It could have been worse, but it's got to get better.

Notes

This story depicts a serious D/s relationship and contains references to child abuse and implied sexual assault. Please read the tags carefully for additional warnings.

A million and one thanks to sconesforjustice and selori for the beta! <3

1. The time Clint got it wrong.

It could have been worse.

Clint had expected them to stick him with some hard-nosed drill sergeant, or whatever SHIELD’s equivalent of a drill sergeant was. Instead, the agent assigned to train him in was barely older than he
was and, Clint gathered, was being punished for some conflict in which someone’s nose got broken; Clint never found out whose. An ill-fitting suit jacket sat awkwardly across the agent’s shoulders, like it was deciding whether to stay or make a run for it, and he kept flashing brief glances from under his lashes when he thought Clint wasn’t looking.

“I’m legal, y’know.”

The agent -- Coulson, his name was -- looked up, blinking. “What?”

“I’m legal,” Clint repeated. “I look younger, but I’m not. I’m twenty-two. So, y’know, if you wanted to do something, you wouldn’t get in trouble.”

Coulson gave him a slow, blank stare, and Clint fought the impulse to squirm. Finally, turning back to his work, Coulson said flatly, “If that’s your idea of a come-on, I’m afraid your technique needs work.”

Clint shrugged. “Whatever. I’ve seen you looking. I’m just saying, if you wanted, I’d let you.”

“You’d let...?” Coulson shook his head, the corners of his mouth curling in disgust. “I think maybe you should bring this up with Doctor Schelling.”

Clint frowned. “Why? I thought shrinks weren’t supposed to fuck their patients.”

“What? No. No, I just mean I think she could explain why... why what you’re saying isn’t... right.” His eyes were down, fixed on the papers in front of him, but Clint could see the flicker of smoldering rage.

Clint, of course, had never been one to let a fire lie. “Are you saying you don’t wanna? ‘Cause I think that’s bullshit.” He leaned forward to catch Coulson’s attention, but Coulson studiously ignored him. “Come on. I know what I’m doing, I swear. If you don’t wanna touch me, you can stick something else in. I can take it.”

The muscles of Coulson’s hand tightened around his pen, and Clint grinned. “Is that it? You don’t wanna get dirty? That’s fine. Took the business end of a baseball bat, once. Hurt like fuck, but the guys seemed to like it.”

“Stop,” Coulson commanded, and Clint’s mouth snapped shut. “Just... stop. Please.”

Clint sat back, startled, and a sudden flush of shame rushed up his neck. “Sorry. Jesus. Didn’t mean to offend your delicate sensibilities.”

“It’s not that. It’s not you.” There was a coil of cold steel in Coulson’s voice, wound tight and waiting for some unlucky bastard to trip the spring. “But if you keep going, I’m going to want the names and descriptions of everyone that... that you let, and I will kill each and everyone of them, slowly and with great satisfaction.”

Something raw and sick settled in the pit of Clint’s stomach, like some small thing had crawled inside him and died there. He stood and shoved his hands in his pockets so that Coulson wouldn’t see them shaking. “Fuck you. All you had to say was no. You don’t have to be a dick about it.”

“Sorry, sorry. That’s not wh-- Barton, wait!” Coulson called after him, but Clint was already out the door.
2. The time Phil lied.

It could have been worse.

Phil ached in places he didn’t know he could ache, and he was staring down any number of disciplinary measures for breaking position against orders. But the op had been a success, mission accomplished, no casualties, and Barton...

He shook his head to banish the memory of Barton’s body hanging limp in a tangle of netting, face awash in fresh red blood. Barton was fine. Mild concussion. He’d be back in the field before anyone could say, For the love of god please shut him up.

The knock on the door nearly made Phil jump out of his skin, and he grumbled miserably as he rolled out of his unusually comfortable bunk. He’d been promised a full eight hours of downtime before debriefings, and he was prepared to fight for every second of it. When he opened the door, though, all the fight went out of him, replaced by a bright and heavy feeling that resounded in the sudden pounding of his heart.

Standing in the barracks hallway, dressed in hospital scrubs and an undershirt, Barton looked strangely young and impossibly fragile. He gave Phil a sheepish smile that made creases in the bandage on his forehead.

“Sanctuary?”

Phil rolled his eyes and stepped aside, waving him in. “I thought you were under observation until tomorrow.”

Barton crossed his arms and stared at his feet. “Yeah. I, uh, checked myself out.” He glanced up and caught Phil’s look. “I really hate doctors, okay? Like, a lot.” He toed at the ends of his rubber sandals. “I heard you stuck around for a while, though.”

“Long enough for them to chase me out,” Phil admitted. “I just wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“I’ll live, apparently.” Barton’s smile brightened. “I guess that’s thanks to you.”

“I didn’t... All I did was cover you until the medics arrived.”

The bright smile didn’t waver. “Sure. Right. Even though you were under fire and ordered to stay put.”

“Well, someone had to.” Phil cleared his throat. “You would have done the same for me.”

“Of course I would.” Barton said, like it was obvious, like that kind of unflinching loyalty was as ordinary as table salt. “But you did it for me, and I just, y’know, wanted to say thank you.”

“Honestly, the only thanks I ask for is that you go back to the infirmary and let them take care of you,” Phil told him wearily.

“I dunno. I was thinking maybe you could take care of me.” Barton’s smile turned sly and uncertain as he stepped in closer. “They said I’m not supposed to sleep for very long. You can help me stay awake, right?”

He smelled of adhesive and clean clothes and of something rich and dark that was entirely his own. There was no room in Phil’s senses for anything but him, no room in his head to think or answer or
to say anything except, “I’m not a medical professional.”

