quirked a grin at them, startling them both. “Oh, well then.” and went back to serving himself.

Clint decided this was more of Phil’s shifting priorities, being so easy with them. It was great, even if it was kinda disturbing. He’d think about that later. He’d worry about the food, now. “So what the hell, Nat.” The dumpling was perfect, light and fluffy and cheesy. He KNEW there’d be Phil’s favorite red currant preserves over there for them, too. He’d only had these things in times of great upheaval – usually in a hospital after some idiotic mission or other - and the scent of them made him wish for a gun he wasn’t wearing.

“My GOD you are annoying.” Nat snapped at him.

“Yes. Yes I am. WHAT?” Clint demanded.

Phil settled down, happily tucking into a plate full of food, watching them as if they were one of his crappy reality shows.

Clint saw caviar on his plate and – since Nat was being snarky rather than serious or worried – threw out “YOU BOUGHT CAVIAR. IS IT NUCLEAR WAR?”

“I will go nuclear on your ass if you do not eat some of this food I put together for you, sit down, and shut up.” Nat snarled.

Huh. So he was ballast and it was Phil she was talking into something. Clint thought he might know what she had in mind, so he finished his cheese thingie and went to get more. Threw in some of the salmon and other stuff for protein, whatever, and sat down. Nat had black bread with salmon on it, a couple blini with caviar (she was so damn Russian sometimes), and half a latke.
“The syrniki are very good, thank you.” Phil told Nat kindly, and she beamed at him.

Yeah, something was up. Clint ate his meal – it was good, of course it was good, anything Natasha did, she did well, including cook. While he ate he stared her down. And, weirdly, she wouldn’t meet his eyes. That? That was really fucking weird.

After they’d finished, they all sat around the table sipping tea that Natasha had stirred jam into. Every time Clint started to ask what the hell, Phil kicked him under the table. Phil watched Nat patiently, waiting. Phil had always been more patient than the other two of them put together. Sure, they could wait when they had to – life and death stuff was very motivating – but for true patience, well. Phil was the only one who had any.

Eventually Nat looked up from her tea and asked Phil, “when you came here, with your team. You were looking for a safe space. For them, really, more than yourself. You intended to go off the grid after that, didn’t you.”

“What?” Clint demanded. Nat kicked him under the table. HE WAS GONNA KICK SOMEONE BACK HERE PRETTY QUICK. He turned to glare at Phil. “What the hell, Phil?”

Phil drank more tea, putting his thoughts in order. If you knew him, you could tell he was thinking, fast. To outsiders he looked like he was considering another dumpling. “They need a safe space. They’re stuck between SHIELD and Hydra and everyone else we’ve pissed off in the last three years. The list is extensive.”

“What? I want that list.” Clint told him. “In fact, I want to know what you’ve been doing-” Nat kicked him again, and he turned to her. “I SWEAR the next person to kick me is getting PUNCHED.” Phil laid a hand on his arm even as Nat stared him down and raised her chin in her classic ‘bring it on, bitch’ gesture.

“I hadn’t really known what I was going to do, once I had the team safely set up.” Phil allowed.

“But it was going to be suitably dramatic and noble.” Nat replied quietly.

Phil didn’t answer, and drank more tea.

Fine, FINE, Clint was gonna sit here and let Nat continue what he saw now was actually one of her so-beautiful-it-could-be-art interrogations. FINE. He sat back and crossed his arms, glaring.

“And now?” Nat asked gently.

Phil’s eyes flicked to Clint, then back to his tea. “I don’t know.”

Oh, wrong answer, motherfucker, there is a DATE being organized and oh HELL NO. Nat’s foot pressed down on Clint’s, gently, so since it wasn’t a kick he shut up again FOR NOW.

“What about what we want?” Nat asked, again in her gentle, neutral voice. She was so good even Clint wasn’t entirely sure where she was going with this.

Phil looked surprised at that. “You? AND Clint?”

“Yes. Strike Team Delta. There were always three of us.”

Now Clint could see the map, and the goal, the big red X marking the spot. Yeah. He’d leave her to it. He got up to get some rum for his tea. She was always better at all that… word stuff… than he was.
Behind him, Phil said so quietly his ‘aids almost missed it, “I didn’t think any of you would be happy to see me.”

“Because we were all lied to?”

“Because I didn’t come find you.”

It took everything Clint had to keep his yap shut on that one. He took a swig directly out of the rum bottle and Nat was giving him That Look and she was gonna make him pay for that later. Fuck. He considered the Kate and Nat Quit Drinking Program, left the bottle on the counter, and went to get some orange juice instead. He poured in some grenadine, and pretended there was tequila in it.

“Phil, when Clint first brought me in, and my memory was a mess and I was spouting Soviet conspiracy theories, did you blame me for it?”

That gave Phil pause. “...no.”

“Of course not.” Nat said smoothly. “Someone had played with my memory, pulled things out, shoved more in.”

Phil stared into his empty cup.

Nat seemed to think a pause was important, so Clint quietly filled everyone’s mugs and sat back down again. If she had TOLD him what she was going to do, he’d have been a damn sight more use to her on this. Since he was sure now that they had the same goal, especially.

Finally, with infinite weariness, Phil asked, “What is it you want, exactly, Natasha?”

“My family back together.” Natasha said without any expression at all.

That one made Clint teary, because the stronger she felt something the less inflection there was in her voice and “Dammit.” he muttered, got up, and went around the table to hug her. She let him. He kept his arm around her shoulders, her head resting against his side, and turned to look at Phil.

Phil, who hadn’t moved, not even a muscle in his face, yet had tears running down his cheeks.

Right, Clint couldn’t take this a second longer. “All right, points made on all sides. Come on.” he pulled Nat up, and she came easily. As he led her past Phil toward the living room, he reached out a hand and took one of Phil’s and tugged him along. He shoved them both down on Natasha’s huge flowered couch, flung a blanket over them, handed Phil the Kleenex, and went back for the tea and the box of pastries.

Once they were all cuddled in under the blanket on the couch, Phil in the center and he and Nat leaning heavily on him from both sides, Clint asked, “Nat, what’s this about?”

Silence.

Shit, Clint was gonna have to be the emotionally mature one. That NEVER ended well, for anyone. “You do realize we know you, right? You only pull the super-spooky spy shit on us when you feel really strongly about something and don’t know how to express it.” It had gotten much, MUCH better over the years; Clint wasn’t sure how they’d survived the first couple years after Nat came in with him.

Still silence. Oh, fine then.
“Phil? You still planning on leaving?” He couldn’t quite keep the edge out of his voice on that one, sue him.

“...not if both of you want me to stay.” Phil finally allowed.

“We do.” Nat said softly.

All right then. Clint cuddled up to Phil, his arm around him, fingers tangled in Nat’s hair, and hung on tight. He was gonna take this moment for himself, thank you.
A Team Begins to Form.

Chapter Summary

“We’d like to become a more world-wide response team, going where we’re invited, to deal with things beyond the scope of local authorities.” Rogers added. He waved a hand toward the screen. “Since the Chitauri, things are getting more out of hand.” There was a short montage of hairy situations, including one or two Phil had been involved in peripherally. “We also have a list of loose ends, from General Ross to the World Security Council, to everything and everyone who escaped from the Raft. And I need to burn down Hydra again.”

Phil was still upset later in the day when he was unwillingly summoned to ANOTHER meeting in the Avengers’ conference room. (The last three years had been hell in many ways, but at least he’d gotten out of a lot of meetings.) JARVIS was apologetic but Sir insisted and would come get him if necessary, so he went down to see what in hell was going on.

This time the makeup was a little different; Rogers and Potts – Pepper – were there as well as Stark and Maria. He was a little guilty about being glad Natasha wasn’t there. That morning he’d been again forced to face what had been done in his name to his loved ones and he didn’t think he’d be getting over it any time soon. If ever.

“So the Avengers!” Stark said brightly, as soon as Phil walked into the lushly decorated room. Behind Stark on a wall screen the A logo he’d taken from what was left of his “STARK” sign after the Battle of Manhattan popped up. “I have some thoughts.”

Phil was pretty sure he himself had a migraine. Or the start of one.

“We.” Pepper stated. “WE have some ideas we’d like to discuss.”

Oh, boy. Rogers looked as determined as Stark and Pepper. The three of them, united on this, was rather worrisome. He was beginning to understand what Clint meant about Rogers and Stark working together being scary. Phil decided to sit with Maria in the confused section.

Pepper smiled at both of them. “With the… restructuring at SHIELD, and your resurrection, Phil, we have some concerns and some thoughts.”

“All right.” He allowed. Pepper was usually reasonable, with well-thought out ideas. Usually ready to implement, if he recalled correctly. Most likely. She was a CEO, after all.

“We want to, not break with SHIELD, but open ourselves to other options as well.” Pepper said delicately.

“We’d like to become a more world-wide response team, going where we’re invited, to deal with things beyond the scope of local authorities.” Rogers added. He waved a hand toward the screen. “Since the Chitauri, things are getting more out of hand.” There was a short montage of hairy situations, including one or two Phil had been involved in peripherally. “We also have a list of loose ends, from General Ross to the World Security Council, to everything and everyone who escaped from the Raft. And I need to burn down Hydra again.”
“Ten Rings.” Stark grumbled with great malice. “And Stern pardoned Justin Hammer. Asshole’s trying to build Stark knockoffs as we speak.”

“I doubt all the people incarcerated on the Raft were true dangers, given the Hydra situation.” Phil reminded them.

“We also intend to take a live and let live approach to mutants and other modified humans.” Pepper said smoothly. “That includes those who’ve escaped. If they want left alone, and are harming no one, we’ll leave them to it. We’ve also spoken with Xavier about letting him and his people deal with the bulk of the emerging mutant talents.”

“Leaving well enough alone will be one of our primary rules, if I have anything to do with it.” Rogers assured Phil and Maria.

“We’ll be like the Federation, with the Prime Directive.” Stark said helpfully.

Thanks to Clint, he got that reference. From Maria’s snort, she did too.

“This all sounds very… good,” Phil told them politely, “but where do we come in to this?”

“We need more staff.” Pepper said baldly, not even trying to slide in some negotiation.

“People who can kick ass, we don’t have to babysit. Or constantly explain shit to.” Stark added.

“People we TRUST.” Rogers clarified.

“And you want us?” Maria said, a lot disbelieving.

“Yes.” Pepper said calmly. The men on either side of her nodded. “Ideally,” she told them, “we’d love to have something like this.” A diagram popped up on the wall screen of some kind of business hierarchy. Interestingly, the one who had oversight over everything – EVERYTHING – was Pepper herself, not Stark or Rogers. “We’d need a government liaison to deal with SHIELD, other alphabet agencies, the UN, and the like. And we need a handler to deal with logistics on the ground, when the Avengers are out as well as coordinating with Steve and the liaison to decide on what exactly the Avengers will take on and what they won’t.”

“Which of us is supposed to be which?” Maria asked.

“Up to you.” Stark said magnanimously.

They’d need Melinda. For Maria to do both jobs with him, Phil thought, so that either could switch for the other seamlessly, as needed. Melinda in charge of security, primarily the Avengers but coordinating with Stark worldwide. With at least half a dozen assistants, some of whom he’d love to steal from SHIELD. He caught himself. “I’m afraid that isn’t possible.” Even though it was essentially his dream job as well as one that was tailor made for his skill set.

That seemed to surprise everyone, even Maria.

“Why not?” Pepper asked, in CEO mode; solicitous, politely finding any issues so she could clear them away and wear him down.

If only she COULD clear them away.

“The… method of my resurrection. We aren’t sure what was used or how… stable… I am.”

They all stared at him and he wished he had on a suit so he could shoot his cuffs while putting his
nose in the air.

“I am gonna repulsor Fury into a little grease spot on the ground.” Stark grit out.

“I’ll provide an alibi.” Rogers offered.

Beside Phil, Maria made a little chuff he knew was suppressed laughter. He’d missed working with her. Hell, he’d even missed bickering with Stark. “So while I appreciate the thought, perhaps-”

“No. OH NO.” Stark pointed a stained finger at Phil. “You do not get to drop that like a bomb and then toddle away. Hell no. SIT DOWN.”

Phil, who’d been pushing back from the table, remained seated. “I don’t need a tazer to drop you, Stark.” He reminded him.

“That’s better.” Stark replied. “Are you in immediate danger? Are you having any known health problems? And by Tesla you better tell the truth or I’ll have JARVIS start scanning you, right here and now, and give the results to the science team, permission be damned.”

“My memory is very incomplete and unlikely to improve. Physically, I have lost all muscle memory. That includes self defense.” Though he’d been working with Melinda for three years to correct that. “Even Xavier can’t say if that will deteriorate.”

“Has it so far?” Stark practically barked.

“Not that I’ve noticed.” Phil said through his teeth, clinging to patience.

“So you’re a lab experiment.” Stark said, rather brutally, Phil thought.

“Tony.” Rogers said quietly.

“No.” Stark snapped at Rogers. “NO, you know what? Fuck that. Congratulations, Phil, you’re one of us.” He waved a hand at where Pepper and Rogers sat. “You’re in good company, right?”

Pepper gave him a tiny smile and a little shrug, clearly in agreement with Stark. Damn it. Mountains moved when the two of them agreed that something needed to happen. Add Rogers to the mix and gods help them all.

Stark was in full steam now, though. “What about Bruce? You do realize we’re not sure what’s going to happen, when he ages. IF he ages. My lungs look more like swiss cheese than your brain, I’ll get scans and we can count the holes and see who wins. And Barnes, holy shit, I will not start, and we’ve got a Norse GOD who likes to visit and eat pop tarts in my kitchen. So, what, you’re an augmented human? THAT ONLY MAKES YOU MORE QUALIFIED TO BE IN CHARGE AROUND HERE. CONGRATULATIONS. SUCK IT UP.”

Phil had felt his spine stiffening as Stark ranted, and he would never admit it in a thousand years, but he may have needed to hear this. “Shut up and sit down, Stark, you’re the worst person ever to put in authority of anything. Clearly even you know it or you wouldn’t have made Pepper your CEO.” He turned to Maria. “Me and you, rotating shifts with assistants, both of us doing both jobs. Melinda running full security and second in command?”

Maria smiled as brightly as he’d ever seen. “That would work nicely, I think. And piss off Nick as a bonus.”

Yes. There was that. He turned back to Pepper, who was also beaming. “Now. Not that I disagree,
but who put you in charge of everything, and why? You don’t have anything else to do?”

*

Nine the next morning, and Clint was out of the shower and hoping, finally, to get his ass back to Brooklyn that day. He’d divided his time between his homes pretty efficiently up until now, but the Tower felt a lot like the Hotel California so he tried to limit his visits to quick overnights. This time around he’d been here four nights – not counting his quickie trip to New Mexico – and he missed his dog, his shabby archery range loft, and the rest of his clothes. His bows. His dog. He wanted to at least spend the night in Brooklyn, try to decide on something like a regular schedule, then haul his ass back over to Manhattan for date night he’d talked Phil into Wednesday evening.

He’d like to decide how he felt about that, too, while he was at it.

Good of course, mostly good. Almost entirely good, aside from the urge to scrape out Fury’s remaining eye with an arrow point. But he really wished Sam was here to dump his feelings out to. Nat was right. Guy had a way about him.

Speaking of, he needed to nag her about talking to Sam, herself. She was currently darting back and forth between New York and DC – he wasn’t asking how – to keep an eye on Sam while he wrapped things up before moving into the Tower with the rest of the lunatics. ‘Cause a guy who kept up with Captain America and won a fight with Rumlow needed babysitting. (Sam said he didn’t win the fight, he just ran away. In Clint’s experience, jumping out a window into a helicopter ten floors down counted as WINNING.)

Steve’s superpower was definitely getting people to do stuff against their better judgment.

Stark’s voice suddenly came from everywhere and nowhere, over what was apparently a PA system he’d never mentioned to anyone. “Avengers and sundry, report to the Promenade deck, with junk food.”

Clint dropped to his couch and put his head in his hands, wondering what in hell he’d ever done to get pulled into this… well he hesitated to use the words ‘freak show’ but he’d been in the circus and this was definitely a freak show and he was NOT talking about the genetically unique among them, either.

Tony was head freak for sure.

Oh, fuck, he might as well go see what was going on, instead of having Tony’s bitching follow him all the way to Bed-Stuy and back. Because it would. Guy was like a robot terrier. “JARVIS, what in hell is the Promenade deck?”

“He was referring to the main Avengers common room.”

Of course he was.

Promenade deck. Jesus. Yeah, they were all on a cruise ship to crazytown.

*

It was – no surprise – as weird as Clint had expected. Both science teams had piled in and were lounging on assorted furniture, some poking at tablets or laptops they had with them. Steve was talking to Bruce, who looked like he wisely wanted to leave. Darcy was running the… popcorn popper. They now had a popcorn popper. Of course they did.
The screen was turned to CSPAN and on that screen sat… Colonel Nicholas Fury, in a fresh new eye patch and a suit.

“What the hell?” Clint asked them all wearily.

“Congressional hearings!” Tony said brightly. “I’ve got a thousand dollars riding on whether he beats Natasha, on the drama scale. Where is she?”

“DC.” Clint said absently, wondering why Steve rolled his eyes and shook his head at that. He focused on Tony again. “Who’d you bet on?”

Tony looked at him with disgust. “Natasha, of course. No one is gonna top her walkout. Unless it was MY walkout, but that was a different time, a different set of hearings.” he waved away his own shenanigans.

“Stern whining “fuck you, Mister Stark” was pretty awesome.” Darcy agreed.

Clint glared.

She ducked her head. “Sorry, but it was. I was undergrad poly-sci then. We had that hearing on a rolling loop for at least a month.”

“Who bet on Fury?”

“I did.” Phil said from behind him. “Nick’s going to turn this into his personal victory and wind up the head of SHIELD again. All while looking like he was in control the entire time. From his hospital bed, he and Captain America took down the shady portion of his intelligence agency. Shame it got that far, but his good friend the Secretary of Defense had been behind it all, and everyone else had trusted the guy too.” Phil skirted carefully around Clint, accepted a bag of popcorn from Darcy, two fingers of Scotch from Tony (at nine in the morning), and sat down next to Melinda.

Melinda glanced over at Clint and shrugged. “Don’t look at me. I don’t bet on people.” She had a bottle of some kind of fruit brandy in front of her and a half-full highball. At nine in the morning.

“Right. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” and he turned around and walked out. No one would be happy if he shot the flat-screen full of arrows.
All’s fair in love and shovel speeches.

Chapter Summary

“Do you always treat visitors like this?” Skye asked curiously, still not moving.

“No.” Clint admitted.

“YES.” Kate told her. “Start talking.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

At home Clint greeted Kate who should have been at HER home, hugged his dog, and threw a load of laundry in. The rest of the day was spent chatting with neighbors as he replaced light bulbs, fixed leaking toilets, and generally did his usual handyman thing. It was hard to explain why it was so relaxing, but he could feel the tension bleeding out of him. The shrink he’d seen after the whole Battle of Manhattan fiasco, well, she hadn’t been right about much, but finding some new permanence? Maybe she’d had the right idea there. Buying the building had been a bit much but even she agreed Lucky had been a good idea. When he got down to the laundry room, someone had dried and folded his clothes and left a new Hawkeye tee shirt on the top of his basket for him as well. Grinning, he hauled the whole thing up his six flights and let himself in, intending to continue nesting for the night.

There was a young woman on his couch. Dark curly hair, a little taller than Darcy, holding some super-complicated phone. Lucky was sprawled out next to her with his head in her lap, and when he spotted Clint, he gave his doggy smile and wagged his tail. “You are fucking worthless, mutt.” he told the damn dog, then walked past the woman – she hadn’t tried to kill him yet, so minimal threat in his world – to put his laundry away.

When he came back, she was still there. Damn it.

“What.” He demanded.

One eyebrow rose on the young woman, as she glanced up from her phone. “You have an interesting way of dealing with intruders.”

“Usually intruders intent on harm don’t hang around on my couch playing picross and petting my dog.”

“Point.” The woman allowed. “I’m Skye.”

Phil’s baby hacker. “The one Phil brought in.”

“Yep.”

They stared at each other a while, and Clint figured this was where his kneecaps got threatened. Or his credit rating. Since the kneecaps were nothing new and he didn’t have a credit rating, he slouched down into a beat-up chair and put his feet on the table. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Manhattan?”
“Jemma’s covering for me.” Skye said easily, continuing to stare him down.

It probably would have gone on that way all night, except Kate decided to show up then. Lucky, standing uncertainly between Clint and his new friend, watching both, gave no warning before the window opened and a throwing knife suddenly appeared in the couch next to Skye’s head.

Skye very carefully didn’t move. Clint gave her a couple points for that one, though hanging out with Phil, you’d expect her to have some common sense pounded into her. Possibly by May.

“Dammit, Hawkeye.” Clint grumbled. “The couch wasn’t completely falling apart, but now it has a HOLE in it.”

Kate, ignoring him, stepped into the room with another knife in her hand. “Who are you, and why are you here?”

“Do you always treat visitors like this?” Skye asked curiously, still not moving.

“No.” Clint admitted.

“YES.” Kate told her. “Start talking.”

Skye allowed herself one squinty-eyed glare at Kate, then turned back to Clint. “I’m here to give you a shovel speech, on behalf of the team.”

“Oh.” Kate muttered. The knife disappeared. “You could have just said. Do you want coffee?”


Kate, muttering something Clint thought was about being fair, what? left them in the living room and went into his kitchen, calling Lucky after her.

Clint really wanted to get back to his nesting, so he decided to move this along. “Shovel speech?” He asked politely.

“Y’know, we thought you were totally wrong for Phil, this grandstanding superhero Avenger. But this?” Skye looked between Clint and the kitchen door, “this might have changed my mind.” She sort of shook herself, and put her phone away. “So. Shovel speech. If tomorrow’s date is about some kind of revenge, we will find a way to bury you.”

Clint was getting a headache. “Who has been suggesting it’s revenge?”

“No one.” Skye smiled. “We’re what you call pro-active.”

“Of course you are.” Clint thought about it a little bit. If Skye’s bond with Phil was anything like Natasha’s – he’d brought both of them in, after all, and hell, Phil had brought in Clint too and look at HIS bond – this was being motivated from genuine concern. Which meant, damn it, he’d have to take it seriously. “The only person I want revenge on for this is Fury.”

Skye nodded as if that was in the works. Interesting.

Clint got up to pace. “Look. No matter who is at fault, the fact remains that Phil and I have been apart for three years. We’re going to be different than who we were before the Battle of Manhattan. We need to get to know each other again.” WHY was he the one being emotionally mature these days? It was a piss-poor status quo, and needed to be fixed, NOW. HE WAS TERRIBLE AT ALL THIS.
“And your end goal?”