Barton laughed, a rough sound that tumbled in Phil’s chest like stones. “I trust your judgment.” He was so close that his breath felt hot and clean on the side of Phil’s face. “You can test my fine motor skills,” he said, reaching down to cup Phil’s cock through the thin pants.

“Oh god,” Phil groaned, and Barton pressed closer against him.

“Or my oral range of motion,” Barton went on, the touch of his lips like a whisper on Phil’s.

Phil would swear for years after that what he meant to do was ask Barton, calmly and reasonably, to slow down. What he did was open his mouth, and that was all it took.

Barton was hardly an inch taller, but even that slight difference gave Phil the sensation of tipping backward, tipping over, leaving his throat and heart open. Kissing Barton was like swimming in a summer storm, hot and dizzying and dangerous with the threat of lightning. Phil would swear that what he meant to do was gently push him away. What he did was twist his fingers in the hem of Barton’s shirt and hold on for dear life.

Barton’s fingers curled around the hardening shape of Phil’s cock. Phil gasped, and the reality of the moment came crashing down with cold, sober clarity.

“What are you doing?” he asked breathlessly, pulling back.

Barton gave him a small, wicked smile. “Saying thank you.”

He leaned back in, but Phil put a hand on his chest. “You don’t... Stop, please. You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Bullshit,” Barton breathed into his ear. His lips were damp and warm on the edge of Phil’s jaw. “Just let me, please. I can make it good for you.”

Something twisted in Phil’s stomach. “Barton, stop it.”

Barton stilled, but he didn’t move away. “Come on. You can pretend I’m someone else.”

“Barton.”

“Get a mouth on your cock, doesn’t matter who it is.”

Phil pushed him away with enough force to make him stumble. “Get out.”

Barton blinked, his face scarlet and stunned. “I’m sorry. I thought...”

The sick feeling in Phil’s gut clashed against the impulse to hold on to Barton and kiss him until it didn’t matter. He fought to keep his voice steady and said again, “Get out.”

There was a second, between two pounding heartbeats, in which Barton’s face collapsed into a look of utter desolation. Then the familiar mask of sullen indifference slipped into place, and Barton scowled. “Whatever. Your loss.”

Phil wanted to apologize, to beg him to stay, or maybe just to slap that expression off of his gorgeous
mouth. As Barton reached for the door, Phil snapped, “Go back to the infirmary.”

Barton paused, and he didn’t look up as he mumbled, “Yes, sir.”

As soon as the door slammed shut, Phil shoved a hand into his pants and wrapped it around his cock, screwing his eyes shut as he forced himself to breathe. It was nothing, just a stupid mistake and a misunderstanding. Barton was concussed and grateful and confused, and it meant nothing. And if Phil would swear that he didn’t want it to mean everything, well, no one ever died from a little white lie.

His bunk was somehow less comfortable when he crawled back into it, and sleep seemed further out of reach. He jerked off quietly and couldn’t help but think of Barton’s bright smile and his hot, wet mouth.

3. The time with the desk.

“It could have been worse.”

Clint snorted. “Sure. Yeah. You could have been inside the van when it crashed, instead of on top of it.”

“I could have been on top when it exploded,” Coulson pointed out, closing his office door behind them. “Or I could have landed on my head.”

“Instead of on your fat ass?”

Coulson gave him a stern look, belied by the bright flash of laughter in his eyes. “That is slander, Agent Barton. There is not an ounce of fat on my ass.”

He stripped off his suit jacket, swiping at the gravel dust still clinging to the shoulders. He’d done a sideways dive off a careening cargo van, rolled into perfect shooting form in time to take out the two front tires of the pursuing car, and had walked away with no more damage than a dusty jacket and slightly messy hair.

Clint had long ago decided that there never had been and never could be a mortal human being hotter than Phil Coulson.

“I dunno, sir,” he teased. “Thought I saw a little jiggle, there.”

Coulson levelled a finger at him, but his glare broke into a crooked smile. “First of all, you’re a liar. Second, it is not appropriate for you to be looking at my ass.”

Clint grinned right back. “Coulson, everybody is looking at your ass.”

“Bullshit.”

“Doing all that ninja shit in tailored pants? The surveillance team has to wipe drool off their stations after every op.”

Coulson laughed. “You are so full of shit.”

“It’s true!” Clint insisted. He realized, suddenly, how close they were standing, how he could see just the smallest smear of dirt on Coulson’s cheek, and how much he wanted to wipe it off. He swallowed. “Feel like I need a stick to drive them off.”
“Oh, now don’t tell me you’re jealous,” Coulson teased, and it wasn’t fair that someone who’d spent the day performing death-defying heroics in a cashmere suit could possibly smell that good.

Clint cleared his throat. “I’m a jealous man, sir.”

There was this look Coulson got, sometimes, oscillating between sick terror and blissful awe, that only ever seemed to settle on Clint. At that moment, it swayed toward the sweeter end, and Coulson said simply, “There’s no need.”

The gulf between their mouths was an impossible space that Clint had given up all hope of ever crossing, but Coulson closed it with dizzying ease, crashing into him with hurricane force. For an endless second, Clint forgot which way was up or down or any direction but backward as Coulson pushed him back against the door. He forgot his own name to make room in his head for the taste of Coulson’s tongue and the feel of the doorknob digging into his side.

These weren’t kisses of sweetness or uncertain passion; they were the inevitable, devouring touches of a need that had gone hungry for too long. Clint reached for the folds of Coulson’s shirt, craving the slide of skin under his hands, but Coulson caught his wrists and pinned them against the wall above Clint’s shoulders.

Right at that second, Clint could have come in his pants, and no one on Earth could have blamed him.