“Normally I would tell you it’s none of your fucking business.” Clint snarled.

Skye settled herself deeper into the couch and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Whatever it is, the goal is something positive.” Clint finally admitted. “I am not doing this to drop him on his ass later, in some twisted revenge scheme. That’s all you’re getting.” And it was more than most would get.

Skye decided that would work, apparently, because she stood and nodded. “Okay then.”

Kate emerged with coffee in a travel mug and handed it over. Skye kinda grinned and let herself out.

“What the fuck, Hawkeye.”

“I don’t even know, Hawkeye.”

“No, I mean what in FUCK, you’re disappearing and making coffee while I’m getting a shovel speech?”

“Well sure. I threatened to shoot Phil’s balls off the other day, of course they would have something similar to say.”

“What.”

Kate smiled, clipped a leash on Lucky, and sailed out the door with him.

“What?” Clint asked the empty room.

* 

Late that night, Clint got a mass text message (apparently JARVIS had his own cell phone; so many questions) requesting all Avengers and support staff show up at one the next afternoon on the Avengers’ public floor for a meeting. Subject: the future of the Avengers. He called Nat. “You seeing this?”

In the background there was traffic noise, and he could barely hear Nat sigh. “Yeah. You saw the hearing?”

“No, didn’t want to shoot up the common room.”

“Fair enough. Fury’s back in charge at SHIELD and helping hand pick the new Secretary of Defense.”

“He helped choose the last one.” Who had been Hydra.

“Yep.”

“D’you ever get the feeling that reality kinda fucked off the day the aliens hit, and ever since then we’ve been in some kinda psychotic state?”

Nat seemed to think about that. “No, but now I’ll be wondering, thanks so much for that.”

“I’m here to help.”
“Yeah, right. From what I’m getting, Pepper, Tony, and Steve aren’t too terribly amused and want to set up their own organization separate from SHIELD for the Avengers.”

“Haven’t we kind of been doing that for the last couple years?” He hadn’t worked for SHIELD since the day they put him on psych leave after the whole Cube Thing. He didn’t blame them, but damn if he was going through more hellish mind fucks to get back in their good graces. He’d come in for Avengers projects, on Steve and Tony’s word mostly, though sometimes for Pepper. (There had been a couple HILARIOUS bodyguard gigs for Pepper.) Mostly he’d lived quietly in BedStuy, fixing up empty apartments and playing tag with really stupid mobsters.

“I think they want to make it official now,” Nat said, interrupting his brooding.

“So what we’ve been doing, but announcing it to the world.” That didn’t sound so bad.

“Probably? I’m curious about how and who is going to pick new cases for us to deal with.”

“We’ve done okay so far.”

“We’ve done jack shit compared to what we could do.”

Nat had been far more willing to get her hands dirty, these last few years; see her running with Steve for reference. “You going to be here?”

“Yeah, I’ll drive up in the morning. Sam’s supposed to be at the VA all day, he should be all right there.”

“Unless Hydra infiltrated the military, too.”

“Shut up.”

“Y’ever think, if Sam kept up with you and Steve, won that fight with Rumlow, that maybe he can take care of himself?”

“Steve asked me to.”

“Well, shit.” She was stuck, then.

“Pretty much. See you tomorrow.” and she hung up.

Clint absently put his phone in his pocket, and went back to staring out across the East River, north toward Midtown sparkling in the distance, and wondered how his life was going to change again. And if he would be happy when it did. This chapter had been more like marking time than making a life, at least it had felt like it at the time. But today, talking to tenants and hanging around, it felt like more than that.

Time’s up. Moving on to the next, whatever that was.

How had he thought Phil would slide into his new life without any other major adjustments?

*

Clint waited as long as he could to return to Midtown the next day. He knew the quiet life he’d been leading in Brooklyn was coming to an end and while he’d kind of hated it at the time, he was now reluctant to give it up. Probably because he knew the alternative was back into the mix of aliens and assassins and magic. He hadn’t done so well with that, the last time out. Even he could feel in control in a quiet corner of BedStuy, with nothing worse than moronic Russian mobsters on his ass and a
baby vigilante to keep track of.

So when he slouched into the ‘vator in the Tower, headed to the Avenger’s public floor – whatever and wherever the hell that was, near the SI executive floor, maybe? – he knew he was the last guy into the building. In fact he and Nat were the only ones likely spending much time OUTSIDE the building, lately. And Sam. Was he an Avenger yet? Was there a hazing ritual? He felt there should be hazing.

Though maybe the whole Hydra thing counted as one giant hazing exercise. One on one with Steve had to be pretty damn nuts.

“Hey, JARVIS, any pressing issues?”

“Welcome back, Hawkeye. None of the human variety, but Sir and Doctor Banner are in need of help with some wavy equals signs when the meeting is over, if you have a moment.”

Moment, hell. When Tony and Bruce dragged him into the lab to check their math, it could take days.

“I know you can do that yourself, buddy.” He told JARVIS in an argument that had been going on for years now, since the Science Bros had originally roped him into this. Tony and Bruce had asked one day, out of the blue, for Clint to look over some math they were having problems with. It had been about trying to predict the path of radiation decay particles, and they insisted it was a targeting problem he should be able to answer. Clint had laughed in their faces, because what in hell did he know about higher math and positron emission? The two of them had been shocked that he was making his shots ‘on the fly’ (like he had time to do differential equations in his head while shooting at people trying to kill him) and begun by insisting he HAD to know higher math to take the shots he did, refused to believe he ‘just knew’ what would work, and proceeded to teach him exactly what they meant.

The most annoying thing of all was that they’d been right; for him it had been fascinating to watch the math explain what he already knew. To no one’s shock but his own, he’d turned out to be pretty good at it. He now saw the world in lines and arcs and parabolas, gravitational movement, had names for the wind systems he sensed between buildings, knew what to call a shear wave. Being able to articulate it in a way understood by others made him a better teacher, and occasionally, when Tony hauled him in for help on guidance systems for the suit, he saw genuine respect on the genius’ face when Clint would discuss the fine tunes that made for pinpoint accuracy.

He’d also spent a month once, shooting arrows in Tony’s shop, trying to teach JARVIS human-brain targeting methods. They’d learned a lot from each other and were buds now. Iron Man was an even more precise weapon, making everyone around them safer.

But he still wasn’t convinced he was NEEDED to fix anyone’s math, particularly with JARVIS in the building. Maybe, MAYBE, if it was just Tony and Bruce, he’d be useful on three dimensional data, but with JARVIS? Who ran those crazyass holo-projectors? Unlikely.

“It is difficult for a computer to deal with approximations.” Which was always JARVIS’ excuse.

“You understand sarcasm and humor, JARVIS, you aren’t selling me on this.”

“Nonetheless.” JARVIS said haughtily and opened the doors into chaos. Which Clint was getting to expect. The chaos. The haughty butler thing he was already used to.
Chapter End Notes

Wasn't planning on a chapter today but I just baked seven dozen cookies and am kind of high from all the sugar fumes, so here you go. Enjoy.
A Bombshell and a Teeny Tiny Anxiety Attack.

Chapter Summary

“Help.”

There was a pause at the other end of the call. “All right. Is this a talking kind of emergency, or do I need to rush to New York to deal with space aliens coming out a portal from another dimension? Give me a little detail, here.” Sam asked.

Chapter Notes

I know I know they keep having meetings. I'm trying to gloss them over and speed them up but you KNOW this is how it would actually happen. I'm trying to make them entertaining, I swear. You'll like the next one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Phil had put on a suit for this meeting, deciding that when he was in charge, he should still look it, regardless of his new approach to his private life. May and Hill, both having been clued in, were wearing the new uniform they’d decided on for support staff; black polo shirts with a discreet A logo in red, black fatigue pants, combat boots. Pepper was due in minutes, having worked this into the rest of her day, and he had no doubt she’d be dressed in one of her suits and perfectly appropriate.

Everyone else, having been told it was an Avengers meeting, seemed to have showed up in whatever they happened to be wearing. Jeans and tee shirts were the norm, and half of them weren’t even wearing shoes. Stark had welding goggles shoved up into his hair; Banner and Ross both had on lab coats. The primary argument seemed to be over the pastries. Once Clint arrived (in a Hawkeye tee shirt, no less) Phil put his fingers between his teeth and whistled as loudly as possible. They all froze in place.

This was his crack team of superheroes that was going to save the world. Arguing over who got the chocolate cream horns. (Darcy won.) He missed smoking. “If you could all have a seat, we’re going to get started as soon as Ms. Potts arrives.” It was gratifying to see them all find seats without arguing, he would admit only to himself.

Pepper strode in then, immediately taking command of the room in full CEO mode. “Morning, everyone. I only have a few minutes, so I’m going to make a statement and then let Steve and Phil lay out all the details.”

Everyone blinked at each other, wondering what Pepper had to do with the Avengers, and nodded politely.

“Excellent.” Pepper stood in front of the room in her business suit and heels, perfectly composed and completely in charge.

Phil sat quietly and waited, because he could tell this was going to be extremely revealing.
“Stark Industries is paying the tab on all of this.” Pepper said, waving a hand vaguely. “The building, your equipment, your salaries. Some of it is being written off as charity, we’re working on all sorts of legal status, but the bottom line? The money is coming out of SI. That makes you, all of you, my employees.”

There were a lot of shifty eyes at that one.

Pepper rolled right over them. “Steve will have the final word in the field. Phil will have the final word on logistics. Tony will work with both of them as well as being in charge of equipment. All of you, together, will decide on which causes you’ll take on. But the absolute, final word, will be mine.” A world map flashed up on the screen, with dozens of cities marked in blue. “Stark Industries has over a hundred thousand employees, world wide. That’s not counting thousands of contractors, large and small, who depend on us. We provide the foundation for the economies of several small nations and provide life-saving medical equipment at cost to most of the international health organizations in the world. Lives literally depend on us. I will not allow the people relying on this corporation to be undermined or harmed if it can possibly be avoided. I will have your backs, but I will also have theirs. That is the only goal of my oversight. If you can’t handle that, there’s the door.”

No one moved.

“Furthermore, and this is NOT to leave this room in any way, since I was held by AIM I am an augmented human.” She held up a hand, and flames licked up from her fingers. There was some low muttering at that, but with a tone of surprise, nothing negative. There hadn’t been even the slightest hint of that, anywhere in the intelligence world, that Phil had heard even a whisper of. Most everyone else in the room looked shocked, as well.

“I am now very hard to kill, and have been trained by Captain Rogers, Iron Man, and the Hulk to take care of myself.” Pepper concluded. “I have no interest in joining the everyday heroics but if I’m needed, I will step in to help. I go by code name Rescue.” She flicked off the flames from her fingers and glanced around. “Any problems? Questions?”

Complete silence.

“Excellent. If that changes, I’m on the Avengers server and e-mail loop as Rescue. Tag me as needed. I’m very glad you’re all here.” She gave them all a broad, genuine smile, then glanced at her watch. “Now, I’m really sorry, but I have a meeting with some people at the UN. Phil will take it from here.”

And she swept out.

Dead silence was ringing, and Phil slowly stood. “Well, after that, everything I have to say is going to be terribly ordinary.” and he gave his patented dry half-smile.

*

Natasha had very politely demanded a meeting with Pepper, and was finally given about fifteen minutes late in the afternoon. Knowing her quarry, and wanting to make, if not friends, then at least allies, she arrived with two lattes, hauling a canvas sea bag over one shoulder.

Security had let her through without question; she’d have to talk to Melinda about that. She could have a live attack rottweiler in the damn bag for all they knew.

Since Natasha had pulled one over on Pepper as her personal assistant back when Tony was dying, they’d been polite to each other, and not hostile at all. But women could do that without any drop of
friendliness whatsoever and there had been that sense about the whole thing. She’d like to see that change. Since she was the one who lied, she was the one who should really make the first move toward friendliness. So here she was.

Pepper looked up from her desk when Nat walked in, smiled, and waved her to a small seating arrangement of couches and chairs in one corner. “Can you give me a second, I have to get this down while it’s fresh in my head.”

“Of course.” Natasha said as nicely as possible. She sat the coffees on the table, dropped the sea bag onto the floor behind a chair, and took a seat, glancing around.

The office was surprisingly small for who worked in it; desk with credenza near the windows, small conference table area on one side, small seating area where Nat was on the other. All furnished rather minimally, if expensively, in whites, greys, and the occasional light blue. It was the art that said “powerbroker”. A Lichtenstein, two Picassos, one she couldn’t identify, and if she wasn’t mistaken – sculpture wasn’t her thing – that was a Koons in one corner, providing a pop of shiny metallic color.

Nat sat back, crossed her legs, and looked serene as she sipped her coffee. Pepper came over quickly, sat down with her, and took another.

“Sorry for the wait.” Pepper said, and seemed to mean it. Which made her the most unusual CEO in history, Nat thought. “What can I do for you?”

Nat got straight to it. She didn’t have much time, and Pepper didn’t have patience for idiotic small talk in her work day anyway. “After your revelation at the meeting this morning? I thought you might want to work with me on fighting styles. Steve and Hulk are all very well, but you might want to be a bit more subtle than that.” Particularly in business settings, where Pepper spent most of her life. Pulling a human fireball in the middle of a meeting because someone patted her ass wasn’t the best possible choice of ways to deal with it.

Pepper grinned. “And you can do subtle.”

“I can.” Natasha agreed with a cautious smile. As the two most visible women working with the Avengers, if they could work together, life would be a lot easier for everyone, especially them. Surely Pepper knew that as well as Natasha did.

“I’d enjoy that. I usually do yoga every morning, maybe we could work in some lessons, a couple days a week? My schedule can vary a lot, but I’m sure I could get in two or three days.”

Nat was surprised, pleased, with the willingness to cooperate. She herself would have been a lot more suspicious. “That’d be great, we can hammer out the details by email.”

They drank coffee together for a long moment. Finally, Pepper caught Natasha’s eye, stared her down, and said “You know, of all the espionage I’ve dealt with, you were the only one who was there to help.”

Ah. Here it was. “Yes, I was. I’m glad you can see it that way.”

“I was prepared to crush you.” Pepper said absently, and Natasha wondered what THAT would have entailed and knew it would have been bad. She’d have survived it, of course, but Pepper Potts after her? That would not have ended well. “But once we were done with cleanup, and I got the truth out of Tony, well, I couldn’t stay too angry, not with everything else that I had to deal with.”

Natasha nodded politely.
“If you lie to me again, especially about Tony, it will not go as smoothly.”

“I understand.” Natasha told her, and she really did. “Now that you’ve been read in, so to speak, I’m hoping to rely on you, not work around you.”

They stared at each other for a moment, saw that the other meant what they’d said, and smiled politely.

“So, what’s in the bag?” Pepper asked.

Natasha let herself grin. “Sort of a peace offering, sort of a request for help. It contains all the black leather owned by Nick Fury.”

Pepper choked a bit on her coffee, cleared her throat, and started laughing. “Really? ALL of it?”

“Except the eye patch I already stole.”

“Yes, I saw that, that was nice work. So what are you going to do with it?”

“That’s the thing. I don’t know. I took it to take it away, but now that I have it… it’d be a shame to just throw it out. You’re the idea person, so I wondered what you’d think.”

Pepper froze for a moment, staring into the distance. “I know an artist. Oh. I know the perfect artist to make the perfect thing. If you’re willing to leave it here and trust me, I think you’ll really enjoy the results.”

“I look forward to it.” Natasha said smoothly, standing up. “I’ll let you get back to the million things you have to do. Thanks for seeing me.”

“Thanks for coming by.” Pepper answered, standing and hugging Natasha. “I’m thinking that the two of us, working together, will do all right keeping the Avengers in line.”

“I hope so.” Natasha hugged back, then escaped.

She could only take so much genuine niceness before she started getting jumpy.

*

By late afternoon, Clint was willing to admit that the idea of the date with Phil that night was freaking him out a little. Okay, a lot. A WHOLE LOT, ALL RIGHT? He hadn’t been on a date in three years, was going out on a limb with the one coming up, what was he supposed to do? WHY HAD HE THOUGHT THIS WAS A GOOD IDEA?

He paced. He wanted to go to the range and shoot, but knew if he did he’d lose track of time and wind up at Phil’s door in old jeans and an arm guard making lame excuses. So he paced his apartment doing breathing exercises Natasha had made him learn. He finally faced that they weren’t working, and grabbed his phone. “Help.”

There was a pause at the other end of the call. “All right. Is this a talking kind of emergency, or do I need to rush to New York to deal with space aliens coming out a portal from another dimension? Give me a little detail, here.” Sam asked.

“This is a major freakout over a minor issue.” Hey, if you can’t be honest with a shrink, right? Only thing he’d learned about shrinks over the years – being honest at least sped up the time you had to deal with them.
“What’s the issue?” Sam asked easily.

“I have a date with Phil tonight.”

That got a long, long pause. “What prompted that?”

“Me. What in hell was I thinking? I haven’t dated anyone possibly in ever, not like Phil would expect a date, he’s all classy and I’m a carnie, and-”

“Okay, I’m getting a feel for the issue here. Take a breath, man, get a drink of water. We’ll work through it.”

Clint did those things.

“Was the date Phil’s idea, or yours?” Sam asked again, his tone easy and calm. He really did give the sense you could tell him anything and he’d nod and roll with it.

“Mine. I’m an idiot-”

“Yeah, yeah, I got that part. Last we spoke, you weren’t even talking to him. I just wondered how you got from there to here in a couple-four days.”

“Oh.” That, he could answer. “When Barnes came in, that big scene down in the lobby. I was up on that girder and couldn’t stop thinking, it would all go better if we had Phil in our ears. And we COULD have Phil in our ears, he was right there, and why wasn’t he?”

“Good handler, huh?”

“The best. And why were we going without the best damn handler ever? Because we’re supposed to be upset or some shit? I wasn’t upset, I wanted Phil in my ear next time I had to deal with an assassin. So I talked to him.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“It was… it was good. Good to see him, good to know he’s THERE, that he’s still alive, that he’s willing to do the job. He’s still him. And I miss him, still. And there he is. Why am I supposed to stay away from him, when I miss him?”

“I don’t know why you would. How’s he feel about it?”

“Same, pretty much. Can’t speak for him, but he seemed on the same wavelength, like we used to be about most stuff.”

“So you decided to concentrate on the good things.”

Clint thought about that. “Not- I don’t think so? It’s that there’s nothing bad attached to Phil being back. Honest to God, I can’t think of anything. I’m still hurt, and angry, but not at him. He came back as soon as he figured out what the hell was going on. I can’t think of anything to be mad at him about.”

“Back to the way it was, then?”

“Not immediately? We’re gonna spend time together, see what’s what. We had coffee in the lobby and talked it over a little. We HAVE spent three years apart, no matter whose fault it was or anything else. Totally different lives than we had before, with no contact, we’re gonna be different than we were. But, I don’t think we’re that different. He’s still Phil.” Still the humor, the kindness, the island
of calm in the middle of raging chaos.

“The date is spending time together, getting to know each other again.”

“Yeah.” Well when you put it like that… It sounded far more sensible than his usual.

“That doesn’t seem like a bad idea.”

“No, I guess it isn’t?”

“If you need my opinion, it sounds good to me. I’m glad you’re not blaming Phil. I agree with you, I don’t think this whole thing was his fault. Sure as hell wasn’t his idea. And getting to know who you are now, that’s smart.”

“Thanks.”

“Doing better?”

“Yeah, almost not freaked out at all, now.”

Sam laughed. “Good.”

“If I dragged Phil to see you, would you talk to him?”

“I’m always available to everyone. But I’m not sure dragging him in is gonna accomplish anything if he doesn’t want to be there. And I’ll be happy to talk to both of you together, but I suck at couples counseling.”


“Exactly. It’s not my angle of the field. I’m more PTSD and trauma and shit.”

“Is it wrong, that I just don’t care? About the last three years?” Well, in relation to Phil. There were still gonna be some words with Fury, eventually.

Sam was silent a moment. “You know, psychology doesn’t have a whole lot of official advice for this kinda thing,” he finally warned. “But… it’s not like he knowingly walked away, deliberately hid from you, and then popped back into your life demanding to walk right back in. If he had, I’d be telling you as kindly as I could to steer clear. That’s not remotely what happened, though. He’s done everything he could to make things right, even though he isn’t at fault. I was there when he explained what had happened, saw him apologize to Natasha for it. He was wrecked. He’s as much a victim as everyone else.”

“Yeah.” Clint agreed, glad he wasn’t cooking up the idea out of his own wishful thinking. If someone uninvolved saw it the same way, he wasn’t out of his mind to think it, then, right?

“So, keep getting to know each other, see how it goes. You’re both smart, you’ll figure it out.”

“Thanks, Sam.”

“It’s what I do. Glad to help.”

Clint actually believed he was.
Next chapter, THE DATE!!
THE DATE!

Chapter Summary

Phil’s phone rang in the middle of breakfast the next morning and he ducked out to answer it because his entire team eavesdropped without even pretending not to.

“Coulson.”

“So how was the date?” Natasha asked.

Chapter Notes

I may be skipping a day of posting sometime soon; the holiday baking is getting intense.

Take care of yourselves, my lovelies.

“What do you do when I’m not here to dress you?” Natasha asked idly from her spot sprawled out on Clint’s bed.

“Call Kate.” Clint told her, rummaging in his closet. “Seriously, what do I WEAR?”

“I’d worry more about your hair.”

“Not funny.”

“Not kidding.” Natasha grinned as Clint went back into the bathroom to poke at his hair some more. He was so easy. Her phone rang. It was Phil. Boys were so predictable. “Yeah.”

“Natasha. I was wondering, if you had a moment...”

“Well, yes. If you want to put a fine point on it.” Phil admitted.

Natasha laughed. “Sure, let me finish dressing Clint and I’ll be right down.” There was a squawk from the bathroom and Clint appeared around the door jamb, face in full Grumpy Cat mode.

Phil gave a hesitant laugh. “Thanks.” and he hung up. A little desperately, she thought.

Natasha stood. “Put on the jeans, the ones that are really worn. Your ass looks fantastic in those. White tee shirt, and that purple sweater Kate bought you. And combat boots because you’re hopeless and that’s what you’ll wear anyway.”

“Got it.” Clint dove back into his closet.
“One day you might want to actually clothes shop.” She called into the closet. She heard what sounded like a raspberry in response, so she’d have to wipe the floor with him, next time they sparred. Natasha went downstairs to tell Phil to wear a blue sweater that would make his eyes pretty.

Boys. Honestly.