He groaned and arched forward, trying to get friction on something, anything, with Coulson’s hips just far enough away to leave him aching. Everything that was happening was exactly what he wanted, he just wanted more.

Like the answer to a prayer, Coulson rolled into him, slipping his leg between Clint’s spread thighs, and finally finally Clint felt whole and contained, anchored in that place and time by the press of Coulson’s body against his.

The kisses slowed, and the frantic ferocity became something firm and sure that somehow left Clint feeling even more breathless, his head light and floating in the space behind his buzzing eyes and bruised mouth. When Coulson pulled away, Clint felt like he could die, might die, had died, and all that he was would simply dissolve into the softness of that perfect damp sheen on Coulson’s reddened lips.

“Oh my god,” Coulson murmured, and Clint couldn’t help the stupid grin that spread across his face.

“So that was a long time coming,” he said.

Coulson shook his head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t...”

“Yeah, that apology lacks some weight with your hard-on poking me.”

Clint rolled his hips to emphasize the point, but Coulson stepped back, dropping his hands and leaving Clint feeling suddenly untethered and cold. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, no, no. That was exactly what you should have done,” Clint told him. “What you did there, with the kissing and the pinning? Good times. Positive choice.”

It occurred to Clint that he probably wasn’t making much sense, but he felt too punch-drunk and turned on to really care. He moved forward, but Coulson retreated, putting as much space as possible between himself and Clint, returning the impossible gulf to its place.
“No, no it wasn’t. This is... This was a terrible idea.” He didn’t turn away, not completely, but he angled away as if trying to hide the flush on his face and the obvious shape of his arousal. “I’m sorry. I am. I just... I think you should go.”

“Yeah, how about no.”

Coulson scowled, but he didn’t turn. “Barton, please...”

“No. No fucking way,” Clint snapped. “You don’t get to dry hump me against the wall and then throw me out of your office with a tent in my pants. For one thing, that’s just fucking rude.”

“I’m s--”

“Yeah, you said that,” Clint cut him off. “Tell you the truth, that song’s getting kind of old.”

Coulson sighed. “I just... don’t know what you want from me.”

“Well, we can start with you fucking me over your desk and go from there.”

“Jesus Christ.” Coulson rubbed a hand over his face, smearing the little streak of dirt that had somehow stayed on his cheek. “I can’t... We can’t just do this. There’s too much...” He slanted his eyes toward Clint, but he still wouldn’t turn to face him. “I’m sorry, but I really do need you to go.”

“No.” Clint planted his hands on the desk, leaning into Coulson’s field of vision. “You keep doing this. You look at me like I’m the best thing in the world, and then you back off like you can’t stand to touch me. Look, I’m into this, okay? I’m here, and I’ll do anything you want. Everything you want. So you don’t have to worry about whatever the fuck you’re worried about.”

Closing his eyes, Coulson shook his head. “You have no idea,” he said quietly, and turned away. “Please leave.”

Clint felt pinned open like a specimen on a table, dissected and forgotten under the unforgiving lights. “Fuck you,” he hissed. Rage and shame roiled in his stomach, and still the one thing he wanted was for Coulson to just touch him again.

“You know what? Fine. Whatever.” Clint unfastened his belt, tugging open his tight tac pants with a stifled groan of relief. “You be an asshole all you want, but I’m not doing the walk of fucking shame with a damn boner.”

He worked his hand hard up and down his stiff cock. The dry rasp of his palm put an edge on the sensation, and Clint imagined rubbing off on Coulson’s thigh, coming in his pants with his arms pinned above his head. His orgasm was hard and jarring, hitting him like a punch, and his face burned as Coulson turned in time to watch him shoot come all over the perfectly ordered desk.

All the shame and disappointment was almost worth it to see the look of utter, incoherent shock on Coulson’s face.

Panting, Clint plucked a tissue from the box on the desk and wiped himself off. As he tucked his cock away, he caught Coulson’s gaze and held it as he stalked steadily, purposefully forward. He got close, right into Coulson’s space and dammit he still smelled so good with that dirty note of sex lingering in the air.

Clint put his lips up against Coulson’s ear and said, “Now, tell me again how sorry you are.” Sliding his palm down the front of Coulson’s slacks, he pressed in gently at the base of the hard, throbbing cock and felt an immense sense of vindication as Coulson shuddered and came right into his hand.
“Yeah.” Clint tucked the used tissue in the front of Coulson’s waistband. “That’s what I thought.”

He slammed the door behind him without a second glance.

4. The other time with the desk.

“It could have been worse.”

Phil raised an eyebrow, and Fury shrugged.

“It’s Barton. It could always be worse.”

Phil sighed. “He could have punched me, I suppose.”

“Or you could have told him he was right and you were an asshole and you really just wanna woo his ass like a fucking gentleman,” Fury said. “Oh, no, wait. That’s not... What’s the opposite of worse?”

Phil rolled his eyes. “You’re a jerk, sir.”

“I got your back, Cheese.”

Barton hadn’t been avoiding him, exactly, but he had been absent enough that the place he typically inhabited at Phil’s side began had begun to feel vacant. They were so often each other’s shadows that Phil had grown to mark any absence with disquiet and a touch of longing.

When the moment came, they were sitting alone in the back of a transport, side by side and just out of the driver’s hearing. Phil cleared his throat and said evenly, “I owe you an apology.”

Barton snorted. “Save it.”

“I mean a real apology,” Phil explained. Barton gave him a skeptical look. “I lied to you, and I embarrassed you, and you would be well within your rights never to speak to me again. I behaved shamefully, and I did everything wrong.”

“You got that right.”