She smiled the whole way.

*

Clint got a solid grip on the basket he was carrying, and took a deep breath. He wondered if this was how teenagers felt on prom night; he’d been doing five night shows and two matinees a week, the year he would have been a senior in high school. So he had no idea.

Stage fright was never this bad, though.

He let out the breath, slowly, and knocked on the door. After a beat, it opened and he stepped cautiously inside. May and Hill glanced up at him from where they sat on the couch, the low table in front of them spread with notes, tablet computers, a hologram floating over it.

May gave him the evil eye for a long moment, and stood slowly. “Hawkeye.”

He considered that. Where she was probably going, and how best to respond. How it had been when they worked together in the field. The fact that she’d had the last three years with Phil, and he hadn’t. Because he’d never done a sensible thing in his life, he replied in the same tone of voice, “Cavalry.”

Before another word could be said, Phil swept out of an adjoining room. “Melinda, remember what I told you.”

May closed her mouth and did the unsettling glare that she did, focused between Clint’s eyes.

Clint assumed he’d be getting another shovel speech some time tomorrow. “Ready to go?” he asked Phil as casually as possible.

“Sure.” Phil smiled almost easily, and they escaped. “You look nice.” Phil told him, once they were traveling downward in the elevator.

“Thanks.” Clint took a covert look at Phil. He was wearing a light blue cardigan over a dress shirt and dungarees. With combat boots. Clint let himself grin a little. “So do you.”

In the garage, they were met by Happy, who smiled at both of them and stowed the basket in the trunk of the car while they climbed in the back seat.

“Where to?” Phil asked.

“Well. It was just an idea, and if you don’t want to, we can always-”

“Clint.” Phil said patiently.

“Shakespeare in the Park.” Clint caught the disbelieving look that flashed over Phil’s face for a fraction of a second and nodded. “I know. I totally know. Not my usual. But when Thor and Tony first met, Tony made this smart remark, you know how he is.”

“I do.”

“So once things had settled down some, Thor wanted to know what Shakespeare in the Park WAS,
and when he heard it was ‘mighty tales of adventure, outdoors, how heroic!’ we all got roped into going and it turned into kind of a thing.” There may have been an Avengers Night the previous summer to fund-raise for the theater. The Amazing Hawkeye may or may not have done a quick intermission show for old time’s sake. With Natasha as his assistant for funsies.

Phil was chuckling. “I remember hearing something about an Avengers Night, and had wondered what the association was.”

“Yeah. A lot of us uncultured plebes on the team were really surprised to find out it was kinda good, and fun, and I haven’t seen the current play yet. Pepper has an in, so I got us tickets. Taming of the Shrew, I don’t think I’d have gone for a tragedy tonight. I brought snacks. Don’t know quite what, I told the SI chef fancy but not weird.” The woman who ran the executive lunch rooms in the Tower seemed to delight in cooking for the Avengers, so they went to her with any requests they didn’t feel equipped to deal with, themselves. She’d laughed at Clint’s request, then patted his arm and said she knew what he meant and she’d have it ready for him.

Phil leaned back in his cushy seat as someone else drove him through Manhattan traffic, and seemed to relax. “It sounds perfect.”

“Cool.” Clint let himself relax a little. “So what were you talking about with Melinda?” What could he say? Spy. He was nosy. And curious.

“Oh, that if she gave you any trouble, I’d shoot her.” Phil said easily.

Clint started laughing helplessly.

*

“That was much more fun than expected.” Phil admitted later. “The taming part can get a lot of shit from modern scholars.”

“Yeah, this only got the Nat stamp of approval after she found out it was an all female cast and crew.”

“Probably the best way to update it to something inoffensive. Well, less offensive, Petruchio has always been a jerk.”

“Yeah.”

They sat silently in the car, an easy silence, as Happy took them to their next destination. “Thanks for asking me to do this.” Phil finally said as the car slowed. “I haven’t been too social the last few years.”

Clint popped open the door and hopped out. “Yeah, me either. I can’t imagine why.” They smiled at each other, and Clint opened the door to the high end patisserie Pepper had recommended to him. They stayed open very, VERY late, serving crowds as various symphonies, operas, and plays let out. Attire mostly ranged toward tuxedos and evening gowns, but the maitre’d swooped down on them like they were his best friends from college. “Monsieur Barton!”

Clint swore if he got the cheek kisses someone was getting punched. He tried to telegraph that and it got through, ‘cause no kisses. Guy backed off fast. “...yes?”

“Ms Potts made the reservations for you, herself. The most lovely woman. Please, welcome!” and he swept them to a dark corner booth.
“I swear to God, I thought this would be simple pastries and hot drinks.” Clint told Phil under his breath. He’d gone to Pepper for suggestions because she did late night after the symphony about a billion times more often than he did.

“Pepper’s invested.” Phil told him.

“Obviously.” Clint muttered, taking a seat. Phil seemed amused more than annoyed, so that was something.

They ordered some kind of dessert sampler thing and a pot of decaf tea the waitstaff kept going on about. Phil took a bite of half a… pie thing, hell, Clint didn’t know much French and what he did know was “there’s a bomb in your car” not the names of different desserts. But Phil looked surprised, in a good way, and gestured with his fork. Clint took the other half, and bit in. There was an explosion of chocolate and orange and… some kind of nut… and cream and dear god it was lucky they didn’t live closer to this place. “I see now why Pepper told us to come here and I forgive her for the front end service.”

“Yeah.” Phil agreed, trying a small bit of something that might be marzipan. “Oh. Amaretto. Try this one.”

They plowed through the sampler, agreed to hell with their manly physiques, and ordered the next sampler on the menu and a full sized one of the chocolate citrus nut cream things.

“...so how are you doing?” Clint heard himself ask. Oops. IT WAS AN EXPRESSION OF CONCERN NOT AN ATTEMPT TO OPEN A CAN OF WORMS OKAY.

Phil seemed to think about it over another bite of chocolate thing. “Better.” He pondered some more. “I don’t think I realized how bad I was, when I got here.”

“Glad to hear it.” Given how bad Phil’s week had been, if this was an improvement on the last three years, Clint was pretty sure he wanted to go shoot Fury for sure, now. In the KNEE.

“No shooting Fury.” Phil told him after one glance at his face.

Clint was also damn sure Phil remembered more than he realized. “You are no fun at all.”

“Nope.” Phil said with a dry smile. He carefully prodded some kind of poached fruit, then sliced out a bit of it to try. It must have been all right because he went back for a bigger piece. “Stark – Tony – yelled at me the other night. Told me being...” he paused to glance around, lowered his voice very slightly, “whatever I am now only makes me more qualified to hang out around here. I probably needed to hear it. It’s just so galling when the common sense is coming from him, of all people.”

Clint gave up on any semblance of formality, laid his head on Phil’s shoulder for a moment, and laughed at the mental image. Under the table, Phil hooked his foot around Clint’s ankle.

* *

“This was really nice, I’d like to do it again.” Phil told Clint cautiously, in the elevator to the Bus Floor. The date had been like one of his day dreams in high school, cute and happy and perfect. He hadn’t thought his life could do something that simply pleasant ever again. It was so very, very much a relief to know he was wrong. The idea that he could continue to be wrong gave him an almost heart-stopping rush of hope.

“Cool. I’ll figure out something else...”
Phil actually had a good idea. “No, next time I get to organize things. There’s a place I think you’d like and I have an in.”

“That’d be great.” Clint sounded sincerely enthusiastic at the idea of another date.

“It’d have to be during the day, sometime next week?”

“Sure, let me know, we’ll work something out.”

Phil didn’t know what he’d done for this second chance, but he was going to do everything he could to keep it going. “I’ll hop off the ‘vator here. If you come in you’ll wind up breaking up a fight or having to weigh in on vacuum tubes in audio amplifiers, or put out a fire in the kitchen.”

“They seem like a mini version of our lab team here.”

“They are. For good or ill.”

Clint laughed at that. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.” It seemed like he wasn’t even thinking when he tilted up the slightest bit to kiss Phil on the lips. It was a move he’d done a million times; in boots Phil was the slightest bit taller than Clint was and he’d gotten practiced at that slight lean upward to meet his lips and catch Phil by surprise.

They both froze.

Phil kissed him back, carefully, gently, but in a way that was very definite. Yes, he DID want to kiss Clint. And wanted Clint to know it. Unfortunately, makeout sessions and falling into bed wouldn’t be for the best right now. “Thanks again for this evening.”

“You’re welcome.” Clint murmured.

Phil exited the elevator, walked through the common room to his quarters, and laid in bed to stare at the ceiling all night. Well. At least he was used to that. Better reason this night, though.

* * *

Clint had wanted to jump Phil, do him right there in the elevator. Which probably wasn’t the best thing for them right that instant, so he let Phil go. After the doors closed, he stood in the elevator for a long moment, breathing. He ran his hands up into his hair, grabbed on, and pulled until he had his own attention. Okay.

He needed to chill the hell out.

“JARVIS, who is in the lab right now?”

“Sir, Doctors Banner and Ross are all in the main combination lab on the eightieth floor. As is your math. Hawkeye.”

“Right, let’s go there, then.” Staring at numbers might zone him out enough he’d be able to sleep some later. Unlikely, considering he hadn’t slept well since he was eight years old, but hey, math!

When he walked in, Tony started his harangue immediately. “Where the hell have you been?” he demanded without even looking up. “We’ve had math waiting, and JARVIS is being a princess, and we can’t find the mist—” he glanced up, took one look at Clint and sat back in his seat. “My my my. Where HAVE you been, Clinton?”

“Out.” Clint said shortly, grabbing a stylus from the SI coffee mug on Tony’s main workspace and
turning to the enormous holographic sheet of numbers glowing on one wall. He liked to get a bit of
distance when he looked at things, so he pulled himself up on the bench top, curled his legs under
him, and started to look over the work. “Is the handwriting I haven’t seen before yours, Doctor
Ross?” he asked her politely.


“Got it.” Clint said with a return smile, and went back to staring at his numbers. Anyone who saw
Bruce for who he was, who stayed loyal, was Clint’s kinda person. Add in that since she’d arrived,
Betty had quietly rolled with all the insanity without batting an eye, had supplied Barnes with science
books and chatted with him regularly about them, had expanded her science lessons to Steve, all with
serenity and humor. Clint hadn’t spent time with her like this before, but she was a calm presence in
the madness of group meals, always friendly, and just plain nice. Bruce was a damn lucky man, and
Clint was gonna find time to tell him so.

“No, no. No. Wait. I want to know who you were out with. Natasha’s in DC, isn’t she?” Tony
demanded.

“Tony, let the guy have a life that doesn’t include you.” Bruce told him.

“Why? I’m not dating any more, I’m with my one true love. I need to live vicariously through the
rest of these guys and you aren’t holding up YOUR end on the dating, either.”

Betty cleared her throat.

“Well, you weren’t,” Tony allowed, “and now you won’t tell me anything, so you might as well not
be doing anything. Speaking of, I’ve been wondering how-”

“NO.” Bruce and Betty said together.

“Is this exponent right?” Clint asked, pointing with his stylus. Half the time he didn’t even know
what the math was FOR, he just worked the numbers and tried to ignore the bickering.

“Yes.” Tony said without looking at it. “Who were you out with? Does Natasha know? Is she going
to skin you alive? I know that’s a figure of speech, but I can see her-”

It wasn’t a figure of speech. “None of your business. Are you SURE that’s right?”

“Hm.” Betty made a considering noise, stared at the math wall for a moment, and grabbed a tablet.
“I’ll check again.”

“Wait. ‘none of your business’ is not a no. WHO WAS IT? DO WE KNOW HER? Are we going
to have to save her from Natasha?”

Clint absolutely didn’t wince at that one, ignored Tony some more, and told Betty “Thanks.”

Tony continued to sputter.

“We appreciate this.” Bruce said with a smile, handing over a mug of some soothing tea stuff he
drank that wasn’t half bad.

Clint took a swig. Hoo, maybe he actually WOULD sleep tonight! “Thanks, Bruce.”

“Wait! I’m not-” Tony cried.

“Hey, look at this.” Betty said, and Clint turned back to the board with her.
“BUT CLINT WAS ON A DATE! WITH SOMEONE WHO WASN’T NATASHA!” Tony wailed. “AM I THE ONLY ONE HERE WHO CARES?”

“We care.” Betty told him softly. “But we also realize you’re entitled to privacy.” Then she patted his shoulder gently and started going through the exponents with him.

Yeah, Betty really was awesome.

*

Phil’s phone rang in the middle of breakfast the next morning and he ducked out to answer it because his entire team eavesdropped without even pretending not to.

“Coulson.”

“So how was the date?” Natasha asked.

“Aren’t you surveiling in DC or something?” he asked idly.

“I had to go on Sam’s run with him, and you know I hate running. I’m now sitting in a shrub watching him cook himself a huge breakfast while I eat a granola bar. You’re my only hope, Phil.”

She had the damnedest ways of getting information out of people. “It was nice.”

“Aw, c’mon, details. Where’d you go?”

“Clint didn’t tell you?”

“No, he told me it was casual and clammed up. See? You need to tell me this stuff.”

That was really strange; Clint told her everything. “We went to Shakespeare in the Park and then had pastries and drinks after. There’s a place on Sixth Ave that does a chocolate – citrus tart you’d like.”

“So you enjoyed it?”

Did she sound… hopeful? “Yes. The play was good, the food was good, and I enjoyed spending time with Clint. I am not giving you gory details.”

“Did you kiss? Was there smooching?”

“Enjoy your granola, Natasha.” She was laughing as he hung up on her.

He was smiling.
Missed It By That Much.

Chapter Summary

"Round up the rest of the herd, get them into the conference room and seated and looking like an actual team that could actually save the world. Fake it if we have to.”

Clint didn’t sleep for shit. Between the unrequited lust and the math free-for-all in the lab, and avoiding Tony’s assumption that he was hetero (why was bisexual such a hard thing for people to understand?), sleeping with Natasha, and all questions related to that, by the time he rolled into bed at three in the morning his brain didn’t know what it was supposed to be doing. He was used to getting in naps where and when he could; he’d been doing it even before he’d become a sniper and taught it as a skill. As usual he gave up sometime around five after dozing a bit and decided to try his own version of meditation. He was in the range when, as he should come to expect, his phone rang. It wasn’t the emergency ringer, but caller ID said “Cap/Steve” and Steve hated calling people – said it reminded him of radios and the war, usually he texted – so that was interesting. “Barton.” He said cautiously.

“Clint. Hey, can you give me the name and address of Lucky’s veterinarian?”

In a split-second decision, Clint decided that no, he really did not want to know. He had more than enough shit to be shoveling without adding to it, thanks so much. “Sure.” He rattled off the data.

“Great, thanks.” The line went dead. Steve had zero phone etiquette, and no history of using phones. Unfortunately his first introduction to cell phones had been through the Avengers, who also weren’t long on rules and manners. He was polite but didn’t bother with a lot of things people took for granted like hello and goodbye. So Steve hanging up on people wasn’t automatically a sign of emergency. (Pepper hanging up on anyone was officially a Code Orange. There was a rule.) Clint stared at the phone. Considered the request. Considered warning someone, anyone, about… whatever this was. Considered what Steve could want a veterinarian for.

Considered Steve some more.

Then he took out his hearing aids, shook out his shoulders, and went back to shooting. Nope.

* 

Phil was hunched over his third morning coffee. He tried to avoid the stuff, made him jittery and threw his aim off, but after tossing and turning all night he needed the jump start, and after last night’s dessert binge, sugar was out of the question. Everyone else had cleared out, but his brain felt like oatmeal, so he was having some alone time.

“Mister Coulson.” JARVIS said politely. “I regret disturbing you, but Director Fury is in the lobby demanding to speak to the Avengers. Captain Rogers is not in the building, nor is he answering his phone.”

Shit. “Find Rogers; ping his phone. Tag all the Avengers and support staff, including lab rats, and tell them to be in the main Avengers floor conference room in fifteen minutes in full business formal dress. See if Pepper can make it. Have whatever phone-answering minion the Avengers have with
the most spine go downstairs, get Fury, and put him in that little lounge area across the floor from the main conference room, give him a cup of coffee, and leave him alone. Lock the door after they’re gone, keep Fury there. Tell him we’ll be with him in about ten minutes.” He thought about that a moment, about how incredibly impatient Fury could get, and how angry he was about wasting his time waiting on people. “No, tell him we’ll be with him in five minutes. If you can make the wifi cut out randomly, do that too.” Let him stew a bit. Short tempers made for stupidity and they needed every advantage they could get, especially without Natasha there to play him like a violin.

Damn, caught with their pants down. Or their bathrobes on. He flung his on his bed, dragged on a suit, with holster and gun thank you very much, and headed down to the public floor. May and Hill were already there, both in their uniforms which would do very nicely. “Where is he?”

“Cooling his heels in the lounge where you put him.” Hill said. “He’s pissed.”

“Good.” Phil said. “No drinks, no pastries, no amenities once we let him into the main conference room. God damn it, where is Steve?”

“The Bed-Stuy Emergency Animal Clinic.” JARVIS answered. “His phone is turned off. When I called the clinic they said he was in an exam room with an emergency and hung up on me. We could send Iron Man-”

“Too messy, too much time.” Too public. Phil shook his head. “No, we need a figurehead-”

Tony stepped up behind him in a fifteen thousand dollar Italian suit, cleaned and scrubbed – and welding boots on. It would have to do; it was better than his usual Converse, at least. Barely. “You’re the figurehead, Phil.”

Even after three years, Phil really, REALLY did not like people behind him. He sidestepped to include Tony in the circle of people, hopefully without showing the whites of his eyes.

He looked at May and Hill. They both nodded. Hill looked a bit misty, May looked ready to chew broken glass. It felt like an official appointment; being sworn in couldn’t feel more official than these two backing him up.

“Glorious. Round up the rest of the herd, get them into the conference room and seated and looking like an actual team that could actually save the world. Fake it if we have to.”

May and Hill nodded and took off.

“What do you need from me?” Tony asked, all business for once.

Phil liked this side of Tony. This side of Tony was the main reason he hadn’t murdered the deflecting goofball side of Tony. Yet. “If it’s possible for Pepper to be here for this it would lend SI authority to anything we say.”

“She’s working on closing down a meeting, hopes to be here in five.”

“Good. Are you sure neither of you want to take this?”

Tony gave him one of those dark, piercing looks he did occasionally, the ones that made you realize he was remarkably good with people and all the rest was an act to shift attention from the overwhelming empathy that dogged him. “Assuming you’re going to make some statement of independence from SHIELD, I think it would carry the most weight coming from you. In fact, it might be best NOT to have Steve here. With him gone, there’s no question we’re willing to follow you, each of our own choice, not through Steve.”
Well, there was a thought. A really humbling, slightly terrifying thought.

Clint popped out of the elevator. He was in a black tee shirt with an A logo and the rest similar to the uniform May and Hill had put together. Except unlike them he was wearing a handgun, openly, on his hip. “Sorry, this is the best I’ve got for these occasions. What’s up?”

“Rat in the hole.” Tony told him.

“Fury’s here, and Steve’s not.” Phil elaborated.


“So it’s you, me, Bruce, and a buncha pissed off scientists.” Tony mused.

“And May and Hill. And Pepper. You don’t ever wanna forget them.” Clint reminded him.

“Oh, believe me.” Tony said in agreement.

“All right.” Phil had a plan forming. “Both of you go on in, get everyone situated. Tony, set this up for maximum intimidation. You know how.”

“Aye aye.” Tony sketched an incredibly sloppy salute, and his body language went from calmly alert and focused to insolent in the blink of an eye. He strolled off toward the conference room. Leo had skidded around the corner from the main elevator bank on the other side of the building, and Tony, with a shake of his head, went to straighten his clothes and smooth his hair. “Kid. No. How are you supposed to win respect from evil overlords when you look twelve?” Tony would be the last to see or admit it, but he was an incredible mentor to young geniuses.

Clint ducked into the conference room.


“Now we wait until everything is in place and Pepper gets here.” Both women nodded and didn’t budge. “You two can go sit…?”

“We’re your lieutenants, Phil. Where you go, we go.” May said with an unholy, here-to-raise-hell grin.

“Fuck yeah.” Hill agreed with a short nod.

Phil sincerely wondered, often, what it was about him that inspired such loyalty, but today he’d take it and be thankful.

Pepper appeared. “I hear we’ve got a confrontation on the boil.” she said calmly in her usual CEO suit and heels.

“Not quite yet, but we’ll get there.” Phil agreed.

“What do you need?” Pepper asked.

Phil was pretty sure if he said he needed a shift in the earth’s orbit, Pepper would call Tony and Bruce and tell them to get to work on it. He resisted the urge to hug her. “Um. Could you go and sit and look like you agree with everything I say? You don’t have to, we can argue all you like later, but unity is the primary message we need to send today.”

“Of course.” She smiled, patted his shoulder. “You took on a Norse god and won, you can do this.”
“I don’t feel like I won.” Phil blurted. Whoops.

Pepper smiled again, that womanly smile that knew all. “Ah, but you’re here, thriving, and he’s in a cell. Sounds like you won to me.” She gave him a quick one-armed hug around the shoulders and strode into the conference room. The door opened to some noise, and she shook her head and told the room, “No.” and the door shut again.

“We are all badass in our own way.” May observed. “She’s carved out a major slice of badass for herself.”

Phil had to agree.

Darcy Lewis, wearing a – huh, a decent suit with heels and her hair up, when did she become an adult? popped out of the conference room. “Hey, Boss Man.” She smiled politely at May and Hill. “Ms Potts says Fury would see me as the least important person so I should be the one to escort him to the conference room.”

“You’re okay with that?” Phil asked as gently as possible. It was a good move, strategically, but he didn’t want to scare the shit out of the kid.

Darcy laughed. “I tazed a Norse god, played tag with the Destroyer, and helped save the world from dark elves. I’m lab assistant to a woman who opens wormholes to other dimensions. For FUN. Oh, and also defended a master’s thesis to an old boy’s department while looking like this.” She waved a casual hand at her body, which had enough curve even the suit wasn’t hiding it. “Believe me, one guy doesn’t scare me, whoever he is. Especially when JARVIS has my back.”

“Indeed I do, Miss Lewis.” JARVIS agreed.

Darcy grinned. “I might even enjoy it, though I’d prefer to do it in an Iron Man tee shirt and ripped jeans. Barefoot. Hair down, no makeup, free love, man. Full granola-eating tree-hugger mode. Would piss him off even more than this.” She shot a peace sign.

“Next time.” Phil heard himself say.

Darcy laughed. “I’ll remember that. So you guys go in the conference room, get yourselves arranged so you look scary as fuck. Have JARVIS tell me when you want me to do my thing.”