"Shut up." The click of Barton's jaw snapping closed was the most satisfying sound Phil had ever heard. "The first thing I did wrong was stop kissing you, and I am honestly, deeply sorry for that and everything after." Barton swallowed, and Phil went on, “All of this is... complicated. For me, it’s complicated. That doesn’t excuse the way I’ve treated you, and I have no right to ask your forgiveness. But I’m asking for that and for your patience.”

Barton studied him for a moment in silence, then said, "Can I ask you something, sir? Honestly?"

"Of course."

"You planning to kiss me again?"

"Yes."


Phil couldn't help but smile, and years later he would swear that the moment everything changed was
when Barton smiled back.

“Given a chance and your permission, I’d like to kiss you a great deal, in a great many places, and to make you come on every flat surface in sight, including my desk.” As the transport ground to a halt, he leaned in and spoke quietly into Barton’s ear, "And if you ever pull anything like that ever again, I swear to god I will make you lick it up."

He felt the change as the heat rose in Barton's skin, watched the red flush blossom on the edges of his ears. Barton's voice was low and rough, and he answered, "What makes you think I wouldn't like that?"

Phil moved back just enough to look Barton square in the eye. "I'm counting on it."

Three days later, he was somehow still surprised to walk into his office to find his desk covered with streaks of whipped cream in the shape of a crudely-drawn penis. It was all he could do not to dance for joy.

He bided his time, waiting until the end of the day to send his summons. Barton appeared in minutes, bouncing on his feet with an indecent grin. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Phil gave Barton a cool once-over and pushed down the sudden flutter in his stomach. "Agent Barton. I assume I have you to thank for this... treat?"

Barton's grin widened. "Yes, sir."

"In that case, I think it's time for you to clean up your mess." He'd set the ruined paperwork carefully aside in a neat stack, but there were still thick smears of cream all over the desktop.

"Yes, sir," Barton answered cheerfully. "You want me to lock the door?"

"No."

A shadow of uncertainty dimmed Barton's bright grin. "Sir?"

Phil clasped his hands on the desk in front of him, careful not to disturb the white streaks. "I'm going to say this once, and I want you to listen to me very carefully."

Barton nodded slowly. "Yeah, okay."

"I know what you want. I understand. And you're going to get it," Phil said, and he let himself savor Barton's momentary shiver. "But it's going to be on my terms, and you have to trust me. If that's... If you can't do that, then this isn't going to work." He paused, but Barton just stared at him, blank and silent. "Clint, I'm giving you an out."

Barton raised an eyebrow. "Is that what that is? I thought you were just stalling."

"Clint."

"I'm in," Barton said. "I trust you. Whatever you want."

Phil let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. "Good. Then you'd better get started on this paperwork."

"I... what?"

"It took me two hours to replace the papers you ruined last time," Phil said mildly, indicating the
ordered, sticky pile. "Now you're going to clean up your own mess."

Barton hesitated, and, for a second, Phil thought he might have made an unbearable mistake. Then, deliberately, Barton nodded. "Yes, sir." He took the papers and a stack of blank forms and settled onto the floor beside Phil's chair, his back braced against the desk, and set to work.

Phil returned to his own work and listened to the rustling of pages at his side, listened as Barton’s breathing slowly changed and settled from his tense and nearly constant state of fight-or-flight to the easy rhythm of repetition and calm. As the hour crept on, some of Phil’s own tension eased, his worry quieted by the simple fact of Barton’s presence and peaceful state.

After a while, Barton held up a stack of new paperwork and announced, “Done.” Phil looked down at him, and he quickly added, “Sir."

“Double-check it.”

“But...”

“You have two choices,” Phil said. “You can argue with me, at which point you will accrue additional punishment and still have to check your work. Or you can do as you’re told, do well, and receive a reward.”

Barton frowned, suspicious. “Reward?”

“You’re being punished for making a mess.” Phil watched the corners of Barton’s eyes tighten, just enough to show exactly how deeply that concept had been beaten into Barton as a child. Its counterbalance, Phil thought, might be a new idea. “If you behave to my satisfaction, you get a reward.”

The frown deepened. “What’re you gonna do? Give me candy?”

It was difficult not to picture Barton’s smart mouth occupied with a piece of hard candy. “That depends entirely on how well you do.”

Something in that must have made sense, because Barton nodded, grumbling, “Guess I’m not done, then.”

As Barton turned back to the papers in his lap, Phil reached down and carefully settled a hand on Barton’s head. Barton stiffened at the touch, then began slowly to relax as Phil’s fingertips dragged gently through his short hair. Softly, he said, “Good boy,” and Barton shivered under his hand.

Phil listened for the return to easy breathing, stroking Barton’s head in a calm, steady rhythm. Soon, Barton moved over just a few inches and leaned in to rest his temple against Phil’s knee, and Phil’s chest flooded with something warm and new.

When Barton spoke again, he sounded almost reluctant. “Think I’m done now, sir.” He offered the papers up, and Phil set them aside without looking. “You’re not gonna check?”

Phil shrugged. “I’m sure they’re perfect,” he said, and Barton gave him a look that was almost beaming. “Now, it’s time to do something about this desk.”

“Yes, sir.” Barton somehow managed to sound contrite and eager all at once.

“You may lock the door,” Phil told him, and Barton scrambled to his feet so fast he nearly kicked Phil in the shin. “In a hurry, are we?”
Barton stood obediently in front of the locked door, the bright grin returned. “Just looking forward to my reward, sir.”

Phil raised an eyebrow. “You think this is your reward?” Barton’s grin faltered, and he watched Phil with wide eyes. “No, Agent Barton, this is to teach you a lesson about getting your filth on my things. Whether you enjoy it is irrelevant. Do you understand?”

Barton shuffled his feet, but he didn’t look down. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Phil leaned back in his chair and gestured for Barton to step up to the desk. “Put your hands behind your back,” he commanded, and Barton obeyed instantly. “Now, you’re going to use that smart mouth to lick up every last bit of this off of my desk, and you’re going to take your time and make sure you don’t miss so much as a single smudge. Because, if you do, there will be consequences. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Barton glanced down at the desk and back to Phil. “Can I start, sir?”

Phil nodded, and Barton immediately leaned over and put his face to the polished surface. Most of the whipped cream had been smeared around, but the white streaks were still more or less in the shape of a cartoon penis. Barton, predictably, began by swiping his tongue through the cream that formed the tip. He cast his eyes up at Phil, looking for approval, and Phil gave him another nod.

With a focused expression, Barton set to work in earnest, licking the desktop in short drags, and Phil watched him with interest. In some places, the cream stuck, and Barton had to work at it with his tongue, panting as he licked it up. Keeping his hands behind him forced his back to arch, and Phil could see the top of his ass flexing as he moved.

“Look at you,” Phil said, and Barton was smart enough not to pause. “I told you what would happen if you made a mess again.” He was stretched out across the desk, reaching out to swipe his tongue over the white streaks. “You know, and you still did it. Why? Did you want this to happen? Did you want me to see you like this?” The top of the desk hit high on Barton’s thighs, just below the rising hardness in the front of his pants. “Is that it? Did you want to show me how disgusting you are, with your face in your own filth?”

Phil could hear Barton’s breathing, rough and heavy. “No. If you’d wanted that, you would have used real come instead of this mess. I think you just wanted me to punish you so you could show me how good you can be.”

Slowly, he stood and walked around the desk with measured steps. Barton’s eyes tracked his movement warily. “And you are. You’re so good. Doing everything exactly right, exactly like I told you. You’re such a good boy.”

The whipped cream was nearly gone, just a few small smudges left, and Barton was lapping at them desperately. Phil stood behind him, flush against his ass, and ran soothing hands up and down his sides. Barton groaned, pressing back on Phil’s aching cock, but Phil held his hips still.

“You’re almost done,” he soothed. “Just a little more.” He watched as Barton’s tongue swiped across the last trace of white. Barton rested his forehead in the center of the desk, panting. “There it is.”

He felt the muscles move as Barton swallowed down a deep breath. “Is that good enough, sir?”

“That’s perfect.” Gently, Phil unclasped Barton’s hands and eased him upright, wrapping arms tight around his chest. “You’ve done so well. I’m so proud of you.” Clint made a thin sound, like the blade of a sob had broken off in his throat, and Phil held him tighter. “You were perfect. I knew
you’d be perfect, and I’m going to take care of you now, okay?”

Barton gave a slow, stiff nod and murmured softly, “Please.”

Phil laid a gentle kiss on the scarlet edge of his ear and another on the side of his neck and stepped back just enough to turn Barton around in his arms. Barton’s face was tight, brows knit with the effort of holding back whatever rush of feeling was welled up inside him. Phil drew his head down and kissed his fever-hot eyelids, feeling some of the tension smooth out of his forehead.


Barton let out a shaking breath, and his shoulders eased under Phil’s hands. He raised his eyes, damp and hazy and full of something just out of reach, and met Phil’s gaze. When Phil kissed him, he opened up like smooth water yielding to rainfall, utterly at the mercy of the touches that fell on him, and he gasped as Phil unfastened his pants and pulled out his hard, pulsing cock.

Ever prepared, Phil produced a small bottle of lube from his pocket and slathered his palm as he pushed Barton back against the desk. "Is this what you want?" he asked, and Barton nodded frantically.

"Yes. God, yes. Please."

"Of course. Anything you want." He wrapped his hand around Barton’s cock and worked it with slow, steady strokes. "If you're good for me, you can have anything you want. All you have to do is ask."

Barton groaned. "Just wanna come. God, please."

"Do it. Come for me."

Just three quick jerks, and Barton was coming hard, his hand tight to bruising on Phil’s arm. Semen streaked down the side of Phil’s slacks and onto the carpet, and Barton gave a sharp cry, muffled as he buried his face in Phil’s shoulder. Phil held him tight through it, and lowered him gently to the floor, shaking and spent.

“That’s it. I’ve got you.” With his back against the desk, he gathered Barton into his arms as the trembling subsided and ran his hands gently up and down Barton’s back. Barton curled into his chest with a breathless sigh, and something that had been awry in Phil’s heart settled at last into its place.

“Jesus fuck,” Barton mumbled, and Phil smiled into his hair.

“How do you feel?”

“Awesome,” he said sleepily. “Fucked-out. Floaty. Fuck. What’s the word for when you feel really good and kinda...” He fluttered his fingers vaguely in the air.

“Euphoric?”

“That. Yes. Like that.”

“Good.” Phil kissed his hairline, softly. “Good. I’m glad.”

Barton shifted and looked down at him, frowning. “Fuck. You didn’t... Fuck.” He reached for Phil’s belt, fumbling. “I’m sorry, sir. I can g--”

“Stop,” Phil ordered, and Barton froze, looking panicked. Phil rubbed slow circles on his back.
“You’ve done everything I asked; you don’t have to do anything else.”

“But y--”

“It’s fine.” Phil placed a kiss on his brow. “I can take care of it. Right now, I’m taking care of you.”

“Okay. I just...” Barton licked his lips, and it was all Phil could do not to kiss him there, too. “Could you... Would you come on me, sir? Please?”