May looked Darcy over – Phil didn’t think they’d been introduced yet – and commented, “all sorts of badass around here.”

Darcy beamed at her.

*

Called a badass by Agent Melinda May. Well, that was something to tell the grandkids about, Darcy reflected. She watched Coulson and both agents slip into the conference room and waited while they decided on the most intimidating arrangement and all that stuff. She wondered where Cap – Steve, he wanted to be called Steve, ha, first name basis with Captain America, what was her life? She wondered where Steve was. No one had told her, but when she asked they all looked irritated so she guessed it wasn’t a major emergency. James might know, but when she’d pointed that out, she was told in no uncertain terms she wasn’t supposed to even think his name while Fury was in the building. Which, okay, they had a point.

She looked down at her highly polished stiletto heels and was thankful she’d brought the damn suit with her. The only reason she owned a suit was for the whole thesis thing she’d mentioned. It was
horrible and she hated it but society judged too much by clothing blah blah and she was the princess of tits and ass so she had to be extra conservative when she wanted to be taken seriously. And so, suit.

Here she was, on the public floor for the Avengers, in the Tower, in New York. Waiting to escort the head of a multinational spy organization to a conference room filled with pissed off Avengers, secret agents, brilliant scientists, and Pepper Potts. THE Pepper Potts.

Who all were acting like she was doing them a favor.

She tried not to giggle with glee. Best fucking job, EVER.

“Miss Lewis, they are ready if you are.”

“Got it, JARV. Tell them I’m on my way.” She stood up straight, and tugged her shirt down a bit, popped a button to show some of that cleavage that made her so inappropriate. Put a sway in her step, and blessed the red lipstick she’d had time to put on. Remembered her resume. Remembered her thesis defense. She knocked on the door of the lounge once and JARVIS immediately swept it open, bless him. She didn’t enter the room. “Director?” No last name, less polite. “The Avengers are ready for you.”

The man himself stood, glowering. “Who the hell are you?”

Oh, an opening like that, she couldn’t resist. “Intern.” delivered with her best Phil Coulson imitation. Then she turned her back on him and walked, knowing he would follow. After fifteen minutes in an empty room? A spy? The curiosity alone wouldn’t let him stay there. The conference room door swept open when she reached it and wow. She was glad she wasn’t on the hot seat.

The table was surrounded by people, with Coulson at the head. Pepper was on his right and Tony on his left. May and Hill stood at his shoulders. Everyone else lined both sides of the table, with two seats empty; one at the end facing Coulson and one along the side between Jane and Skye. The end seat meant for fury had Clint and Bruce flanking it, which was all the deterrent they needed against things getting physical. She fought the urge to giggle as she strode to her own seat, putting a little “haha, I am badass” swagger into it, and sat. When she turned, Fury hadn’t seated himself, but was standing at the far end of the table, hands on hips. “Really, Phil?” the guy demanded.

Oh, this wasn’t going to go well for him at all, Darcy smiled. And sat back to enjoy.
Chapter Summary

Pepper was glaring at Fury in a way that made Phil frankly worry for the asshole.

(You also get an explanation of where the hell Steve’s been, to round out the chapter word count. Enjoy.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil was considering how to reply to “Really Phil?” when May did it for him.

“Director Coulson.” May said evenly. “Of the Avengers Initiative.”

At her words everyone around the table beamed at Phil, which wasn’t lost on Nick. “Have a seat, Fury.” Phil wondered where the black leather coat was. Nick loved that thing, it intimidated everyone. Fury dropped into the chair at the other end of the table. His eyes swept the room, cataloging who was there – and who wasn’t. Phil knew that he’d worry about where Natasha was for at least a week. Ha. “This,” he told his former friend, “is your polite reminder that the ends don’t justify the means. We won’t be operating as if they do. So keep it in mind.”

Nick seemed to rethink whatever he’d come there to say and instead opened with “There’s no way the world’s governments are going to let a group of augmented humans operate openly.”

“We have a hearing with the UN next month.” Phil told him smoothly, and enjoyed the shock on Nick’s face. They must have succeeded in keeping it on the QT, because he was genuinely surprised. “What brings you here?” Put the ball back in Nick’s court, sit smugly, and refuse to budge an inch. That was Phil’s current tactic. He hoped to make Nick look like a yapping rat dog.

“I’ve been re-confirmed as the director of SHIELD. I’m here to remind all of you about your contracts.”

Before Phil could respond, Tony pulled a plastic bag of what seemed to be ashes from the interior pocket of his suit jacket and passed it down the table. Clint cheerfully deposited it in front of Fury. “That’s my consultant’s contract. Terminable at any time by either party. Done.” Tony sneered.

Maria – Fury’s former right-hand woman, that had to sting - strode down the table with a sheaf of papers, and deposited those in front of Fury as well. “Resignation letters from every SHIELD employee in this room, as well as Natasha Romanov. Notarized.” She returned to her place behind Phil.

Fury was living up to his name, as he leafed through the pages, pausing to glare at May and Hill. Neither would tell Phil what they’d put in their resignation letters, but the way both were glaring back at Fury, he probably had the gist.

“Any further questions?” Phil asked, hopefully without smiling. Everyone else at the table was doing enough of that.
“There are clauses in every single contract, that SHIELD employees may not transfer to any other intelligence agency without the permission of the director.” He laid it out like a trump card, smiled smugly. “I’m not giving permission.”

“We won’t be operating as an intelligence agency. We’re going to be emergency response. Therefore the contracts don’t apply.” Phil struggled not to gloat as the smile dropped from Fury’s face.

“Where’s Rogers?” Fury demanded, probably hoping for a conciliatory voice of reason.

Phil didn’t understand how Fury could have worked with the guy for years and thought Rogers, of all people, was conciliatory. Or a voice of reason for that matter. Had he forgotten three helicarriers shooting each other from the sky over his head? If so, how?

“He’s out tending to more important things.” Tony said cheerfully, “but he considers blowing three helicarriers out of the air his resignation letter. I’m sure we can get him to blow up the last one with a notary along if that wasn’t sufficient. Oh, wait, isn’t Natasha a notary?”

“She is.” Pepper agreed smoothly. “Or at least, Natalie Rushman is.” She aimed a narrow-eyed look at Fury. “We still haven’t sued SHIELD over the misuse of the repulsor technology, either.”

Fury glared back. “They’re out chasing the Winter Soldier, aren’t they? Rogers, Romanov, and Wilson.”

Huh. Phil hadn’t actually leapt to that conclusion himself. How very convenient all three were busy. He prayed no one at the table would start laughing. “Their whereabouts are not up for discussion.”

“I have information on a Winter Soldier sighting.” Fury said smugly, leaning back in his chair like he did when he had a winning hand at poker.

Nobody laugh, nobody laugh. “Really?” Phil asked politely.

“Emergency response isn’t qualified or legally able to go get him. SHIELD is. Assuming we had the proper personnel to do it.”

Everyone around the table stiffened and glared, getting the idea. “You want us all to come back to work for you in return for helping us find the Winter Soldier.”

“Yep.” Fury said smugly.

“Thank you, we’ll muddle through that on our own.”

Pepper was glaring at Fury in a way that made Phil frankly worry for the asshole.

“Rogers will never go for that.” Fury told them all. “I’ll e-mail him the deal as soon as I leave here, and he will never put up with your refusal to find his friend.”

Phil was weary of the entire thing, of turning friends against each other and making people hate each other in the name of, not even national security, but what you wanted for yourself. Nick didn’t NEED any of them at SHIELD, this was a power play and a tantrum. “And again, the reminder that the ends don’t justify the means. As things stand, right this instant, we plan to work with SHIELD as support and auxiliary. We simply intend to work with other agencies and governments as well, when we’re needed. That can change.”

“You wouldn’t dare ignore SHIELD. Rogers won’t let you.” Fury snarled.
“Honestly?” Phil admitted, “I think most of the people here would enjoy it. Probably including him.” When Rogers found out about the attempted bribe, he was going to be enraged. Phil knew him well enough for that.

Phil thought, later, that it was when everyone laughed that Fury knew he was sunk. “I’ll be back when Rogers is here to represent you.”

“It won’t go any better.” Phil told him evenly. He was even telling the truth. “It might go WORSE.” Steve didn’t like game playing like this, not a damn bit.

Fury stood and swept out without another word.

“JARVIS, please monitor his whereabouts and make sure he leaves here directly.” Pepper asked.

“Of course, Ms Potts.”

“Right. Nice job, Phil.” Tony stood, rubbed his hands together. “Dinner and drinks, everyone, in the common room tonight. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have laws of physics to warp.” and he swept out as well. Everyone else left fairly quickly, with a few words or a smile on the way. Eventually it was just him and Clint.

“Think he’s done?” Clint asked.

“Oh, no. He’s hoping the Winter Soldier aspect will work on Steve. When it doesn’t, he’s going to fall back, reconsider, think of all the talent sitting here that he’s not in control of any longer, and come at us from another angle.”

“I had some thoughts, about the team. Training stuff mostly. Got a minute?”

For Clint? “Sure.” They sat back down together.

*

“Director Fury.”

“Yes. JARVIS, is it?”

“It is. As you likely know, I was designed to be very protective of the people I assist. I am now watching over the Avengers and their support staff, not only Sir and Ms Potts.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Certainly not. Simply stating facts. A threat would be to remind you that after the Chitauri invasion, Sir and I decided I should have a way to defend the Tower.”

The elevator doors opened.

Fury decided it was time to leave.

*

Clint cooked that night, with Darcy’s help. The two of them and Bruce were the only ones who could cook in the quantities needed to feed the horde, and all three of them were doing most of the meals in return for not having to do much else in the way of chores. Tony and Pepper were trying to find at least a cleaning crew but so far no one was passing the background check requirements put together by Steve, Phil, and Tony.
“I can’t believe this kitchen.” Darcy commented, loading the rotisserie oven with chickens.

“It’s a long way from a communal pot over a fire, when I started out at the circus.” Clint agreed.

“So I was wondering.”

“Yeah?”

“Who is the public face of the Avengers?”

“Tony, unfortunately.” Though privately, Clint thought Tony did a pretty good job. He sure as hell was the only one of them qualified to deal with the media; he’d been at it longer than most of them had been living in the shadows.

“Yeah, got that, and he’s not half bad, but why isn’t there a social media presence? If Fury wants to make us out as a buncha crazy vigilantes, right now there’s not a lot to change the public’s mind. Why hasn’t someone been posting pictures of, I don’t know, you cooking dinner, and Natasha painting her nails and stuff? Make you all look approachable and human and reasonable, at least make Fury put some effort into smearing us.”

“That’s above my pay grade. You’d want Pepper for that, probably. Phil’s good, but he’s as used to sneaking around in the dark as the rest of us. PR isn’t somewhere our brains will ever go automatically.”

“Man, what I could do with an Avengers Twitter account.” Darcy speculated.

Clint almost wanted to see it. But he thought of everyone showing up for breakfast half-dressed and with bedhead, Tony after his shop benders, and Pepper in a rage. Some things were best unseen.

* *

Steve showed up late for dinner, which was really unusual. He also showed up in the sweats he wore out running that morning, which was unheard of. Everyone turned to stare when he walked in, because he’d been missing all day. He never went missing for that long. “Uh, hi, everyone. Uh, just turned on my phone and got the texts... sorry.”

Everyone made rude noises and called rude names and threw things.

"Where the FUCK have you been?” Tony demanded.

Clint was watching closely; Steve had one hand tucked inside the hoodie he was wearing and Clint wondered if he’d hurt his arm somehow. Foiling a bank robbery or something equally ridiculous, for sure. But then the hoodie MOVED. “What the hell is that?”

Steve pinked a bit. “Oh, well.” He removed his arm and held it out and in one giant super-soldier hand was a grey tabby kitten, scrawny and covered in scratches. One ear was chewed up. It blinked at everyone and mewed silently, then climbed up Steve’s arm to his shoulder, limping a bit. Steve grinned and patted it, leaving it where it was. “I found her this morning on my run.”

“No.” Tony announced.

All the women and half the men made cooing noises.

“Oh, here we go.” Barnes was still in the Hulk Tank, but taking his meals with them via wall screen. He and his appetite had both perked up since his arm had quit drugging him, and he looked a lot less
haunted since his session with Xavier. “Is this the first stray he’s brought home? If so, you’re lucky. You better hope to hell he doesn’t graduate to people. Well. Here I am. You’re all screwed.”

“NO.” Tony repeated.

Clint ate more chicken, looked at Pepper, at the besotted look on Pepper’s face as she looked at Steve and the cat, and knew Tony was never gonna win that one. Looked like the Avengers and extended now had a cat that would be hanging around. “We’ll need to work out some way for her and Lucky to meet, in a controlled situation at first.”

Smiling, Steve sat at his place and dished up most of what was left on the table. His shoulders were so broad, the kitten had room to lay down as long as she was willing to lean up against his neck, and she was. Clint had to admit it made a nice picture; big hunky blond guy, small fuzzy kitten.

“We could do twelve photos like this, put together a calendar, and fund Planned Parenthood for the rest of the century.” Darcy mused.

“I don’t like cats.” Tony said, as Steve fed the kitten a small bite of chicken from his fingers. Everyone at the table squeed when the kitten butted her head against Steve’s in thanks and laid down on his shoulder again.

“What are you naming it? Her?” Clint asked.

James, from the wall screen, said “Sidekick. The damn cat’s name is Sidekick. If he brings home more I’m going to start naming them after the seven dwarfs.”

Steve grinned and didn’t argue.

Chapter End Notes

I am almost done with the rough draft, and it WILL come out to about 60K words. So y’all will - SHOULD, barring space pirates or zombie plagues - have the entire fic by Yule.

Happy happy!

And if you can't manage that in these times of stress, at least take good care of yourselves. <3
Natasha Asks for Help. (!)

Chapter Summary

“You know how Clint talked to you last week?”

“Yeah. Can’t tell you anything about it, but if he told you he did, yeah. I can confirm.”

“The way I got him into your office was to make a deal. That he’d talk to you if I did.”

Another big, wide grin. “Really.”

Natasha nodded, poked at what was left of her pizza.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Captain Rogers. I thought we should debrief-”

Captain Rogers leaned back in the comfy chair in the private conference room on the Avengers common floor. Unlike the public one, which had been designed to impress, this one was designed for comfort and utility. The table was a massive touch screen configured for individual or group uses, the entire room had holo capabilities, and credenzas along each wall contained food, drink, first aid kits, office supplies, and every other amenity that could be dreamed of in the minds of Tony Stark and Pepper Potts.

“Phil.”

Phil blinked at that. “Yes, Captain?”

“We’re going to be leading a team that the Joint Chiefs call a herd of cats. The most professional members are an assassin who ignores all rules of engagement and a scientist with no military training who turns into a giant rage monster. We’re really gonna use titles?”

Oh, fine, but then how was he going to keep from acting like a twelve year old fanboy? Phil dropped into a seat beside Steve. “I know, I know, but I’ve got this major case of hero worship going on and if I’m formal I might not act like an idiot.” Again tossing his super-spy image out the window.

Steve laughed, long and hard. “I’ll squash the hero worship soon enough, then you can keep me in line like you do Tony.”

Phil seriously thought about that. Threatening to taze Captain America for not paying attention. “...nope. Not seeing it.”

Steve chuckled again. “Well, bring me up to speed on this afternoon and we’ll see how it goes. Sorry I missed it. Would you let anyone else get away with turning their phone off to rescue a kitten?”

“Ah. No.” But he still wasn’t going to give him the hell he’d give, say, Clint, for doing the very same thing. “Um, in the future, could you please not do that?”
Steve laughed again, shook his head, and bumped his shoulder to Phil’s. “Lesson learned, and try to give me hell next time.”

“...still not seeing it.” Phil shook himself. Right. Director. He could do it, even informally. “Probably the easiest way to do this is to watch the recording. It wasn’t a long meeting. JARVIS?” he asked.

“Of course, Director Coulson.” The nearest wall screen turned on, and together they watched the meeting. Phil made a few notes, both people to commend for their poker faces and people to be forced to cultivate one. Still, they’d done remarkably well. As expected, when Fury made his Winter Soldier announcement and bribe, Steve’s face went dark. But they finished it out in silence and the screen turned off.

“Wow.” Steve said.

“Yes.”

“Can you tell, does he think he actually has something, or is it an outright lie, start to finish?”

Phil shook his head. “I know him as well as anyone does, and I honestly can’t tell.”

Steve went to a refrigerator, rummaged, and eventually found himself a beer (Guinness, Phil was amused to see), offered one. Phil took it. “How do we let this play out? I can go corner him, in fact I’d enjoy it, but I think the strategy we’re using might be most effective.”

“Let him keep coming to us. It underlines that he’s the one who needs us, not the other way ‘round.” Phil agreed.

“Darcy did great with him. What’s her history? Can we leave her on point with him? She seems to rub him the wrong way, it would be perfect.”

Phil had to laugh. “Oh, her history. It’s a lot like yours, average beginning, extraordinary events. No super serum, but there’s a mad scientist. Actually two mad scientists. And a half dozen space aliens. She simply rolled with events, kept the mad scientists alive, shrugged off the space aliens and greeted them like company. Then she took a break to finish two degrees in political science, and came back to work with the mad scientists again. Voluntarily.”

“Really.” Steve looked fascinated, and he should know his people, so Phil settled into storytelling mode. He was going to love this one.

*

Out in the common room, Darcy found a security cam photo still from dinner, of Captain America’s beat-up kitten sleeping against Captain America’s heroic neck. With JARVIS’ help she also found a picture of Lucky wearing a Hawkeye bandana. She posted them to all Avengers’ social media with the message “Rescue animals make the best pets.”

It crashed Tumblr.

One more thing to cross off her bucket list. Her life was awesome.

*

Natasha, sitting in a shrub across the street from Sam’s apartment, read the latest text update from Clint and put her phone away. Steve and a kitten. Good grief, the world couldn’t handle that much cute in such a small space. Inside his condo, Sam moved around a little, packing a few last things. He
was headed back to New York in the morning, and Nat was glad this idiotic protection detail would be over. She’d driven more miles for dumber reasons, but the constant back and forth of the last week had been really damned tiresome, especially with Clint and Phil circling each other cautiously and no one else knowing enough about it to try and help. She thought Pepper knew, but there wasn’t anyone she could pull into it for assistance; she was the only one who knew both of them well enough to be helpful. The best option she had was Tony, and no. Just no.

Her phone rang. “Romanov,” she answered, not really thinking about it, deep into her brooding on an idiot protection detail where she wasn’t needed.

“Get in here and share a pizza.” It was Sam.

“What?” What?

“I’m not a moron. I know you’ve been following me around all week to keep my fragile little self safe from the mean Hydra baddies I hadn’t already blown out of the sky. So get your magnificent backside in here and share dinner.” He hung up.

What?

Clearly she was slipping. Getting predictable. She sat in the damned bush for another five minutes, thinking about what to do, like she wasn’t going to drag in there and eat pizza with Sam. Damn. Maybe the stress of Phil coming back wasn’t only getting to other people.

Damn.

Fine, she’d go eat some pizza.

She REALLY hated when Clint was right. Not that she’d ever tell him he was.

* 

They ate pizza and talked about psychology. Sam seemed fascinated by her take on the subject. And her use of it. By the end, he thanked her for only using her powers for good.

“I didn’t always.” She forced herself to admit to him.

He smiled that easy grin. “Oh, I dunno, the planet isn’t a nuclear wasteland, pretty sure you could have pulled that off if you’d really wanted to.”

Nat stared at her feet, not knowing how to interpret that, exactly. Might as well give it up. “You know how Clint talked to you last week?”

“Yeah. Can’t tell you anything about it, but if he told you he did, yeah. I can confirm.”

“The way I got him into your office was to make a deal. That he’d talk to you if I did.”

Another big, wide grin. “Really.”

Natasha nodded, poked at what was left of her pizza. “I told you about Strike Team Delta.”

“Yeah. Thanks for that, it helped me make sense of things.”

“We weren’t just co-workers, the three of us. It was a family. Hard to define who had what role, maybe impossible, but it was the three of us together for ten years, not only Clint and Phil.” Her mouth was going strangely dry. “When Phil died… I don’t think I had time to mourn. I mean now,
looking back. I was afraid Clint was going to go after him. Did anyone tell you about Clint and Loki?"

“No, that whole thing is classified and you’re about the only person who has given me any history at all to be getting on with.”

Natasha shook her head. Idiots, she thought fondly. “I’ll twist some arms when we get back.” She stood, gathered up boxes and napkins. “I have to move.”

Sam made a ‘go ahead then’ wave of his hand. “Common enough among people who kick ass for a living, having trouble sitting still.”

“Yeah.” She busied herself for a bit, cleaning up, putting her thoughts in order. Got herself another drink, refilled Sam’s. She was afraid they might be at this a while. Finally she got her courage together, sat down again, and stated baldly, “Loki took Clint. Some kind of magical spear, scepter thing. Mind control. Used Clint to do all his dirty work.”

“Would that be the same spear—”

“That Phil was stabbed with. Yeah.” Natasha made herself breathe evenly. “I got him back. Cognitive recalibration. Hit him really hard in the head.” Her smile felt wobbly. “By the time Clint shook it off, Phil was gone, and a portal had opened over the Tower and we both had things to do other than talk about how we felt.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” The lack of platitudes was heartening. “After, he really hit rock bottom. I was so afraid he was going to drink himself to death, or shoot himself in the head, I didn’t have time to miss Phil. I was too focused on Clint. Then… once he got back on his feet, mostly, I went back to work for SHIELD and took every assignment they would give me, to keep on not thinking.”

“And now Phil’s back.”

“And now he’s back.” She agreed. She stared at her hands. Now he was back, and what was she doing? Brooding and worrying and not being of any use to either of them. “And I… I don’t know anything.”

“Do you blame Phil for missing the last three years?” Sam asked neutrally. Natasha was impressed. He’d make a good interrogator. (That was a compliment. REALLY.)

“No. Of course not.” She caught Sam’s look and shook her head. “Really. Not emotionally, either. When he apologized to me the day he came in, that’s the most… shattered I’ve ever seen him. Ever. And we’ve been through some major shitstorms. He’s as much a victim of Fury as Clint and I are. Maybe more. I’m working on getting details out of him about that.”

“You’re worried about Clint?”

Nat thought about that. “Not really. He’s gotten back to his old zen state, the last year or so. He always had this really amazing ability to accept things and roll with them, as long as I’ve known him. The Loki deal, with losing Phil on top of it, cut him off at the knees like nothing else ever has. Phil coming back, sure that's stressful, but it's a good thing. Short term he’ll need some support – we all will – but I think he’ll get himself sorted.”