Phil’s heart pounded, and a surge of heat went straight down his spine. “Would you like that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay.” Phil swallowed. “Okay. Get it out for me.”

There were still tremors in Barton’s hands, but his touch was swift and sure as he undid the belt and fly and reached in to free Phil’s cock. Phil sighed as the cool air met his hot skin and at the light touch of Barton’s callused fingers.

“Good boy,” he murmured, pulling Barton close against him as he worked his hand, already slick, up and down the hard length. “Such a good boy.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” Barton’s fingers lingered on his wrist, tracking with him as he stroked. “I’ll be good for you, sir. Just for you.”

“God, yes. I know. I know you will.” He quickened his pace and kissed Barton’s hair, his face, his perfect mouth, upturned and open. “My boy, my good boy.”

“Yours,” Barton said against his lips. “All yours.”

Phil moaned as he came, shooting onto Barton’s arm and lap, spilling across his bare cock. It seemed to last forever, and he came down slowly, letting his senses settle into the heat and comfort of Barton’s weight against him.

“Damn,” Barton breathed.

“I concur.”

“So.”

“So?”

“Just so I’m clear,” Barton said. “If I’m naughty, I get punished. If I’m nice, I get handjobs?”

“Where ‘handjobs’ represents a variety of possible rewards, yes.”

“Huh.” Barton rested his head on Phil’s shoulder. “I think I like this system.”

Phil smiled. “I think we can make it work.”

5. The time Phil told the truth.

It could have been worse.

When he went looking for punishment, spoiling for a beating or just to get taken gently down, there
was a kind of predictability to it. If he caused trouble, he would do paperwork and issue apologies; if he broke something, he got spanked and made to fix it.

When he wasn’t looking for it, though, when he really did just screw up, Clint never knew what he was going to get.

So, all things considered, it could have been worse. His knees and back ached from kneeling, and he was long past sick of staring at the same few inches of wall for hours. But it could have been worse. Maybe not much worse, but worse.

At first, he’d thought he was getting off easy, but, after an hour, he’d started to think Coulson was trying to kill him with boredom. When Coulson left the room without explanation, and Clint was alone in the silent dark, he’d wondered first if it was a test, then how long he was supposed to stay there if Coulson didn’t come back. At some point, Clint had convinced himself that Coulson wasn’t coming back and that he would be left kneeling in the dark until he passed out.

When Coulson returned, he gave Clint a sandwich and a pat on the head, and Clint would never in his lifetime admit to another human being that he’d nearly cried with relief.

Other than that one, brief reward, Clint spent the day as, essentially, furniture. Coulson didn’t speak to him or touch him, and, if he spoke, he was ignored.

By the end of the day, Clint didn’t even realize it was the end of the day. He’d lost track of time somewhere around what he figured must have been lunch. He was sore and starving, and he needed to pee worse than he’d ever needed anything in his life. He didn’t register that Coulson had stood until he felt the presence of a body close behind him, close enough to touch, close enough to prop him up if he just leaned back a little.

“Do you understand why I’m angry?” Coulson asked, so calm and so weary, and Clint’s pulse spiked.

Clint swallowed, working moisture into his dry mouth. “I disobeyed an order, broke cover, left my position.”

“If I punished you every time you disobeyed an order, you’d never get off your knees,” Coulson sighed, and Clint figured he was right about that. “I’m angry because you took an unnecessary risk and put yourself in danger for no reason.”

“Bennett w--”

“Bennett had the shot,” Coulson snapped. “You jumped the gun and got in the way, and if Bennett hadn’t adjusted to cover you, you could have gotten people killed, including yourself.”

Clint opened his mouth to answer, closed it, and looked down, his head bent nearly to the wall.

“Sorry, sir,” he said, and Coulson sighed again.

The sudden touch on his head made Clint flinch, but he relaxed as Coulson’s fingers dragged gently over his scalp, soft and soothing.

“You’re one of the best field agents we have, but you’ve got to trust the rest of us to know what we’re doing, too.” There was a quiet disappointment in Coulson’s voice that made Clint want to bury himself in the carpet and never come out.

“I do. I trust you,” Clint said. “I just... I fucked up. I’m sorry, sir. I swear I’ll try to do better.”
Coulson ran his hand back through Clint’s hair and told him gently, “I know you will. You just made a mistake.” He stepped back, taking his hand away, and Clint felt suddenly cold and exposed. “You can sit down. I think that’s enough for today.”

Gratefully, Clint rolled over onto his ass, leaning back against the wall and stretching his legs out in front of him with a groan. He arched his back and felt all his vertebrae popping one by one like bubble wrap. Coulson sat down in front of him, offering up a bottle of water and a protein bar.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, and Coulson smiled.

As Clint gulped down the water, Coulson rolled up his shirtsleeves and began to massage Clint’s leg, loosening the stiff muscles and restoring feeling where they’d gone numb. Clint breathed a happy sigh.

“Oh my god, that feels so good.”

Coulson flashed him a grin. “Magic fingers.”

“Hah. Can’t wait to see what happens when you get me naked,” Clint said, and Coulson’s smile faded. He dropped his eyes and turned his attention back to rubbing Clint’s aching knee. “Sorry. I didn’t... I mean, I know. Your terms, your pace. I’m not trying to... y’know.”

“I know. But you’re right about one thing.” Coulson glanced back up, a shadow of the smile returning. “You’re going to love my naked massage.”

Clint laughed. “Looking forward to it, sir.”

Coulson moved up to soothe the sore muscles in Clint’s thigh and said, “You’ve been patient with me, and I know that doesn’t come easily to you. So... Thank you.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m not getting anything out of it,” Clint pointed out. When Coulson didn’t answer, Clint prodded him with a foot. “Hey.”