“You feel left out?”
Natasha glared at Sam, and he grinned back. Oh, he was GOOD. “Not the way you mean, I don’t think. I don’t feel left out of the drama.” It all hit her in a rush. “I want to FIX IT. I want to murder Fury horribly, and set Clint and Phil up in a nice little apartment, and go back to spending evenings on their couch yelling about sports and reality TV. Put it all back together in a nice little box the way it had been.”

“Why haven’t you? The skills you have, that’d be easy compared to some of the stories Steve’s told me about your work.”

“If I do it for them, it’s not real.” she said slowly, realizing it as it came out of her mouth. “I have to sit back on my ass and let them come to their own conclusions, even though my entire existence has been about making men do whatever I want.”

Sam was smiling for real now. “There you go.”

“You’re good.”

“It’s what I do.” Sam grinned.

“You do it well.”

Sam smiled at her some more. “So what are you gonna do about it now?”

There was only one thing to do. “Ugh. Nothing.” She threw her hands in the air. “Well, not NOTHING. Support them both, nudge them to talk to each other. Sit back and let them figure it out and hope they do what I want because it’s all about me.”

He laughed.

Natasha had been raised a spy in a communist country, taught to despise material wealth. In her view, real gifts weren’t THINGS. Things were easy. Data, information, personal information, THAT was hard. So the obvious thank-you gift for Sam was right at the top of her mind. “You know, you’re part of a very, very small group of men in my world.”

“Yeah? I remember flirting with you, so it can’t be that.”

“Men who treat me as an equal without having to beat the hell out of them first. It’s a list of pretty much Avengers and one or two SHIELD guys.”

Sam blinked. “Oh.” He thought about that some. And then some more. “Yeah, looking like you do, I bet you get mountains of bullshit.”

“We also share a common bond in beating up Rumlow.”

“I’m telling you, I did not win that fight, I jumped out a window.”

“Looked like winning to me.” They grinned at each other for a while. “I’d better get going.” Natasha stood, brushed her hands off on her jeans.

“Are you gonna go back out to whatever dark corner of the world you were watching me from, earlier?”

“...maybe.”

“How about you stay here on the couch? I’ve got a blanket or two around here, you can hear my every move upstairs and it’ll be comfier and safer for me than anywhere else you’d wind up.”
“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I am sure I will sleep better without wondering if you’re outside and if it’s gonna rain.”

“Okay.” She gave up and hugged him.

Sam gave nice hugs.

Chapter End Notes

All the writing done except for the denouement, which will probably go on forever because that's my favorite part. But all plot points getting wrapped up in this installment, are wrapped.

Someone come over here and bake cookies with me.
Hijinks Ensue.

Chapter Summary

“I don’t wanna coooook.” Clint whined.

“I don’t wanna siiiiice and diiiice you.” Nat replied.

“Y’all are entertaining as hell.” Sam observed.

“They haven’t even started.” Phil told him dryly.

Chapter Notes

This covers some events in the "Thor" chapter from "Sam Meets the Avengers". The timing doesn't QUITE match up, but I've decided it's my story and I'll tell it how I like. :)

Phil and Clint were having drinks in the executive lobby when Sam and Natasha trailed in off the train early Friday morning. Natasha spotted them immediately and Phil could tell she was pleased to see them. Normally she didn’t show much emotion in public, so the one-armed hugs she gave both of them as she sat down was a little, well, worrying.

“Morning!” she said brightly, smiling at both of them.

Clint’s head thunked to the table before Phil could stop him. “Oh Jesus, is it the apocalypse AGAIN?” Phil gave up and grinned at Natasha. Clint lifted his head, looked at them smiling at each other and said almost seriously, “huh, maybe it really is.”

Phil kicked him lightly under the table and felt Natasha’s foot connecting with Clint’s other shin. They grinned at each other some more.

“Hey.” Sam Wilson said easily, handing Nat a coffee and joining them. “How’d it go around here this week?” He looked at all three of them, rather knowingly. “Looks okay, right?”

Phil wondered what the other two had been telling Sam. Then he wondered if he cared. “It went better than expected, all things considered.” He allowed.

Natasha beamed some more. Clint may be right, that was getting a little unnerving. “No pastries?” she asked them.

Clint shook off his doom and gloom. “We’re trying to quit. Went on a binge the other night at Le Petits Four. They have a chocolate thing you’d like.”

“Really.” Said Natasha evenly. That was her gathering data tone. Not good.

Phil decided he wasn’t up to dealing with her in full-blown spy mode, especially not targeted at
them. “We went there the other night. Together. Is there a problem?” He said as evenly and neutrally as possible.

She blinked. Looked at Clint, back to him, blinked again. Then smiled some more. “I want pancakes.”

“I don’t wanna cooooook.” Clint whined.

“I don’t wanna sliiiice and diiiice you.” Nat replied.

“Y’all are entertaining as hell.” Sam observed.

“They haven’t even started.” Phil told him dryly. To the other two, “Come on. If Clint does pancakes and bacon, I’ll do eggs and hash browns.”

“He’s gotta cut the potatoes.” Nat told him.

“Yes.” Sam said thoughtfully.

“You are no fun at all.” Clint told him.

Clint pulled Natasha aside as they crossed the lobby. “You okay?” he asked her.

She gave him her usual ‘have you gone mad?’ look when she was trying to avoid a subject. “Of course.”

“You look tired.”

“Flatterer.”

“Nat.”

She shrugged irritably. “It’s been a shit week. I’m tired.”

He’d known her to go a week without any sleep at all and look fresh as a daisy. “You aren’t going to tell me?”

“Nothing to tell.”

Great. More to worry about. Just what he needed.

*Kat Kate came by with Lucky while they were doing a half-assed brunch, feeding whoever wandered in. “So what’s the big deal then?” she demanded, glaring over her sunglasses as she glugged coffee.

“He found a kitten yesterday while he was out running. We want her to make friends with the mutt ASAP.” Clint poured more pancakes, sprinkled sugar over and rolled up the ones he’d finished, and handed them off to Natasha, who poured half a pot of melted jam over them and dug in. James,
on the wall screen from the Hulk Tank, bitched that he was stuck with syrup and someone send him some jam. Natasha, mouth full of strawberry jam, flipped him off and kept eating. James said something in Russian and Natasha gave him a look that made Clint almost pity the Winter Soldier.

Except, you know, not.

“Captain America has a cat.” Kate repeated, pouring more coffee and giving Phil a pat on the shoulder as she passed.

“Steve has a cat.” Clint corrected. After all this time, he still couldn’t see them as the same person. Which was nuts and he should talk to Sam but when Steve put on that costume it was like a different person. From dork to heroic figure in a single clothing change.

“It’s adorable.” Darcy told Kate. “We’re going to make a calendar, proceeds to charity. Help out, and you can help pick the photos.”

“I’m in.” Kate unclipped Lucky’s leash and he wandered the kitchen a little, leaned against Clint for a while, then went to lay under Natasha’s chair. Every time he whined she would slip him a small piece of bacon.

“Some ruthless spy.” Clint told her.

She stared back at him with that perfectly blank look that scared the shit out of most people. Clint laughed at her. James muttered something else in Russian and Clint was not gonna save that guy when Nat caught up with him.

Steve swept in, the kitten again riding his shoulder. Next to him, Kate muttered “Oh my God I think I just ovulated.”

“Shut up, I do NOT want to know this stuff.” Clint flipped a pancake at her and she caught it out of the air and ate it.

“Morning!” Steve said cheerfully, grabbing half the bacon and the plate of pancakes Clint handed him. “Thanks.” He sat at the table, gave the kitten a bit of bacon, then went to fixing his pancakes with about half a stick of butter. “Thanks for bringing Lucky over, Kate.”

“No problem.” Kate assured him. “I wouldn’t miss this.” She snapped a photo of Steve and the kitten with her phone, not even attempting to be subtle about it.

“What’s with the photos?” Steve asked as if he didn’t care, digging into his breakfast.

“We want to make a calendar. You and Sidekick. Sell it, all proceeds to charity.” Darcy told him.

“I would ask what the appeal of me and a kitten is, but I’m sure I don’t want to know.” Steve told her. “What charity?”

“Planned Parenthood.” Kate told him.

“And Planned Parenthood is…?”

Kate and Darcy stalled. Natasha, knowing Steve better, and especially Steve’s history, took over. “Women’s health, reproductive stuff, birth control, fertility, sexually transmitted illness screening, health support for trans and gay people, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, right, the ones who offer abortion that congress keeps attacking.” Steve nodded.
“Hey, now-” Kate started.

Natasha held up her hand, gave Kate A Look. “Yes. That’s them.”

Steve nodded. “Cool. Let’s do it.” Kate made a shocked noise of some kind, and Steve sighed at her. “My mother was a public health nurse back in the day. What do you think public health was code for?”

“Captain America supports Planned Parenthood.” Kate said in awe.

“Believe me, kid,” James told them both, “you would not believe the shit we saw, growing up. Neither one of us would want a return to it.”

“I should probably write something up to put in it, so it is very clear that Captain America DOES support Planned Parenthood and isn’t a dupe manipulated by exceedingly intelligent women.” Steve considered. “Although Captain America does have a soft spot for exceedingly intelligent women, maybe put that in there too.”

Said the guy who couldn’t flirt for shit, Clint thought, shaking his head. It was probably just as well he couldn’t, they’d never be able to get through all the screaming women – and men - in the lobby, otherwise.

“The internet is going to EXPLODE.” Darcy announced in awe.

James made a disgusted, grumbling noise that sounded like agreement. He didn’t approve of anyone being public figures. That made them targets. And he was still stuck in the Tank, unable to watch their backs.

“Speaking of, the Avengers are going to need a social media presence.” Darcy told them all cheerfully.

Pepper strode into the kitchen, dressed for her day in a five-figure suit and shoes that cost more than Clint’s last three cars put together. “What are we doing?”

“Social media, and a Steve and Sidekick calendar, proceeds to Planned Parenthood.” Nat told her.

Pepper kissed the top of Steve’s head, then the cat’s. “Bless you both.” She turned to Nat. “I’ll line up a photographer, and a printer, say half a million for the first run? JARVIS set up social media accounts on all platforms a couple years back, you know, Avengers dot com, Avengers on tumblr and twitter and so forth. Let him know what you want done with them.” She beamed at Phil and Clint, took a single slice of bacon, half a pancake, and a cup of tea to the table.

“Oh yeah, uh.” Darcy looked a bit shifty. “JARVIS told me about those last night.”

Pepper smiled. “That was you. Nice work for a first tweet, you have a good feel for PR. Can’t go wrong with cute furry animals.” She turned. “Kate Bishop, yes?”

“Uh, yes.” Kate said, almost as a question. Clint could tell Katie-Kate was on the verge of calling Pepper ‘ma’am’ and tried not to laugh. Kate didn’t respect ANYONE.

“Nice to meet you. I have an internship open in my office, let me know if you want to come help rule the world.”

Darcy grumbled a little.
Pepper turned to her. “You’re in charge of Tony and the labs and the source of all of our product line development. You already pay for the rest of us running the world.”

Darcy gazed on Pepper with devotion and the beginnings of to-the-death loyalty.

Clint and Steve and Phil grinned at each other. They were very sure the US Government had had no idea what they were getting into when they allowed all these women to meet. It was gonna be great.

“This is gonna be good.” James announced from his wall screen.

Meanwhile, Lucky had wandered over to Steve and was snuffling curiously at Sidekick, wagging his tail. The kitten at first had backed away, but when nothing bad happened, she moved forward down Steve’s arm to get a better look. Lucky nosed her carefully, and she patted him with one tiny paw. Lucky gave a woof of amusement and laid his head on Steve’s arm, pressed against Sidekick, who was now sniffing back.

“I guess that’s sorted, then.” Steve said happily, and gave each animal a bit of bacon. Lucky looked devoted. Clint better not have lost his dog to Captain America and a kitten, he didn’t care how cute they were.

*

People drifted in and out of the kitchen most of the morning, and Clint made pancakes for a solid two hours. Phil, Darcy, and Bruce occasionally came and went, to cook more bacon or eggs, or slice fruit. Which was how he found himself in the middle of a discussion about weed. Literally. Bruce was frying bacon on one side of him and Darcy was slicing fruit on the other, and they were talking about hybrids and breeding and grow rooms and it came out that Bruce had been breeding marijuana strains for ‘optimal mellow’ pretty much from day one after his accident. And it so happened he had a new one ready to go. “We should try it.” Darcy announced.

This would not end well.

“I suppose we could.” Bruce agreed. “It’s nice out right now, and there’s a patio sort of spot on one of the roof terraces.” When they both looked at him, he shrugged. “I like to try new stuff outside, in case of hulkage. Less stuff gets broken.”

This was REALLY not going to end well. “Is that a risk?” Clint had to ask.

Bruce gave one of his hair-raising little smiles and said “not usually?”

Clint sighed and poured more pancakes, wondering how exactly he was going to explain that any chaos that came from this was not his fault? Where did weed fit into the Nat and Kate Quit Drinking Program? He’d never done street drugs, not at his worst, and weed was about on par with booze in his mind, but he couldn’t imagine the response being positive.

“You in?” Darcy asked him.

He really thought about it. On the one hand, it was disaster in the making. On the other… getting out from under a little of the stress right now sounded kinda nice. “Can I bring a friend?”

“Sure.” Bruce said, baffled.

“Oh hell, if we’re bringing friends, I’m inviting Steve.” Darcy announced. “I wanna see him stoned. I bet it’s epic.”
“You know the serum doesn’t really allow for stuff like that to work...” Bruce started.

“Ha.” Darcy said. “It works on you, doesn’t it?”

Clint contemplated the idea of Bruce AND Steve stoned at the same time. Yeah, they’d definitely need an adult.

*

Later that night, up on the roof, they’d found a giant futon thingie and flopped out on it while Bruce messed with the “bongerizer” that Tony had built for him. Because of course Tony Stark saw someone growing marijuana in his building and his first reaction was to BUILD SOMETHING. Sam watched the proceedings with an unimpressed look, accepting a cheeto from Darcy. “...and you want ME to be the control here.”

“Yep.” Clint assured him.

“While getting stoned. Along with you.” Sam repeated.

“Why not? When in Rome and all that shit.”

“Then how am I supposed to be the adult, again?” Sam asked, confused.

“You have common sense hardwired into your brain.” Clint assured him. “It’ll be great.”

“You have seen me flying around on the news, right?”

“Hey, man, last time I jumped off a building I DIDN’T have wings.”

Bruce sprawled out, inhaled, and passed the vaporizer to Darcy, who inhaled and passed it to Sam. Sam gave them all one last look of worry, shook his head, and inhaled. Then he passed it to Clint.

It was all going really well, Clint thought, until the bifrost lit off.
THOR!

Chapter Summary

Steve was striding toward them with a look of worry on his face and four chuckleheads – including the chucklehead he wanted to make his own – sat on a large cushioned surface and watched idly, passing around a bag of cheese doodles.

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I may need to work on emergency response around here.” May said thoughtfully.

He pinched the bridge of his nose some more.

Chapter Notes

Still some overlap with the “Thor” chapter of “Sam Meets the Avengers”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Phil was having what he’d hoped would be a quiet night on the Bus common floor, going over plans for the new team with Maria and Melinda. They hoped to finalize exactly what they wanted in the way of offices for the public Avenger’s floor, and would be moving into temporary offices until they were refurbished the way they desired. The hardest part was actually believing they had unlimited funds and could set things up any way they wanted; it was making choices a bit difficult.

“Phil, I don’t care if we’re sharing the job, I am not sharing an office with you, I do not need Barton snoring on my couch at weird hours.” Maria insisted.

“We could put in some pocket doors…”

“SNORING. AND NOW HE HAS A DOG THAT SNORES.”

Phil had only met Lucky in passing, and wondered how Maria knew about the dog’s snoring, and tried not to be jealous that she knew something about Clint that he didn’t. The date had gone well and the idea that they could be together again had possibly maybe made him just the tiniest bit obsessed. As well as light-headed.

The lights dimmed, as they had for the Winter Soldier’s arrival, and by the time they brightened again, all three of them were pulling on holsters and boots. “What’s the situation, JARVIS?” Phil demanded.

“According to Miss Lewis, the bifrost is… forming… and will deliver Prince Odinson to the roof shortly. However, given recent history and the last portal that opened above this building, forgive me for being more apprehensive than I might be.”

“Nope, sounds like a solid response to me.” Melinda assured him. As head of security, she’d been trying to ‘get to know’ JARVIS, since he was effectively their first line security system. The results
had been very amusing to Phil. The elevator opened as they reached it, stopped again for several more people to pile on, and opened onto a scene the likes of which Phil had never seen before.

Given his history, that was really saying something.

There was a beam of blindingly bright white light striking down from what looked like outer space – he could see cloud layers way way up in the atmosphere – and hitting the far side of the porch, where beams curved out in graceful arcs and the stone floor seemed to be smoking. Closer in, Steve was striding toward them with a look of worry on his face and four chuckleheads – including the chucklehead he wanted to make his own – sat on a large cushioned surface and watched idly, passing around a bag of cheese doodles.

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I may need to work on emergency response around here.” May said thoughtfully.

He pinched the bridge of his nose some more.

“Darcy says it’s the bifrost, and Thor.” Steve told them all. He looked… mostly all right, but his hair was rumpled and his eyes were suspiciously dilated.

“DID SOMEONE GET YOU STONED AND NOT INVITE ME?” Stark demanded.

“Yeah, Stark, let’s concentrate on the irrelevant details.” May grumbled at him.

“This is relevant!” he argued.

Everyone, by unspoken agreement, proceeded to ignore him. “What’s the usual protocol for this?” Phil asked Pepper.

“Uh. We don’t really have them. Usually Thor arrives by taxi.”

“Put it on the list.” Phil told May and Hill. They nodded.

Thor hit the roof – literally. There was an audible thud, and the floor shifted the tiniest bit, and then the light switched off. Dust settled. It seemed like even the city was silent for a beat. They all blinked at each other as Thor cried out, “My friends! It is good to have returned!”

Pepper’s and Stark’s phones started ringing, probably city officials wanting to know what the hell, judging from conversations Phil could half-hear.

After that were greetings and hugs and laughter. Phil was surprised to see how close the Avengers seemed to be with Thor; Phil suspected Thor was spending more time on planet than intelligence agencies knew about. Which made him wonder, along with Pepper’s revelation, how much more his (new) people were hiding.

“Son of Coul! I searched for you in Valhalla! I am so glad to see you here among your people.” Phil was nearly crushed under the weight of Thor’s hug and wished he couldn’t hear Stark giggling. He didn’t mind the title from Asgardians, but he’d be tazing Stark if he started using it.

Finally Thor put him down. “It’s good to see you too, Thor.” They grinned at each other; oh, the adventures they’d had. “How have you been?”

“I am well, but unfortunately.”

There was a thump behind them, and they all turned. Behind them, James Barnes had staggered out
of the stair well and was slumped against the sliding doors between the indoor atrium and the outdoor porch. JARVIS was apparently refusing to open them, given how Barnes was arguing with the ceiling.

His gun was out and pointed at Barnes before he had a conscious thought about it. May, Hill, and Natasha had similar reactions. Stark suddenly had a repulsor on his hand, pointed at Barnes as well. Pepper had stepped between Barnes and the rest of the support staff. She wasn’t on fire yet, but looked like she was ready if she needed to be.

“What in the FUCK, JARVIS.” Stark demanded.

JARVIS somehow seemed to sigh. “When the alarm was sounded, he proceeded to escape. I was unwilling to do the damage it would require to stop him, since he seemed intent on coming to all of you anyway.”

“A little warning next time?” Stark lowered his arm and the repulsor retracted into what Phil had thought was a watch. Interesting. And ingenious, of course.

“I was afraid that a second warning on the heels of the first would result in shooting.”

“Warn us next time anyway, please, JARVIS.” Steve stepped forward, between all of them and Barnes. “You can open the door now.”

Barnes staggered out. “What the hell?”

“What the hell us, what the hell YOU.” Stark replied.

“Not helping.” Steve said under his breath. “Hey, Buck. Everything’s fine. It was Thor coming to visit.”

Barnes blinked at Thor. “He landed on the roof?”

“Kinda, yeah.” Steve put a casual arm around Barnes, which also effectively turned Barnes toward the elevator and got them moving away from the crowd of assassins with guns.

“I am sorry to cause any problems.” Thor said, watching the men move off.

“Oh, it was a problem long before you got here, buddy.” Tony said easily. “Have you eaten? We’ll go get you some food and a drink.”

Belatedly, the elevator opened and Jane shoved past Steve and Barnes as they were getting on, raced through the doors, and took a running leap at Thor. He caught her, one forearm under her backside as her legs wrapped around him, the other arm across her back and tangled in her hair. They kissed. Intensely. A lot.

“...or, you know, that. That’s good too.” Stark said with a grin.

People began trailing back inside, waiting on the ‘vator or taking the stairs down the few floors to get to apartments and the common room. Phil turned, and there Clint was, one arm slung around Natasha’s shoulders, rumpled and grinning.

“So because this isn’t booze, I’m supposed to let you off?” Natasha was asking.

“M not drunk!” Clint said triumphantly, listing heavily to starboard. Oh boy.

Natasha got a better grip on him and tried not to smile. “Maybe if you don’t make a habit of it.” she
gave him a gentle push and he toddled back to where Sam, Bruce, and Darcy were chatting, and took a seat. He grabbed a handful of chips (they’d finished the cheese doodles) and seamlessly joined the discussion which seemed to be an attempt to understand the bifrost. Given only one of them had the background to do it when NOT stoned, it wasn’t going very well.

“Is there a problem?” Phil asked carefully, easing up beside Natasha. There had been some reference to Clint developing a drinking problem, and while he didn’t blame Clint in the least, he should probably know more about it.

“Not really, I don’t think.” Natasha smiled faintly as all four stoners started laughing about something, and flopped down together in a big puppy pile, continuing their physics discussion. “Clint had some problems after you died. Supposedly died. But I don’t think this is a return of them.”

“Please, let me know if there’s a problem, and if I can help.” Please, let him not be the problem.

“I will, but the real problem was Clint was locking himself in his apartment all alone and self-destructing.” She waved across the roof. Sam and Darcy were now bickering about cheese doodles and chips. “This isn’t solitary, or destructive, I don’t think.”

They were all hooting with laughter again. “No, I don’t think.” In his years at SHIELD, Phil had seen many, many ways people used to deal with stress. This seemed like a far more harmless option than most he’d witnessed.