“Give me your other leg.” Clint obediently shifted so that Coulson was sitting on the floor between his knees, and Coulson went to work on the opposite leg. After a moment, he said, “When I was a kid, I had this dog.”

“Is this gonna be a weird story?” Clint asked. “I feel like this is gonna be a weird story.”

“Shut up. It’s a relevant story.” Coulson went on, “I loved that dog, and I did everything for her. I trained her, fed her, took her to the vet. I gave her baths in this stupid plastic kiddie pool.”

“So it was love at first crotch sniff?” Coulson shot him a look, and Clint’s mouth clicked shut.

“Then, one day, she got out of the back yard and got hit by a car.” He went on massaging Clint’s leg as he spoke, his hands moving in a soothing cadence with his voice. “She ran out in the street, and one of our neighbors hit her. And all I could think about was, did I leave the gate open? Was I not paying enough attention? Should I have trained her better? I was sure it was my fault, I just couldn’t figure out what I’d done wrong.” He finished the massage and left his hand resting gently on Clint’s knee. “My parents got me another dog, but I told them that I clearly wasn’t responsible enough to take care of a dog and they should find him an owner who wouldn’t get him killed.” He paused. “I was ten. I may have been a little dramatic.”

Clint frowned. “So... are you saying I’m your bitch?”
Coulson rolled his eyes. “You’re making fun of me.”

“Maybe a little bit.”

“I’m pouring my heart out to you, and you’re making fun of me.”

“Look, what I’m getting from this story is that you had the most normal childhood in the history of children, and that maybe you have some guilt issues to work through.” Clint caught Coulson’s gaze and held it. “I’m sorry your dog died. That sucks. And it’s both hilarious and unsurprising that you were that serious and responsible as a child, but if any part of the point you’re trying to make involves comparing me to your childhood pet? Then we have a problem.”

Coulson took a deep breath, looking like he was working to keep an even temper. “The point,” he said calmly, “is that I am responsible for the life and well-being of every agent under my command. Every decision I make in this job has direct consequences for any number of people, and the repercussions of a wrong decision are all on me. Every life lost as a result of my orders is on me, and I carry that with me every day.” His hand tightened on Clint’s knee. “And you... Whatever else you are to me, you are my agent and my responsibility. That weight, in addition to everything else...”

He paused, clasping his hands in his lap as he breathed in. He gave Clint a small smile, and Clint saw an afterimage of what he must have looked like as a child, shy and earnest.

“When I look at you,” Coulson said. “I feel like I did when my parents brought home that new dog: entirely unequal to the challenge and entirely unworthy of being trusted with something so precious.”

Clint blinked. “Oh. Wow. That’s... really sentimental. And still ends up with me likened to a dog.”

Coulson put a hand over his eyes, shaking his head. “I give up.”

“Hey. No. I’m sorry. Just look at me.” He pulled Coulson’s hand away and held it. “If you’re trying to say that you’re in love with me and scared of fucking things up, then you can just say that.”

For a second, Coulson looked at him blankly, then said, “I’m in love with you, and I’m scared of fucking things up.”

Clint grinned. “Awesome. Me, too. Now can we move on to the part where we just have feelings instead of trying to explain them?”

“Strong communication is essential to any relationship, Agent Barton.” His expression was carefully bland, but Clint gave him a look and he laughed. “Fair enough. In the meantime, I owe you a reward. Anything you want.”

“Honestly, sir, all I really want right now is to take a piss,” Clint said. Coulson hummed thoughtfully, and Clint fixed him with a glare. “Oh no. I know that look. Punishment’s over. You don’t get to make me suffer anymore.”

Coulson smiled sweetly. “Maybe I enjoy making you suffer.”

“No, you enjoy telling me what to do and watching me bend over backwards to do it,” Clint replied. “Come on, sir, don’t make me piss on the rug.”

“What was that about not being a dog?” Coulson teased. Clint answered with a thin, pitiful whine, and Coulson laughed. “Fine. Go.”

Clint was up and out the door before Coulson had a chance to think twice, and, once in the
bathroom, he peed for a solid minute, groaning with relief. The night was drawing on, and the base was quiet, though never fully deserted. Clint’s stomach growled to remind him that breakfast, lunch, and dinner times were all well past.

“I am fucking starving,” he announced as he returned to the office.

Coulson, now standing and collecting his things from the desk, hesitated, then said casually, “I’ve got some leftovers that need to be eaten.”

Clint narrowed his eyes. “Leftovers?”

“Most of a pizza and a few boxes of Chinese.”

“At your apartment?”

“Yes.”

“Are you asking me to come home with you?”

“...Yes.”

“Smooth.”

“Shut up.”

Clint slipped around the desk, grinning, and pulled Coulson in for a swift, hard kiss, full of promise and possibility. Sweeping an arm toward the door, he said, “Lay on, MacDuff.”

Coulson wrapped his arms around Clint and kissed the corner of his mouth. “Don’t ever say that again.”

“No promises.”

“Barton.”

“What?”

Coulson took a breath, but whatever he meant to say seemed to dissipate on his tongue. He smiled. “Let’s go.”

Clint smiled back and followed him out.

6. The time with the belt.

It could have been better.

“Fuck you, sir.”

Phil gripped Barton’s jaw and forced his head up. “Are you done mouthing off, or do you want me to get my belt?”

In an instant, Barton went completely white. “No.”

“No, what?”
“No. No, I mean no,” Barton said, panicked. “Stop. Red.”