Nat shrugged. “Time will tell, but unless it becomes a habit, I don’t think it’s in the same country as what he was doing before.”

Oh, good. “Let me know if I can help.”

“Don’t worry.” Natasha casually wrapped her arm around him and gave him a one-armed hug before slipping down the fire stairs.

Phil tried to remember if Natasha had ever hugged him like that before, and wasn’t coming up with anything. Didn’t mean much, but that felt like a new thing. A nice new thing, so he let it ride. Though he reflected, Strike Team Delta had been three people, and his sudden resurrection may be having more of an effect on her than even Russian Breakfast had let on. It had been intense, but he thought they’d settled things between them. Maybe not. He’d need to talk to her again.

He found a couple blankets and threw them over people who gave him glassy-eyed grins for it, or snored at him. Clint was on the ground and when Phil tried to get him onto the futon, Clint had refused. “Natasha might send me back to Mauritania. If I sleep on the ground I can feel her coming.”

Phil didn’t even know WHAT that was about, if anything, but he’d seen Clint do the sleep-on-the-ground thing before; it was one way of compensating for his hearing loss. So he settled for stuffing Clint into the sweatshirt he’d had on, and left him there.

Then he went back to work.

* 

Clint woke up with a back full of gravel – for real and in the ‘muscles are rocks’ sense - and Darcy patting his nose. “Stop.” Pat. “Quit.” Pat pat. “I will end you.” Pat pat pat.

“I want pancakes.”

“I want to own a tiki bar in Niue. Life’s full of disappointments.” He stood with a groan.
Sam was sitting up, looking like Clint felt. Bruce was nowhere to be found. The whole area was littered with crumbs and chip bags and blankets, and he was wearing a sweatshirt he didn’t recognize. He cautiously lifted his arm and sniffed the sleeve; it might be Phil’s. Might be wishful thinking, but it smelled like him, Clint was pretty sure.

“Did you just sniff that sweatshirt?” Darcy demanded. “Why are you smiling? Why is everyone around here so – wait, I know that one.”

Clint shook his head, feeling his vertebrae protest. Second time this week; he really needed to figure out a real sleep schedule. (He’d been thinking that for over a decade.) “JARVIS, what time is it?”

“Good morning, Hawkeye, it is eight thirty. Prince Odinson and most of the Avengers are gathered in the common floor kitchen having breakfast.”

He was pretty sure they had anti-inflammatories in the kitchen. In fact, knowing Tony, they had a whole spectrum of painkillers down there. Sounded good. “C’mon.” he grabbed Sam’s arm and tugged a bit. “Food and drugs.”

“Didn’t we already do the drugs?” Sam asked wearily, standing.

JARVIS had the ‘vator waiting and seconds later they were dropping into chairs at the table, where scornful friends shoved food at them. A couple of slices of bacon helped immensely and he started looking around for some toast.

Phil sat a mug of tea in front of him, with three little blue pills. “You are a god.” Clint told him, washing them down.

Phil simply smiled at him and sat nearby. He would never get tired of that.

“Gang’s all here.” Tony said cheerfully. He’d never admit it, but he was always happiest when all the Avengers were gathered in the Tower. Clint could never figure if it was because he enjoyed the company, or the backup. Clint remembered, himself, how much his life had improved once he’d had Phil and Nat at his back, and didn’t feel like he was on his own.

“We need to have a meeting-” Phil began.

Everyone jeered and threw things at him, but it was mostly balled up napkins so Clint let it go and concentrated on eating again.

“We need a list of outstanding problems for the Avengers to start working through, even if we’re going to do nothing but gather data for now.”

Thor – somehow sounding diffident, how did he DO that? - said politely, “I am here on behalf of the AllFather, to speak of some diplomatic issues.”

Phil suddenly looked very intense.

“Phil. PHIL.” Tony said, leaning back in his chair and putting his feet on the table.

Natasha slapped them down.

Tony sat up again, but kept talking. “It’s the weekend. It’s Saturday. And our long-lost shield brother has returned to us!” He gestured extravagantly to Thor, who grinned brightly around a mouthful of eggs. “We need a party! And we need to recover from the party! How does Monday sound?”
“However,” Thor allowed, “it would be wrong to deny my hosts’ hospitality, by refusing my welcome festivities.” Haha, go Thor. Everyone forgot he’d trained at his parents’ knees to take over a kingdom since he was a baby. Which was about two thousand years ago. He was probably better at diplomacy than ass-kicking, but it was always a shock to be reminded of it, for some reason. Darcy laughed and high-fived him. He grinned again, bright and happy, and went back to his breakfast.

Phil looked around the table. Clint did the same. Everyone looked exhausted, cranky, and wiped out. Natasha looked half asleep, which was worrying. Steve was slouched down into his chair, absently feeding bits of bacon to his kitten on his shoulder. Tony had been in the lab all night and seemed drunk, though Clint was reasonably sure it was exhaustion. Bruce was bright eyed, cheerful, and wide awake, chatting with Betty. Asshole.

“One weekend.” Phil allowed. “Since we officially came into existence this week and the gang’s all here. One weekend to celebrate, then Monday morning, early, I expect every butt to be in a chair in the conference room, sober and not hungover. That includes support staff. And in the mean time, don’t get so blitzed you can’t save the world if an emergency comes up.”

Everyone cheered. Clint winced.

“We are going out. Everyone in the garage at nine tonight, we’re hitting the clubs.” Tony announced. “Yeah, that means support staff too.” when it looked like Darcy might be sad. She perked up.

“I had better not wind up bailing anyone out of jail.” Phil told them all.

“Bailing us out? Hell, Phil, you’re coming along.” Tony demanded.

“Oh no.”

“Oh YES.”

Chapter End Notes

The way my holiday is shaking down, the real chaos is going to hit me in the next two days. So we might have a day get skipped. But IT IS DONE (I am at the stage of adding fun, silly scenes at the end). I still plan to meet the goal of having it all posted by the holidays.
Clubbing!

Chapter Summary

“I’d like to cut in and dance with Clint.” Phil said with a grin at Natasha. “If he doesn’t want to, that’s fine, but I’d appreciate you dancing with me rather than humiliating me by leaving me standing here.”

Natasha looked at Clint, who shrugged and grinned. “Sure.” she turned back to Phil, smiled, and KISSED HIM FULL ON THE LIPS before prowling away.

They rolled up to some incredibly popular club or other, with a huge line out front. Tony swept them inside and after an intense discussion with the manager, they all ended up off to one side of the club, in a VIP room that was more like an alcove. Phil saw Tony hand over a black AmEx and decided he didn’t want to know. Anything. They had their own bar, and a bartender Tony chased off to take her place. He immediately started mixing drinks for everyone, refusing to take orders, instead making up whatever he thought each person should have. Steve wound up with a sweet Manhattan, and Sam sat at the bar next to him, drinking a boilermaker. There had been a scuffle with Tony over giving Sam a beer; it was a ‘boring’ drink for a ‘fancy’ club. Phil was drinking a martini because Tony was in a mood and what the hell, he liked martinis anyway. Darcy was sitting with his three mini geeks, swinging by the bar occasionally to pick up fruity ‘girl drinks’ by the pitcher. He should have been more concerned about that but really didn’t give a damn.

Thor, Asgard help them all, was out on the dance floor with Jane, trying to learn ‘this new Midgardian custom! It looks very enjoyable!’ Unfortunately Jane couldn’t dance well enough to teach him, but the crowd loved him and he had no shortage of help.

Phil was NOT bailing anyone out of jail later, and had made that very clear. If it came to that, he’d send Steve; that disapproving face he did would be worse than being bailed out by your mother.

The dance floor was down some steps, through a few tables, and past the DJ booth. It was a good club with an excellent DJ so the music was good and the floor was pumping. They were above things far enough to have a good view of the rest of the club.

Clint had worn an extremely tight purple tee shirt, very old jeans, and beat up boots that only looked like club wear because they were on his body. On that body? He was having to dance with Natasha to keep the other men and women off him. Clint and Natasha had always danced for fun quite a lot, frequenting clubs in any city they happened to be staying. Phil had reasonably clear memories of the two of them on what seemed like an infinite number of dance floors, dancing everything from bump and grind to formal waltzes, ballroom, and if he could rely on his brain, actual ballet.

All the women who’d come along had dressed, to a woman, in short, tight dresses and ridiculous shoes. (Jemma looked wonderful, though deeply uncomfortable.) Natasha, in a light blue metallic dress, platform stilettos that added at least six inches to her height, and a blonde wig, was relatively unnoticed as an Avenger. The rest of them had been on Twitter since about two minutes after they’d walked in. Darcy had told him cheerfully, showing him a candid photo of Steve and Tony arguing at the bar. The men were all sitting against or leaning on the bar, watching the dance floor, when Kate stalked in. She too was dressed for clubbing, with a backpack-style purse on one shoulder that Phil would bet contained one of Clint’s old folding bows.
“You guys do realize you’re trending on Twitter, right?”

In his previous life, those words would have struck horror, if he’d even allowed himself to come to the club in the first place. Now? Phil took another sip of his excellent martini, and munched the olive. He was glad he’d worn a good suit if he was going to be plastered over cyberspace.

“I can’t live my life according to what the public thinks, Bishop.” Tony and Kate had gotten into a mutual bitching relationship that would be heartwarming if it didn’t annoy the hell out of everyone around them.

“That was obvious in about 1994, Stark, I’m talking to the rest of these yahoos.” She turned to Phil. “Your picture is on there. More than once.”

Phil grinned. If he was going to run with the Avengers, he’d have to get used to it. “What’s the word?”

Kate blinked at him a moment. “Everyone wants to know who the guy in the expensive suit is.”

“That’s me.” Tony piped up cheerfully.

“It really isn’t.” Kate told him with an eyeroll. She turned back to Phil. “If you left now, JARVIS could probably scrub-”

“It’s all right, Kate.” He said as gently as was possible, which wasn’t much with as loud as the music was. “I’m done with the spy thing. I’m more like Avengers management now. I’ll be around at press conferences and the like; this is not going to cause a problem.”

Kate stared for a long moment, then nodded, and turned to the bar. “Stark, I want three fingers of the Espolon, the anejo, and do not give me the cheap shit or I’ll shoot out the tires on your Audi.”

“You aren’t old enough to drink.”

“Do not fuck with me, I will kick your ass. Hand me the goddamn bottle and a glass of ice. I’m sitting with the geeklings.”

Phil listened to the bickering with half an ear while he watched Clint on the dance floor. He’d always thought Clint moved better than a dancer; rather than grace, he had the raw power of a gymnast who kicked ass for a living, and for some reason that was far more attractive than simple grace. He did a fancy one-armed lift with Natasha and the crowd cheered.

“No, seriously.” Tony tried to tell Kate. “I remember your sister’s debutante ball. You’re like seventeen. I don’t know how you even got in here, the bouncers are usually pretty good about carding.”

“You barely remember it through a haze of scotch fumes. That ball was in TWO THOUSAND FIVE, and I was TWELVE, you dumbass.” Kate gave up arguing, hopped up on the bar, and swung around to hop down behind it. Phil stepped aside as her legs went by, not really looking away from Clint.

“Tony, don’t be a lunk, let the gir-woman have a drink.” Steve chided him.

“You almost called me a girl.” Kate said wonderingly at Steve. “Since you’re the only guy on earth who can say he’s old-fashioned and get away with it, I’ll let you live.” She hip-checked Tony out of her way, got the bottle and glass, and went to sit next to Darcy.
“I get no respect around here.” Tony complained.

“Nope!” Sam told him cheerfully. “Hand me another beer, dude.”

A slower song came on, and out on the dance floor most of the women headed in. Clint and Nat took the opportunity to do some hybrid waltz-foxtrot deal they’d invented so they could waltz to songs in the wrong time signature. They called it the HokeyPokey, it looked smoking hot, and how did he remember that?

Tony said something to him, but he ignored it and went out to the DJ booth, rifling his pockets for his money clip. He found a hundred, held it out to the DJ, who cocked an eyebrow at him. Phil knew he wouldn’t be getting the time of day, the ultimate average guy who wore a suit to a club, except he was running with the Avengers. “Guy in the purple tee, woman in the ice blue.”

“Can’t miss ‘em.” the DJ agreed.

“Wait until I get out to them on the floor, give me thirty seconds to talk, then play Smooth.” He handed over the hundred.

“You don’t stand a chance.” the DJ said helpfully.

Well, bless him, the guy didn’t know even half the story, now, did he? He let himself grin. “Watch and learn, Grasshopper.”

“It’s your fail.” the guy said cheerfully, and pocketed the money.

“Thank you.”

Phil easily made his way out to Clint and Nat, swaying around people. It was so easy to move in a happy mob, compared to a riot.

“Hey Phil!” Clint said cheerfully, swinging Nat around so they both faced him.

“I’d like to cut in and dance with Clint.” Phil said with a grin at Natasha. “If he doesn’t want to, that’s fine, but I’d appreciate you dancing with me rather than humiliating me by leaving me standing here.”

Natasha looked at Clint, who shrugged and grinned. “Sure.” she turned back to Phil, smiled, and KISSED HIM FULL ON THE LIPS before prowling away.

“This isn’t your usual.” Clint said cautiously, moving closer.

“I was always too afraid to show much enthusiasm, for fear I’d scare you off.” The song was starting.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” Phil stepped into Clint’s center of gravity, put his right hand at the small of Clint’s back, took his hand in his, smiled, and said “Tallest man leads.” Then he dipped Clint nearly to the floor and jerked him up again so their noses were nearly touching.

Clint’s eyes went dark and aroused at the same time he started laughing. It was a very, very good look on him.

“Tango.” Phil commanded, and swept him away.
It took Clint almost a verse to stop laughing, and when he started to get his breath back, Phil said in his best dry delivery, “I am not doing any lifts, even if you want to feel like Baby out of your corner.” and set him off again.

Best dance ever.

*

Natasha let herself smile, really smile, the whole way back to their little alcove and bar. This song was one of Clint’s favorites, they danced to it all the time. Phil would always sit back and stay in the shadows. But this time he took the risk and stepped in.

And Clint let him.

Strike Team Delta might get their happy ending, after all.

At the bar, Tony was standing, mouth hanging open, watching Clint and Phil dance. She turned; yeah, they did look damn good together. She’d always known they would. It helped that Clint was laughing. “Stark. STARK.” Tony shook himself and looked at her. “A kir royale, please, and do not even begin to argue with me.” She was having champagne and toasting to hope. The good guys might win this one.

“Buh.” Tony said, opening champagne and liqueur on autopilot. He handed over the drink. “What.” he waved vaguely at the dance floor.

She glanced over. Sam was openly smiling at Phil and Clint. Steve… Steve looked surprised but was smiling too. She took her drink and clinked it to his, and drank, watching the two men on the floor. By now everyone had cleared a space and they were trying to outdo each other. The DJ was rolling another slower song for them and the crowd was eating it up.

“What.” Tony tried again.

“His brain’s stuck.” Steve said sagely.

“Mmmm.” Natasha agreed. She leaned out a bit to look at Sam. “You should fix him.”

“I keep telling you guys, I can’t fix that kinda thing. I just listen and nod a lot, I don’t do that complicated neuro stuff.” Sam explained.

“Ithoughthewassleepingwithyou!” Tony finally got out.

Steve, who’d been fine with two men dancing, now gave Tony a stern look. “Do not be rude.”

Aw, bless his heart. Natasha leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. He turned pink but continued to glare at Tony.

“I’m not rude!” Tony squeaked. “Clint’s… with… her all the time, like ALL THE TIME, and, and.” he flapped a hand at the dance floor. “COULSON?”

Natasha leaned in over the bar until she knew it looked like her tits were going to fall out of her dress. Tony only looked more terrified, which earned him some credit. “Is there something wrong with Coulson?”

“Of course not!” Tony seemed to shake himself all over and get a grip. “Clint used to sleep with you. I did NOT read that wrong.”
“It was a long time ago.” Mostly.

“And now he’s with Coulson?” Tony asked desperately.

“Tony.” Steve said waringly again.

“What is the problem here, Stark?” Natasha asked in her ‘I could dismember you but I don’t want to ruin my manicure’ voice.

“No problem. Nope, none, no problem.” Tony assured them all. “I, of all people, I am in no position to judge anyone. About anything. Ever. Particularly sex. But.” He waved his hands at the dance floor again, and then at Natasha, and spoke to Steve and Sam. “Barton has got to be THE MOST BADASS MOTHERFUCKER ON THE PLANET.”

“Fair enough.” Natasha allowed, and went to sit with Pepper and Maria. Behind her, Steve and Sam were in near-hysterics and Tony kept repeating ‘what? It’s true!’

“Do I want to know?” Pepper asked.

“You really don’t.” Nat told her, and sat back to enjoy the rest of her night. She watched them dance, watched them laugh, and her face felt odd from smiling so much. When they headed out the front door together, she and Pepper raised their glasses in a silent toast and drained them. Natasha took Pepper’s glass and her own and went back to the bar for a refill.

Tony was mixing and puttering and garnishing when he suddenly froze and locked that intense stare onto her. “WAIT. Clint and Phil. That wasn’t a new relationship I saw walk out of here. Did Fury know before he faked Phil’s death? WIPED HIS MEMORIES?”

Steve’s head snapped around and he frowned as he waited for the answer.

“Yes.” Natasha said, taking the drinks. “Fury knew.”

“And he told Clint that Phil was dead. And erased Phil’s memory of Clint.” Steve clarified.

“Yes.” Natasha said simply. She didn’t have much else to say about it, after years of worry and days and days of rage.

“Oh my fucking god.” Tony snarled.

That did not sound good. “Dibs.” Natasha told him, hoping his fear of her would keep him from doing something exceedingly illegal. From the look Steve and Tony exchanged over her shoulder, she didn’t have much hope.

Ah well, she tried. Fury really deserved whatever they could throw at him, and she wasn’t the man’s keeper. She collected the drinks and went back to Pepper. “There may be some law-breaking going on in the next day or two.”

“Different from the usual law breaking?” Pepper asked disinterestedly, nodding thanks for her drink refill.

“Tony just figured out that Fury knew Clint and Phil were together and still faked Phil’s death without telling Clint.”

“HE. DID. WHAT.” Pepper asked, turning her head slowly to stare at Natasha.

Whoops. “I thought you knew?” She’d known about Clint and Phil; Pepper had been a drinking
buddy of Phil’s before he died, and after, she’d somehow put things together and befriended Clint. Clint remained baffled about it, but they’d built a really solid friendship between them, to the point Clint even did bodyguard jobs for her. Clint hadn’t done that for ANYBODY because of a few experiences after he got thrown out of the Army.

“I knew Phil and Clint were together, I had NOT realized Fury knew it.” Without another word, Pepper rose and strode over to the bar where Steve and Tony had their heads together.

Whoops.

Darcy dropped down beside her. “Should I worry about that?” she asked.

“About what?” Natasha asked, confused.

Darcy nodded toward the bar, where Steve, Tony, and Pepper were in a huddle. “That. That was Ms Potts’ empress of the universe walk, and none of the three of them look too happy right now.”

“I can’t tell you.” She got a pitying glare from Darcy. “No. It’s not mine to tell. But it’s nothing that should involve you. Especially not in a negative way.” Whatever was being planned by the three of them, Natasha could easily imagine Darcy laughing her ass off about it, later.

Darcy made a humming noise. “Okay. Can I ask you something else?”

Dear pinko commie atheist lack of gods, what now? “...all right?”

“Where did you buy that dress?”
Chapter Summary

In the quiet, private elevator, Phil couldn’t resist any longer, and quit trying. He stepped into Clint’s space again, shoved him against the wall, and kissed him.

Chapter Notes

I finished the in-progress draft of this today. Comes out to about 62K words, so y'all have most of it already. So to celebrate, have a bonus chapter, full of smut!!

Trigger warnings: Not really any? There is sex. It's kinda graphic. It's a little rough, but consent is quite happily given in a very clear manner.

After they danced, they didn’t go back to the rest of the gang. Phil took Clint’s hand in his and they headed for the front door and hailed a cab. “Tower, or your place in BedStuy?”

“Tower’s closer.” Clint pointed out.

“Avengers Tower.” Phil told the cab driver.

Inside the Tower, in the quiet, private elevator, Phil couldn’t resist any longer, and quit trying. He stepped into Clint’s space again, shoved him against the wall, and kissed him. At last. He pushed one knee between Clint’s legs and snuggled it up against his balls and Clint moaned beautifully and dropped his head back. It exposed his throat, so Phil happily leaned in and bit him, THERE, on that tendon over his collarbone that made Phil’s mouth water. He tasted of Clint, and sweat, and Phil licked a line up his throat and bit again.

“Jesus, Phil.” Clint said hoarsely, rubbing against Phil’s knee. “Keep that up and I’m going to come in my pants like a teenager. I’ve been hard since you grabbed me on the dance floor.” He rocked his hips, closed his eyes.

“Really.” Phil said curiously.

Clint moaned and rubbed again. “Libido was gone… years… now it’s back. With you.”

Phil pressed his knee upward a little more as he leaned forward and said into Clint’s ear “if you come in your pants, I’ll spend all night if that’s what it takes to get you to come again, on my cock next time.” then he bit as Clint shivered in his arms and came on the spot.

That was fascinating and he’d have to take advantage of it again. Soon. He’d never dared talk to Clint like that before.

“Sorry.” Clint half laughed, looking dazed, his eyes blown and his lips swollen.

Phil leaned in and sucked that deep red bottom lip into his mouth, then raked his teeth over it, pulling
away. “For what?” he asked. “Making me feel like a sex god?”

“Sex ninja.” Clint corrected.

The elevator doors opened on Clint’s floor and Phil took a breath. “Yes or no, Clint. No hard feelings if you-”

“Oh my god, are you kidding?” Clint took his hand and pulled him into his apartment, pausing for more kissing and to grip Phil’s ass and rub them together again. “When we were together, before, at least half my fantasies were about you… taking over.”

“Really.” Because as he remembered it, he’d wanted to take over but was afraid of offending Clint. Or scaring him off. Or worst, getting disgust and a no. “Were we both idiots, all those years?”

They’d ended up in Clint’s bedroom, dim with city lights. “I’m beginning to think so.” Clint agreed. He started to pull his shirt off and Phil stopped him.

“I believe I was taking over.” he reminded Clint, and pulled the shirt off for him. He raked his nails over that incredible musculature, moved on to Clint’s jeans, wet in the front from his sex ninja move, and unbuttoned the fly. “Shoes and pants off.” Clint shivered all over and stripped. His eyes were black and he was covered in goose flesh. Clint had a tattoo on his chest, a new one; Phil couldn’t see it well in the half light. When Clint was naked, and Phil still completely dressed in his suit, Phil pulled him over to the bed. “You know you can stop me-”

“Oh Jesus, don’t.” Clint demanded, pulling the blankets back and dropping down. “Lube’s in the drawer, I’m clean, I still hate condoms, do whatever you want.” He arched his back, raised his arms over his head, stretching, and Phil kicked off his shoes and climbed on, kneeling over him on knees and hands. He paused to enjoy Clint, entirely naked under him, while he was clothed. He pinned down Clint’s wrists, watched him arch up. Then he started kissing. They kissed forever, and when Clint finally started to relax, Phil reached down with both hands and pinched Clint’s nipples, hard. Clint arched and moaned and went back to the tension and writhing. Phil traced most of his torso muscles with his tongue, and glanced down; Clint was hard again. “Nice.”

Clint made a satisfying wordless noise in reply. “Roll over. Hands on the headboard.” Once Clint was face down, Phil stripped out of his clothes and got the lube. “Spread your legs.” When Clint did, he knelt between them, admiring the view. Clint always did have the best ass. “Where did this tattoo come from?” he had to ask.

“Later.” Clint said, hips moving.

Phil slapped the tattoo, hard. “No rubbing off on the sheet.” Clint really was gone; he’d yelped and moaned at the slap and wasn’t THAT interesting. So Phil changed his plan, leaned down, and BIT that heart on Clint’s ass, the one he hadn’t had anything to do with, and made sure it left one hell of a bruise, grinding his teeth down into it. Clint was nearly screaming his name by the time he was finished and they were going to have to discuss this at length later because he found he quite liked leaving marks. Big ones. As well as having his name screamed. He slapped again for good measure and Clint shouted some more. “Don’t you dare come again without me inside you.”

“Then FUCK ME.” Clint demanded, turning to glare over one shoulder.

Phil had to laugh, and slapped the tattoo a third time, making Clint groan and bury his face in the pillow again. Phil got one cheek in each hand and squeezed, finally allowing himself to enjoy without reservation. He didn’t think he’d ever done this before, doing entirely as he pleased; he’d always been too worried about impressing Clint and making things perfect. Since Clint didn’t seem
to be minding a bit, he kneaded, hard, spreading Clint open to a series of delicious low sounds. He wondered about fingertip bruises, and let himself work the muscles, watching that little rosette quiver and open slightly as he pulled. When Clint started whimpering, he added a blob of lube, cold, to listen to the whine, then placed both thumbs on that little rose and continued to knead his cheeks, pushing in first one thumb, then the other. Barely entering, teasing, enjoying all the sounds from Clint, especially the ones that sounded like his name. He took his own sweet time, massaging and working Clint open, smiling when Clint pushed back into his hands and begged.

He pushed both thumbs in, to the knuckles, and broke Clint open. Clint was trembling all over now, and actually cried out when Phil squeezed a giant blob of cold lube down into his ass as Phil held him open. He continued to spread his thumbs stretching Clint’s to another series of glorious sounds, enjoying it now as much for the noise as the view and all the writhing. He pulled Clint up onto his knees, working the muscles as they tightened, pushing in further and further with both thumbs.

He got up on his knees and spread some lube on his cock, and went back to spreading Clint open until Clint was rocking on his knees, and pushed inside. Clint pushed back against him and they came together like they’d never been apart. Phil laid over him, feeling Clint quiver around him and tremble under him, and reveled in it, in owning this body and making it his. “Don’t come until I tell you.” He ordered, and thrust, hard.

“Phil.” Clint gasped.

“Not until I tell you.” Phil ordered again, and began. Clint, under him, was perfect; noisy and tight and hot. He let himself go, thrusting roughly, pushing into that magnificent ass. He put his lips between Clint’s shoulder blades, kissed, and whispered, “mine.” Then he thrust again, hard as he could, pulling Clint’s hips back into it. He wasn’t going to last very long. That was okay, the way Clint was begging and shaking, he didn’t think either of them was going to last very long. He tried to push in deeper, harder, to get in as far as he could. He pulled back until he could see that tight ring of muscle stretched around his cock and ran his thumbs over it, kneaded those incredible ass cheeks some more, tried to pull Clint open even further.

Clint was sobbing into the pillow, begging. Phil wanted to hear that for hours. But he wasn’t going to last. He gave the cheeks a last hard squeeze, ran his thumbs roughly over the pink ring around his cock, listened to Clint sob his name. Then he said “NOW, Clint. Come now.” and thrust. That ring of muscle quivered and clenched and screamed and he came, pushing himself in deep, emptying himself inside Clint where he belonged.

* 

He came back to himself next to Clint, one arm thrown over him. Clint hadn’t moved, face down on the bed, trembling. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the back of his neck. “You were perfect.”

Clint made a ‘mm’ sound and turned his head slightly, so Phil could see one blue eye peering out of the pillow. “Damn, Phil.” he said, voice rusty.

“Did I hurt you? Other than the bite mark?” Phil asked, rubbing a hand up and down Clint’s perfectly muscled back.

“Only in good ways.” Clint flopped down into the pillow again. “’S amazing.”

Oh, good. Maybe he’d get to do that again some time. Soon. Phil kissed a shoulder blade. “I’ll be right back.”
The water in the bath was instantly hot, and small lights under the edge of the counters were more than enough to see by. Phil cleaned himself up shakily and took a warm wash cloth out to clean up Clint. Clint, who hadn’t moved, but was occasionally shivering. Phil rolled him onto his side gently and began to wipe him off; every here he touched left quivering muscle and more goose flesh. Clint reached out for the washcloth and Phil held it out of reach. “No. I like watching you tremble for me.”

Clint whimpered again and tried to hold still, letting Phil finish cleaning him up and then take a few half-hearted swipes at the sheet. The washcloth was flung carelessly into the bathroom to splat on the tile floor, and Phil climbed back into bed, wrapping Clint in his arms and kissing the top of his head. Clint was asleep before Phil had even made himself comfortable.

* 

The next morning, Clint woke up late, and Phil was gone. He had vague memories of Phil getting a call and kissing him before he left. According to JARVIS, everyone was up in the common room applying hangover remedies, which meant Steve was cooking greasy breakfast food. (Dude cooked eggs in bacon grease. The thirties must have been something else.) That sounded pretty good, so he pulled sweats over his very tender ass, threw on a tee shirt, and limped upstairs to join them.

“You okay, man?” Sam asked, when Clint gingerly sat next to him at the kitchen table.

“Oh my god, don’t ASK HIM.” Tony said in horror. “HE MIGHT TELL US. And I am not ready to hear about Coulson having sex.” Across the table, Phil chuckled into his tea cup. Tony pointed with his fork. “SEE? That is DISTURBING.”

“This isn’t from having sex, so chill the hell out.” Clint told Tony. Then he turned to Natasha. “It is, in fact, from Phil’s teeth prints in that goddamn tattoo you and Kate put on me.” He’d timed his statement perfectly, and Natasha actually choked on her tea, as Clint had hoped, then laughed long and hard, until she had tears in her eyes.

“Oh, NOW you can be disturbed.” Sam told Tony, who nodded.

Phil smiled widely at Clint and poured himself some more tea.

“Uh...” Steve said, over by the stove, eyes flicking from one team member to another. Clearly he wanted to help, and just as clearly, he had no idea what to do or say.

Clint sighed and began speaking as he dished up huge helpings of everything on the table. “After the Battle of Manhattan, I was in pretty bad shape. I decided to try life at the bottom of a bottle for a while.” He got a shoulder bump from Sam and bumped back. “After letting me go for a couple weeks, Nat and Kate decided it was turning into a problem and that they were going to make me quit drinking.”

“You know,” Sam told Natasha apologetically, “that method really doesn’t work, the person has to come to their own realization--”

“Yeah, no.” Clint interrupted him. “In the normal world, you’re probably right, but you left normal about three states back. When Nat and Kate decide they’re going to fix something, it gets fixed. Whether it wants to or not. Even if it’s a person.” Clint shook his head, accepted a cup of green tea from Phil with a smile, began buttering pancakes. ‘They began penalties, they called it, when they found me passed out, drunk. One of those penalties was a tattoo on my ass. ‘If lost, please return to Kate Bishop’, with her cell phone number, surrounded by a big red heart.’

“You didn’t want to tag him yourself?” Sam asked Natasha.
“I didn’t want to know where his ass had been.” Natasha explained.

Tony inhaled his coffee. Down the table Bruce had his face in his hands and his shoulders were heaving; they knew now that if he was upset he’d leave, so that must be laughter. Betty, next to him, was patting him on the back and giggling helplessly, giving Clint a sympathetic look.

“So, anyway, I never bothered to have it lasered off because there really wasn’t anyone looking at my naked ass until last night—”

“OKAY!” Tony interrupted. “We get the idea. That’s how they got you to stop drinking?”

“Oh hell no.” Clint said easily. “I told you, I was trying to escape reality. Took more than an ass tattoo to get my attention.”

“What did work, then?” Phil asked quietly.

Clint looked around the table, decided maybe he could spare a few others some grief, and gave up the rest of the story. “Well,” he spoke around a mouthful of bacon, “the ten chinchillas loose in the apartment while I’d passed out on the couch, that mostly did it. Tried to quit after that. Chinchilla bites can be nasty.”

“You never told me that.” Natasha grumbled.

“You didn’t ask.” Clint replied. “But I backslid some, and woke up in a drunk tank.” Everyone chuckled. “The drunk tank was in Mauritania. Which was a hell of a shock, considering I’d passed out in my apartment in BedStuy.” The chuckles became outright laughter. “Sat in there for a week, no paperwork, not knowing the language. Finally the guy in charge, the one who strangely hadn’t known a word of any language I spoke the day before, came to let me out and told me – in ENGLISH – that he’d owed Nat a favor and to have a good day.”

“In Mauritania.” Sam repeated.

“With no paperwork.” Clint reminded him. “And no money. Clothes on my back, which were pretty ripe by then. Had to make my own way home. That took another week. Since then I haven’t gotten drunk.”

“You’re right, that’s not the usual level of ‘saving someone’ I see from loved ones.” Sam agreed. He leaned around Clint. “Nice work.” He told Natasha.

Clint shook his head, tucked a foot under Phil’s across the table, and admitted to himself that he was happy. Phil smiled back.

People were getting up to leave and Phil announced calmly, “I need to speak to Steve, Tony, and Pepper privately. Sooner rather than later.” He paused to glare at all three of them. “Now would be best.”

All three looked guilty. Which Clint found interesting because he didn’t think he’d ever seen Pepper look guilty about anything before. Ever. Well, for once he wasn’t the one in trouble, so he got up and absentmindedly started on the dishes. Before he left, Phil stopped to refill his tea and pat his ass, very gently, over the massive bruise. “Do I want to know?” he asked.

“Hmm, oh, the terrible trio? Someone slagged Fury’s car last night.”

“Huh.” was all Clint could think of to say.
“Fury was still in it.” Phil added, and strode out to go reprimand the CEO and the chief stockholder of Stark Industries. And Captain America.

Clint couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so hard.
MORE Hijinks, with bonus property damage.

Chapter Summary

Natasha’s deep, rich laugh burst out. “And I’m supposed to forgive the three of you for not respecting I had dibs?”

Steve cleared his throat. “Ah, that too, please.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil shut the door to the private sitting room and stood, glaring at his three miscreants. Maybe later he’d gloat that he got Pepper Potts and Steve Rogers to look guilty. But right now he was too damned irritated. (Tony looked defiant. Tony always looked defiant. The odds of this discussion having any impact on him were nil.)

“I had a call from Fury this morning.”

No one spoke.

“I’m doubly annoyed, seeing as I was… very comfortable… at the time.” He’d been in bed with Clint and had to get up. He’d had plans for this morning, and none of them had involved GETTING OUT OF BED. For that alone he was damned annoyed, but if he couldn’t control these three, the Avengers Initiative was dead in the water.

“Oh gross, Phil, I told you I don’t wanna know-”

Tony broke off when Phil turned and glared at him. “Keep complaining and I will give details. We had a very, VERY good night.” Tony shut up. Ha.

“Now then. Fury tells me that Captain America called him and asked to meet in a quiet location out of town, to discuss the Winter Soldier information that Fury claims to have.” He took a moment to glare some more. “About the only person, ON EARTH, who Fury would see in those circumstances WAS Captain America. No longer. When he arrived at the destination, Captain America was waiting to shatter the driver’s side window, threaten Fury’s life, manhood, and remaining eye if he didn’t stop meddling in the lives of the Avengers, and then disappeared. Iron Man repulsored his vehicle into oblivion while doing something to jam all his communications. According to him, Natasha Romanov was in the woods on the far side of his car with a flame thrower, and melted his car doors shut on that side. Would you say that’s an accurate summary?”

All three looked at each other and nodded.

“Where were you during the destruction?” Phil asked Cap.

“Uh. I went down the road to warn off other motorists so no one would get hurt.”

“While your two partners in crime committed half a dozen felonies against a man who could make all three of you disappear, permanently.”
“Oh come on, Phil.” Tony started.

Phil let his temper slip a bit, and his voice rise. “You have no idea, NONE, what he is capable of. You think he’s a ruthless bastard, and he is, but you do not seem to fully understand that he is willing to do ANYTHING if he thinks national security is at stake. Right now, his life is part of national security in his mind.”

“We’ll fight him like we have everything else, if we have to.” Cap said quietly.

“We are on thin ice, here. If it looks like the Avengers are out of control, it could be open season-”

“No.” Steve said gently. “Sit down, Phil. Co-leaders, remember? This one’s on me and I’ll take the heat if I have to.”

Phil figured what the hell and dropped into a chair. “IF? IF you have to? This is going to have repercussions-”

“That was kind of the idea.” Tony observed.

Phil was ready to argue some more.

Pepper stepped in. “All right, everyone take a breath.” She glared at Tony, poked Steve, and gave Phil a level look. “I knew about you and Clint. After you supposedly died, when he showed up here looking like he was near death himself, carrying a bow and a quiver, and I remembered you and your cellist story.” She had a look of her own that wasn’t quite a glare but in the neighborhood. “I kept my mouth shut about it because it wasn’t my business to go announcing it. These two,” she gestured at the men on either side of her, “hadn’t realized that until last night at the club.”

Phil started to say something and she held up a hand. “No one is judging. In fact, we hope you’ll be happy together. However, last night is ALSO the first time we realized what Nick had done. To both of you. Letting Clint think you were dead, and erasing your memory of him. It was the first we put it all together, with your relationship, and really understood what the two of you have gone through at his hands.”

“We can’t let it go, Phil.” Steve said, almost gently. “If we let him get away with it, he won’t hesitate to continue playing divide and conquer, trying to manipulate us individually. Hell, his try with me and his Winter Soldier information – he’s already trying it again. We’ve got to send the message that we protect our own. Against all comers.”

Phil… couldn’t think of an answer to that.

“He deserved it.” Tony stated, with his own glare. “For what he did to you, alone, he deserved everything we did and more. You were asking for calm and we were giving it to you. But finding out it was so much worse than we’d thought? No. We aren’t going to stand by and let anyone treat our team – our family – like that, not even if they say it’s all right.”

Phil really, REALLY hated that they might have a point.

“Weren’t you ready to kick his ass, when you thought it was Nick trying to manipulate Steve?” Pepper asked.

All right, all right. “All right. But we cannot continue to go off script and work individually. If we’re trying to send this message, we have to do it as a team, not as Iron Man and Black Widow kicking someone’s ass because they deserved it.”
Pepper winced at that. “I’ll talk to Natasha.”

“No.” Phil told her. “WE will talk to Natasha. It is still best if Nick doesn’t know you still carry Extremis. The entire intelligence world thinks that when Tony said he ‘cured’ you, he removed it. There hasn’t been a hint anywhere of anything else.”

She looked down at her hands.

“At the least, it could have been planned better if you hadn’t completely lost your tempers.” Phil told them. “Don’t even pretend this wasn’t, in part, anger. You probably thought out the ‘supporting each other’ angle on the way there. Or the way home.”

Tony gave a half smile and snort at that.

“JARVIS, can you have Natasha join us?” Phil asked.

“Of course, Director Coulson.” JARVIS said smoothly. “I also apologize for my role in last night’s… excitement.”

“You too?” Phil asked tiredly.

“I was the one blocking Fury’s comms. And rerouting traffic via police scanner.”

Phil pinched the bridge of his nose as Nat slipped into the room. She gave his face a look, gave a slight smile, and asked “that good?”

He turned and gave Pepper a look.

Pepper cleared her throat. “I have a favor to ask, Natasha.”

“Really.” Nat said neutrally.

“Yes. Last night, the boys and I… after we found out what Nick had done to Clint AND Phil at the club, we, ah, melted his car. A bit.”

Natasha’s deep, rich laugh burst out. “And I’m supposed to forgive the three of your for not respecting I had dibs?”

Steve cleared his throat. “Ah, that too, please.”

Natasha looked back at Pepper, who gave a faint smile. “I used Extremis to melt the side of his SUV. He didn’t get a good look at me, and thinks it was you with a flamethrower.”

“We’re completely different body types and heights.”

“Ah.” Pepper tried to swallow a laugh but Phil could hear it. “Iron Man was also involved, it was a bit chaotic.”

“And you want me to take the blame so Fury doesn’t find out about Extremis.”

“Yes, please.” Pepper said simply.

Nat started laughing. “All right, but I want to see the video. I know JARVIS would have recorded it from Tony’s HUD. And we are DEFINITELY doing self defense three days a week. No excuses.”
Pepper nodded. “All right.”

Nat looked at Steve and Tony. “As for you two, I’ll come up with something. As of now, you owe me a favor. Each.”


“I had dibs.” Nat reminded them.

“I thought we should talk.” Phil said when he found him.

Clint was slouched down in his Tower living room, Lucky beside him, dozing with the TV on. He’d had a pretty good day, starting with Phil kissing him. Breakfast he didn’t have to cook, for once it wasn’t him in trouble, and he’d hoped to follow that with a nap. Now here was Phil, looking all serious. Hyperventilating would not be the most suave response, would it?

“Hey, no.” Phil came into the apartment from where he’d hovered in the door, and sat next to him, taking his hand. “Not like that. Where we’re going from here, not anything horrible.”

Oh. Well. That sounded… sensible. “You don’t wanna just fall into bed and go from there like last time?” he half-joked.

Phil shook his head. “I’m starting to think our last go wasn’t as great as it could have been.” Phil leaned forward and kissed him softly. “I want to be with you. Together in any and every sense you want, including last night, and right now, and sitting on the couch bickering over bad TV.”

Clint let out a slow breath. That sounded good, not alarming at all, right? “Good. Okay.”

“But… things we both said last night. Were you ever fully honest with me, before? I don’t remember it all, but I remember a lot of things I didn’t say, that I should have.”

“Like what?”

“I love you.”

Clint tried not to tear up. He sat forward, grabbed Phil, and held on tight. “I love you too.”

“See? Good things, but we should talk about them.”

Clint hugged some more. Phil’s arms were around him tight and his legs were tangled up wrong and his back was killing him and it was the best thing ever. Phil started to shift around, and Clint had a better idea. “Here, come on.” He took Phil’s hand and pulled him into the bedroom. Before Phil could argue, he got them both laid down, curled around each other. Phil’s hand came up automatically and his fingers combed through his hair – Phil had done that countless times in the years they were together. He shut his eyes and reveled in it for a moment, everything he’d wanted the last three years, right there with him.

“Last night,” Phil began carefully, “you told me you had fantasies about me cutting loose on you. Before.”

“Yeeees?” He wasn’t sure where this was going, or if it was going to end well.

“You never told me.” Phil said softly. “Did you?”
“No.” Clint admitted. “I didn’t want to… turn you off.”

“You didn’t want to rock the boat.”

“No, of course not.”

“Why not?”

Clint wondered if that was a trick question. “Because I couldn’t believe we were together in the first place and I didn’t want to make any demands that might change your mind.”

Phil sighed deeply, then hugged him for a long moment. So that was probably okay. “Can I go over what I remember? You can correct me. Before we discuss further?”

“Sure, but I think you remember a lot more than you realize.”

“Really? Why- Let’s discuss that next, but I want to stick to this.”

“Okay.”

“As I remember it, we worked together for a couple years, during which I lusted after you to the point I was afraid I was drooling when I saw you in your tac suit. Oh my god, your arms in that vest. Then one weekend when Nat was out of town, we fell into bed together while watching hockey at my place. And you never left.”


“So we circled each other for years, then fell into bed without ever talking about it. Did we ever date? Like Wednesday night was?”

“Not… really. When you put it like that, we sound so dysfunctional.”

Phil chuckled. “I never told you, though? That I was glad to have you there? Thought I was lucky, any of that?”

“No, but to be fair, I didn’t either. I was afraid I’d scare you off if you knew how much I felt for you.”

“Both of us lived together for six years, madly in love with the other and afraid to commit to saying it out loud for fear we’d scare the other off.”

Clint thought about that. “Maybe. Okay, probably.”

Phil slouched down in the bed a little more and leaned in to kiss Clint again. “I’d like to avoid a repeat of that.”

“Well, I feel even more damn lucky to have you this time, but I can talk about it if you want.” Clint said half-sarcastically.

“I do want. That’s my point. There’s so much I didn’t tell you, because I was afraid I’d scare you off, this amazing, heroic, sexy guy who’d somehow settled for a guy who looks average at best, whose hobbies were bad TV and collecting Captain America stuff. You could’ve had anyone you wanted, you HAD Natasha Romanov, and you wanted me instead?”

“What? No, you’re all intelligent and calm and in control and kind and funny and I just shoot stuff.”
Phil laughed. “You see? We did that for years. Why?”

“You said last night we were both idiots.”

“How about we try to fix it?”

“By talking.”

“Yes.”

“But I’m TERRIBLE at that!” Clint whined, about half seriously.

Phil laughed and hugged him again. “Clearly I am too. But let’s try?”

“Will it result in more sex like last night?” Oops, probably not the priority here.

“I’m hoping.”

Oh, yay. “Well then.” Clint half laughed.

Phil shook his head. “If only I’d known you were so easy to motivate.” In a move Clint never saw coming (so hot) Phil rolled and pinned him to the bed. “So what about my memory?” and he leaned in and BIT again, along his shoulder.

Clint gave a very manly yelp. “Damn, Phil, I can’t concentrate when you-” there was another bite and he arched up into Phil’s body pinning him to the bed and oh god, that was good. “Little things. You keep getting little details.”

“Like what?” Phil asked in an idle voice, as if they were in a park having tea and he wasn’t grinding his hips down into Clint’s.

“Russian Breakfast. Pastries. Oh, GOD, Phil. How we kiss. The way you run your fingers through my hair, AH DO NOT STOP.”

Phil laughed happily, jerked down Clint’s pants, and bent his head. “See how easy it is to talk to me?”

“Ah!”

Phil raised his head, and grinned up along the expanse of Clint’s body. “So, Clinton, was there anything else you wanted to tell me?”

“Anything. What do you want to know? AH. PHIL.”

Chapter End Notes

Internet is going to be spotty the next couple days, so I may be posting the rest of this on and off throughout today. Maybe save the epilogue for tomorrow or something. We’ll see.
Loose Ends, Snarled.

Chapter Summary

Clint lifted his head, eyes as intense as Phil has ever seen him. “Loki’s scepter. That’s what you’re asking about.”

“Yes, my hawk-eyed brother.”

“Son of a bitch.” Steve said.

Chapter Notes

Remember, this was only ever meant as a quickie get-together fic, to lay out some conflicts before the REAL story started. So no complaining that the major plot conflicts don’t get resolved. Clint and Phil get resolved, that was the only point of all this. :D

One more chapter and an epilogue to go, and both are written.

At eight AM, sharp, Phil strode into the private Avenger’s conference room in his favorite suit, at peace with the world for the first time in three years. He had a cup of excellent tea in one hand and a StarkTab loaded with data and discussion points in the other. Everyone else was there except Tony, which was expected but would not be tolerated.

“Pepper said she has a planet to run, and she’d look over the minutes and talk to both of us later.” Steve said politely, sitting to the right side of the chair at the head of the table.

“That will be fine, thank you. She, of all people, has a built-in pass for just about anything we do.” CAPTAIN AMERICA HAD SAVED HIM A SEAT AND SAT AT HIS RIGHT HAND EEEEEE. Phil shook his head at himself.

“Problem?” Steve asked carefully.

“Yes. My inner ten year old is still thrilled at the idea of working with you.” Phil said as dryly as possible, hoping most of the other people in the room would take it as a joke. There were some chuckles, and an open grin from Steve, so he had hope. “You brought a cat to an Avengers meeting?”

“She kind of brought herself.” Steve said, patting Sidekick on his shoulder. “I can put her in my apartment if you want, but she cries.”

Phil sat down, arranged his tea and tablet. “Well, we’re here to save the world, we can’t let the kittens be sad. It would be a major failure in our mission statement.”

People looked a little uncertain until Natasha, Melinda, and Maria all started laughing.

Clint, down the table, had his head on his forearms, slouched over. Betty was to his right, and to her
right was Bruce. Both were looking at Clint with a bit of concern.

“Is he awake?” Phil asked them.

Betty nodded as Clint gave a silent thumbs-up, without otherwise moving.

He might have been a little… rough… on Clint yesterday. He would NOT gloat. Not now anyway.

“Right then. Thor, you came on behalf of your father?”

“I have.” Thor said in a polite, slightly formal tone. He stood, crossed an arm over his chest, and gave a half bow, half head nod to the room. “Thank you for your attention.” Here, clearly, was the Crown Prince of Asgard and Protector of the Nine Realms. They too often forgot that most important aspect, when he was wandering around the Tower in flannel pajamas covered in storm clouds, eating Pop Tarts.

“Heimdall, guardian of the Rainbow Bridge, has watched the actions of my good Captain and his heroic defeat of Hydra.” He gave another half bow in Steve’s direction, then formal head nods toward Natasha, Sam, and Maria, individually. “Asgard commends your heroism and your honor.”

“Our thanks to both you and your honored father.” Steve said easily, with a head nod back in his direction.

Thor gave a small but genuine smile at that. “It has, however, raised a very significant concern. The last Asgard knew, the Scepter was in the custody of SHIELD. Is it still there?”

Clint lifted his head, eyes as intense as Phil has ever seen him. “Loki’s scepter. That’s what you’re asking about.”

“Yes, my hawk-eyed brother.”

“Son of a bitch.” Steve said.

They all looked at each other. Thor nodded. “This is our dilemma. We wish to have its location known to us.” He sat.

Tony burst into the room. “I’m not late.”

Clint, not looking away from Thor, picked up a computer stylus, threw it like a knife, and buried it in the wall next to Tony’s head. Tony looked at the stylus, looked at Clint, and shut his mouth on whatever else he was about to say. He sat down without another word, and used every IQ point to figure out what was going on.

“We don’t know, Thor, but I give you my word, that we are damned well going to find out.” Phil told him.

“Thank you, Son of Coul, that puts me much at ease. I am, of course, at your disposal for any assistance needed in doing this thing.”

“Of course. Thank you.” Phil replied.

He watched Thor’s body language relax back into his usual less-goofy version; paying attention and being helpful, but not remotely as formal as he had been when speaking for his father. It was a neat trick. And completely different again from Casual Thor, who cheerfully listened to music and watched movies and otherwise soaked up pop culture and joked with his friends.
Glaring at Stark, Phil said “The scepter. SHIELD had it. With the Hydra fallout now we don’t know what’s happened to it.”

“Shit.”

Yes, no kidding. “You and Bruce located it once before. Is it possible we can do it again?” Phil asked them.

Bruce and Tony and the other scientists all exchanged glances. Bruce was apparently elected spokesman by silent vote, because he put a hand out and waggled it in a wishy-washy manner. “Maybe. Last time, we had a couple thousand labs putting sensors out, on the word of the US Government. They may not have known why, but pretty much anyone doing anything involved with radiation knew something major was going on. A day later a portal opened and space aliens invaded New York. If we try that again, there will be, at best, major rumors and a good bit of panic.”

“We aren’t in quite as much of a hurry as we were before.” Tony pointed out. “We’ve got satellites in orbit that can sense the gamma spectrum.”

“We as in Stark Industries, or We as in the United States?” Phil asked.

“We as in humanity at large.” Stark clarified. “I – we – might be able to hack them, use those in a similar manner. Like before, we could probably rule out some places at least.”

“Unless the background radiation in space throws the whole thing off.” Leo pointed out politely.

“Yeah.” Tony agreed with a wave toward Leo. “What he said. In which case, we’ll come up with something else.”

“I take a personal interest in the weapon that killed me.” Phil announced, and everyone froze and then looked at him. “Just thought I’d say it. I’m biased from the outset.”

“I think we all are on this one.” Bruce told him gently.

“Should one of us talk to Fury about this, or should we hack the servers again?” Skye asked them all.

“Both.” Natasha told her. She shifted her attention to everyone. “Delta Strike will go speak to Fury on this. He owes all three of us, and we know him well enough that we’re most likely to see through any of his smoke and mirrors. JARVIS and the rest of the computer science gang can data mine the servers.” She glanced at Phil, gave a half grin. “Assuming that’s okay with you.”

“Which brings me to my next point,” Phil said after a smile back at Natasha. “We are all experts in different areas. While Steve and I are nominally in charge, when it comes to different disciplines, we WANT input from anyone who knows anything about it. So don’t hold back on ideas about this or anything else.” He glanced at Darcy and Skye for a moment, made sure they knew he was talking about them, especially. “Don’t let a lack of degrees slow you down. Universities don’t offer degrees in most of the things we deal with anyway. You have a thought that seems even remotely useful or helpful, we want to hear it.”

“I understand my tactics are studied at military academies.” Steve put in. “My formal education was two years of art school.” He raised his hands in a little shrug, and smiled. “There you go.”

“Right.” Phil looked down at his notes. “Next issue. I know many of you have personal agendas.”

“Justin Hammer.” Tony threw out.
“...such as Justin Hammer.” Phil continued. “We can sit here and talk all day, or each of you can write up your worries, suspicions, and facts, and put them on an e-mail loop to everyone else.”

“E-mail.” Everyone chimed in.

“As I thought. Do we have any more PRESSING problems we need to work on, this instant?”

Sam cleared his throat. “Well. More, I have a question. I’m not an expert in the technology involved. But I know people.”

“Of course.” Phil nodded politely, gestured for him to continue. He was curious about what Wilson would say. They hadn’t spoken much, but his service record was exemplary and he’d gone through quite a trial by fire with Steve. And Natasha spoke well of him.

“Right. Arnim Zola.” Sam began.

Beside Phil, Steve slowly sat up, somehow managing to look a millimeter away from homicide with a kitten riding his shoulder.

Sam caught it and grinned at Steve. “Chill, man.” He turned back to everyone else. “I’ve read up a bit, and asked Steve a few questions. As I understand it, guy was some kind of crazy genius, right?”

Natasha and Tony nodded. “Totally fucked in the head, but brilliant. In his fucked up, psychotic way.” Tony confirmed. “My Merchant of Death years, I was like a Buddhist monk in comparison.”

“Dude found out he was dying, and used seventies computer technology to upload himself onto a couple hundred miles of magnetic storage tape, right? That’s a guy hell bent on living forever. I mean, people don’t just DO that, do they? Or have I been missing out on a lot of computer advances?”

“No, I don’t know of anyone else who has done it.” Tony confirmed. “And I’d have probably heard.”

Sam nodded. “But when Steve and Nat break into his little underground bunker, he calls SHIELD to firebomb the place, and stalls them? Happy as a clam, waiting on his own destruction?”

That gave everyone pause.

“Maybe the idea of taking down Captain America made it worth his sort-of life?” Steve offered.

“I don’t know, I’m not a profiler, but it seems REALLY out of character.” Sam said. “I’ve wondered about it since it happened, seemed weird. The whole damn thing was weird. Then, this week something else occurred to me.” He took a deep breath and looked around the room again, like he was sorry to even bring this up. “Nat said he had internet access. Some kind of modem, fiber optic, whatever the hell.”

Oh.

“Oh. SHIT.” Tony said, staring in horror at Sam.

“You think he... uploaded? copied?... himself somewhere?” Nat asked carefully.

“I have no idea.” Sam told her. “Not a profiler, sure as hell not any kind of computer expert. But it would be just like him, wouldn’t it? And explain why he calmly called down an air strike on himself?”
“Oh, SHIT.” Tony repeated.

Sam turned to him. “So I guess, what I’m really wondering is, would that be possible?”

Tony pulled on his own hair a bit. “Yeah? I mean, who the hell knows, really, it’s not like what Zola did has ever been done again, but everything I know about tech says it would be possible. Probable, with the personality involved, like you said. I’ve read some of his work. Zola had that kind of brilliance that comes with bugfuck insane.” He rubbed his face with his hands. “JARVIS?”

Right, ask the true expert, Phil thought. Excellent idea.

“It would take a very long time.” JARVIS told them. “The data required to form memories, a personality… even terabytes don’t really communicate the enormity of it. But, yes, given time, there is no reason he couldn’t. The question is, where to? I operate out of multiple server farms. The people who physically maintain it think it is simply Stark Industries data they curate, but there is indeed a… footprint, shall we say. Nothing is pure data, it has to be recorded, physically stored somewhere. Cloud storage is an erroneous myth.”

“Could you find it?” Phil asked.

“I have never met another consciousness in the digital realm, but I have not actively looked. I will begin searching.”

“Thank you, JARVIS.” Phil said gratefully.

“Of course. I believe I am invested, now.”

“I’m going to go meditate, if it’s all right with everyone.” Bruce said, standing.

“Absolutely.” Phil said. “I think we’re done here for now, anyway. Anyone else?”

“Please god, nothing else.” someone mumbled.

After some silence, everyone filed out until Phil and Clint were left, staring at each other. “Do I look like I’m freaking out?” Clint asked. “Because I’m freaking the fuck out, here.”

Phil remembered the feel of that ice cold blade pushing through his chest, looking down to see it sticking out of his chest. That moment of frozen stillness when his lungs refused to work at all. Then the spear sliding out and the pain starting. He couldn’t breathe. Things went a bit grey and he was dimly aware of Clint telling him to breathe, and then someone else’s voice was there, calm and stern, counting out breaths. Eventually he could focus on Sam Wilson, kneeling on the floor in front of him, looking up into his eyes, a serious look on his face.

“You back with us? Don’t talk, just nod or shake your head. Keep breathing, slowly.”

Phil nodded slowly.

“Good. Slow and steady.” He glanced over and Clint knelt next to him with a bottle of water, holding it out.

Phil touched it, and the bottle was cold. Cold and clammy and he shuddered.

“Breathe.” Sam commanded again, beginning to count out slow breaths.

Phil shut his eyes and did as he was told. Finally he tried “not cold.”
“Something warm to drink?” Clint clarified. At Phil’s nod, he was gone again.

Sam was there, gripping one of Phil’s wrists, a solid link to NOW, still calmly talking him through breathing. When Clint got back with the tea, his hand was shaking too hard to take it, so Clint wrapped his hand around it and guided it to his mouth. A few sips thawed him out, or at least felt like they did, and his muscles began to relax.

“It was cold.” he said hoarsely. “The spear. When it went through.”

Clint swore, and Sam’s eyes sharpened, connections being made. “Keep breathing, have some more tea.”

He did as he was told.

Slowly, slowly, his muscles relaxed, thawed, and began to work properly again. He let himself lean back, tilt his head to the ceiling, and close his eyes for a moment. “All right.” He had to clear his throat. “I’m… I think I’m better. Thank you both.”

Sam moved as far as the chair next to him. Clint stood, kissed him gently at the side of his mouth, and went to make more tea.

“Well.” Phil said, at a loss, as he accepted another mug of tea and Clint sat on his other side. “That was… really vastly annoying.” Sam chuckled a bit instead of asking why he was annoyed, which let him relax further. He’d always hated when shrinks asked him why he felt really damned obvious emotions. “I suppose if I apologize I’ll be sworn at.” Phil asked Clint. Clint nodded. He turned to Sam. “How did you get here so fast? Or was I out of it that long?”

“You weren’t out of it much at all. I was in the hallway. I kind of figured something like this might happen.”

Probably the only person on the planet who could provide really REALLY good treatment AND air support. What were the odds of another person with those two skills? Who was willing to put up with all of them? He didn’t realize he’d spoken out loud until Sam laughed.

“No offense.” Sam told them both. “It was a pretty good guess at least one of you would have some trouble, given history. Nat kinda filled me in. I figured if y’all found me out there I could make up something stupid to ask one of you.” He looked between them. “You both need rest. And emotional support. Go find somewhere to cuddle up and take a nap. CUDDLE, not anything else, you hearing what I’m saying?”

Phil rolled his eyes as Clint laughed. At the moment he felt like he’d be lucky to walk as far as a bed.

Sam looked Phil in the eye. “You want me to throw him out,” he asked with a nod toward Clint, “or can I talk in front of him?”

Clint seemed to be holding his breath, like him getting thrown out was actually a possibility. Phil laid a hand over his and squeezed. “Go ahead, I’ll just tell him anyway.”

Sam nodded. “Fair enough. I know a guy, I’ll give him a general idea of what’s going on. You’re gonna go to him and lay out the medical end of things with him and get some kind of fast-acting anxiety med for the next time this happens.” Before Phil could say a word, Sam narrowed his eyes. “If this was reversed, and it was Clint having trouble, what would you tell him? Blow it off, or get the med?”

Damn. “You have a mean streak.” Phil told Sam.
“Ruthless.” Sam corrected. “You gonna go? No need for you to suffer through this kinda thing again. Better living through chemistry.”

“I’d prefer not having another attack like this at all. It’s the first one I’ve had in over a year.”

“Good. Maybe you won’t need the med. But if you do, you’ll have it. Carry one or two tabs on you, like you do your gun. Think of it as the same, a kind of self defense.” His voice softened. “Coulson. Phil. You went through things no one has ever gone through before. Nasty stuff. And I doubt I know all of it. Annoying as it is, it’s normal. Cut yourself some slack and deal with it. Treat yourself with the same even-handedness, kindness, you would everyone else around here.”

“When you put it like that.” Phil grumbled.

Clint blinked at both of them. “I am impressed.” He told Sam. “Like, really, REALLY impressed. You’ve done more good in ten minutes than all the shrinks put together in the rest of his life.”

“It’s what I do.”

“You do it well.” Phil told him.

Sam smiled brightly. “Cool, so you have no excuse not to talk to me again when you need to.”

“Ruthless.” Phil repeated. Clint nodded, with a slight grin.
Chapter Summary

They were curled up in bed together, about three episodes in, when there was a knock on the door. Their bedroom door. “Gotta be Nat.” Clint muttered to Phil. No one else would get into the apartment with no notice and THEN try to be polite. “C’mon in!” he called.

Chapter Notes

And so, the end of our quickie little filler fic before the real story starts. (Ha.) Tune in probably tomorrow for the epilogue.

Now I'm going to go tie all our loose ends up in a bow, somehow. That's gonna take a minute.

They got back to Clint’s apartment and straggled into the bed room, Clint propping up Phil with an arm around him. He pulled back the covers on his bed, stripped Phil down to a tee shirt and boxers, and tucked him in. That anxiety attack had scared the shit out of him. Not so much that Phil had one; really, they should all be nonstop anxiety attacks at this point. But because he’d completely stopped breathing. Every muscle in his body had locked up. Scary as fuck.

“Are you gonna go see the doc like Sam said?”

“Are you going to let me not?”

Clint thought about that. “You know how we talked about not wanting to scare the other off, before? I let you get away with a lot of shit I didn’t want to, because I was afraid to speak up and fight with you over it. Not this time.”

“So you’re willing to fight with me to take care of myself.”

Pretty neat way to put it. Sounded better than Clint’s version. “Yep.”

Phil sighed. “Yes, I’ll go.”

“Good. Thank you. I’m making a pot of tea and then I’ll be right back.” He pulled the blankets up around Phil and kissed him softly. “I am very glad to have you here, to be able to help you.” There. He actually spoke about his feelings. “JARVIS, figure out whatever horrifying reality TV Phil has rolling in his quarters and fire it up, please.”

“Of course.”

The screen on the wall turned on and showed three or four women bitching each other out. “Fantastic.” Clint sighed.
“It’s so much more petty and insignificant than our lives.” Phil explained, for perhaps the thousandth time.

“That’s what you always say.” Clint had decided that at least privately, he was going to point out any time Phil’s memory worked and it didn’t seem like he knew it.

“I did?” Phil said with a smile.

Clint shook his head and went to make the tea.

* *

They were curled up in bed together, about three episodes in, when there was a knock on the door. Their bedroom door. “Gotta be Nat.” Clint muttered to Phil. No one else would get into the apartment with no notice and THEN try to be polite. “C’mon in!” he called.

Nat stepped into the room and stopped, staring at them like she was reading their minds. Maybe she was, it was Natasha after all. “Sam talked to me a little. Didn’t tell me much because of privilege, but I got the gist. Are you both okay?”

“Yes, thank you.” Phil said gently.

Clint gave Nat a hard look. She wasn’t looking so great, herself. She really hadn’t been for the last couple days. “Go grab a mug, we’ll pour you some tea and you can join us.” He scooted himself and Phil over in the bed some, hoping Phil wouldn’t argue.

Instead, Phil added “yes. We could use some company. We were ordered to cuddle. The more the merrier.”

Nat looked at them both for a long moment, nodded to herself, and instead of getting the mug, went into Clint’s bathroom and shut the door. When she came out she was wearing one of his tee shirts and a pair of panties. Clint lifted the covers and she climbed in on the other side from Phil and curled up, taking a sip from Clint’s drink before settling down.

Phil whistled softly, and there was a woof. Lucky pranced in from his usual napping spot in his chair in the living room. Phil clicked his tongue and patted the bed next to him, and Lucky hopped up, laid down without any fuss, and went back to sleep.

“Why does that damn dog listen to everyone but me?” Clint demanded.

“Because you’re a pushover.” Nat said softly.

“Am NOT.” Clint argued. Phil sighed and Clint couldn’t tell if it was amusement, happiness, or ‘oh dear gods nothing has changed’, so he shut up.

“I have a memory of before.” Phil said hesitantly. “Something like this?”

“Yes. Occasionally I’d have a bad night and you’d make room for me.” Natasha told him.

They all laid in a pile for a bit, listening to each other breathe. Clint had taken this kind of thing for granted once, but now he was trying to memorize every detail. He suspected the other two were, too.

“I have phantom pain. Sometimes. In my chest.” Phil said softly.

Clint hugged him. “I still get a dull ache in my chest where that goddamn glow stick touched me. And have nightmares where everything is blue. They’ve gone away, some, but I still have them once
in a while. Probably should have warned you; when I wake up freaking the fuck out, JARVIS lights
the room in gold.”

There was a long, long pause and Clint swore he could HEAR Nat thinking. “I started having
nightmares again, last week. Bad ones. A lot.” She took a shuddering breath. “Like the ones right
after I came in.”

“Because I’m back.” Phil said sadly.

Nat’s hand reached across Clint to grip Phil’s hand, hard. “No. No, doushenka. They’re about the
Winter Soldier.”

They laid there and pondered that for a long while.

When Clint was nearly asleep, so low he could barely hear her, Nat added “…and I don’t think
they’re dreams. I think they’re flashbacks.” All three of them pulled the covers up, cuddled in
determinedly, and took a nap. Them against the world. As it was meant to be.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

What ever DID happen to all Fury’s black leather?

Chapter Notes

Until next time, lovelies! Hug yourselves this holiday, and take good care. <3

At Pepper’s request, everyone gathered in the common room after dinner. In the center of the room was something covered in a sheet, maybe two feet high and a couple long and deep. She and Nat were standing beside it, grinning. Phil immediately began running through potential cover stories, available lawyers, and, if needed, government contacts and threats he could make. Everyone would be willing to alibi each other, but unfortunately no one would believe them. The team already had a reputation.

“A couple months ago,” Pepper began, “Natasha came to me with a bunch of Fury’s leather coats.” Everyone laughed. Phil pinched the bridge of his nose.

“It was all the leather he owned.” Natasha added. “Well, other than the eye patch. I took it to take it, but after, I thought maybe we should DO something with it.”

Picking up the thread, Pepper continued, “I know an artist, a really good artist who was perfect, and with enough money she was willing to take a request.” She bent, grasped the edge of the sheet, and pulled it back with a flourish.

It was a giant rat. Phil took a closer look. It was a giant black leather rat, with an eye patch. The laughter was an uproar around him and he looked at Pepper. “Statue?”

“No!” Natasha almost crowed. “A FOOTSTOOL.”

Oh, dear god. Clint grasped Phil’s arm and led him determinedly to a couch, and with a sigh, Phil let himself be led. He sat down rather than wrestle Clint, and when Natasha pushed the overgrown rat over, lifted his feet and then rested them on the back of the thing. He had to admit, it was comfortable, if ridiculous looking.

Everyone applauded. Clint was crying, he was laughing so hard.

“How did I wind up in charge of you people?” he asked, and they all applauded some more.

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