Phil let him go immediately and reached to unbuckle the cuffs around his wrists. “I’m sorry. Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

Barton shook his head, rubbing at his wrists, and Phil took a step back to give him space. “It’s nothing. I’m fine. Just... just gimme a minute.”

He curled into himself, folding his broad shoulders into a smaller space -- a smaller target. It clicked, and Phil’s stomach dropped.

“Who was it?”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t matter.” Barton kept his head down, still rubbing his wrists.

“Clint.” Phil kept his voice even, but he didn’t even try to stop the cold rage from seeping into it. “Who used the belt?”

“It was my dad, okay?” Barton snapped. “Whatever. It’s fine.”

“No, I’d say that’s a lot of things, but it’s certainly not fine,” Phil said, and Barton glanced up at him. “And you’re downplaying the significance of your trauma response in order to maintain a facade of emotional control, which, while understandable, is a little absurd, in light of the current situation.”

Barton blinked. After a moment, he said dryly, “Well, when you put it like that.”

Phil sat down on the floor in front of him, in easy reach but not touching. “You don’t have to talk about it,” he said, and Barton visibly relaxed. “But you don’t have to pretend it’s fine, either.” Slowly, Barton nodded, and Phil reached out a hand, moving clearly and deliberately, and set it gently on Barton’s knee. “Do you want to stop for now?”

Barton gave him half a smile. “Kinda?”

“Okay. Do you want to eat ice cream and watch Blade Runner?”

At that, the rest of the smile dawned. “See, now you’re just patronizing me.”

“I’m not patronizing you, I’m spoiling you, which I’m allowed to do at my discretion.”

“Oh, yeah? Who says?”

“I do, and I’m in charge.” Phil tried to keep a straight face, but he never could, not with Barton.

Barton leaned in close, his lips ghosting across Phil’s. “Only ‘cause I let you.”

“And have I told you...” Phil kissed the corner of his mouth. “...how happy I am...” Another kiss on his jaw. “...every day...” Another on his neck. “...that you let me?”

Barton rocked forward and pushed Phil back onto the floor. “You’re welcome to show me.”

“What did you have in mind?” With Barton’s weight pinning him down, Phil understood the appeal of surrender, of being overwhelmed and enveloped, at the mercy of a strength that would never be used against him. Everything within his power was always Barton’s for the asking, but, at that moment, he would have submitted to any indignity just for the favor of a kiss.

Barton feigned a thoughtful expression. “Well, I’ve already got my dick out, so I guess maybe you
could suck it. Since it’s convenient, and all.”

Laughing, Phil rolled Barton onto his back. “You’re perfect,” he breathed, and Barton raised an eyebrow.

“Even though I’m fucked in the head?”

“Especially because you’re fucked in the head.”

Barton grinned brightly. “You say the sweetest things.”

And that was it, until it wasn’t.

7. The time Clint actually learned a lesson.

It could have been so much worse.

Clint woke slowly to the feel of soft kisses on the back of his neck and a warm hand flat against his stomach. After the shit he’d pulled in the last few days, he’d fully expected to come home to a severe, elaborate, and painful punishment, but Coulson had just whisked him away from the bureaucratic vultures and fussed over him for most of the night.

The kisses became wet bites as Coulson nipped and sucked along Clint’s neck and shoulders, leaving the skin stinging and tender. The hand on his stomach drifted lower, skimming under the waistband of his shorts, and Clint wondered if, instead of being punished, he was getting a reward for doing well. He had brought in the Black Widow, after all, if not exactly in the way he’d been told to.

There was a fresh, ugly bruise on his shoulder that ached when he moved. Coulson kissed it softly, then bit down hard enough to break the skin, and Clint yelped.

“Well, good morning to you, too,” he grumbled.

Without warning, Coulson rolled him onto his belly and straddled his hips, pinning him face-down on the mattress. “Shut up.”

Clint’s heart thudded, a familiar surge of adrenaline sending heat straight to his cock. “Fuck. Yes, sir.”

Coulson jerked down Clint’s shorts and gave him a sound slap on the ass. “What did I just say?” he snapped. Clint, wisely, buried his face in the pillow and didn’t answer. “Good boy.”

A nice, hard fuck in the morning was one thing, but Coulson wasted even less time than usual. Clint heard rustling and the click of the lube cap, and then two slick fingers were shoved inside him with no preamble and no pause as Coulson started working them in and out of his ass. Clint moaned and bit down on the pillow to keep from shouting.

He had barely started to adjust, the sensation edging into more pleasure than pain, when the fingers slipped away and were immediately replaced with Coulson’s hard, thick cock, splitting him open, too big to drive in all at once.

“Oh, Jesus. Fuck. God. Christ.” Clint arched away instinctively, desperate to relieve the blunt pressure, but Coulson pushed him hard into the mattress and held him still.
“That’s two,” Coulson growled, his voice steely and rough with sex. “If I have to tell you to shut up again, you’re going to regret it.” He shoved in further, and Clint stifled a whimper. “Now, I’m going to fuck you, and you’re going to take it like a good boy. Do you understand? Answer me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Coulson thrust hard, pushing all the way in, and tears stung at the corner of Clint’s eyes.

The rhythm was vicious, too fast and hard for Clint to do anything but submit. His teeth tore holes in the pillowcase as he fought to keep down the moans and cries ripping up from his throat. Coulson didn’t say another word, just panted with effort as he used Clint the way he wanted, and Clint spread his legs as much as he could to show what a good boy he could be.

Coulson spread his ass open and held him down through the rapid, shallow thrusts. He came with a loud moan, filling Clint with wet heat. No condom. Okay, so Coulson was in a mood. Clint might have cared more if it hadn’t been so hot, and if he hadn’t been five seconds from coming himself just thinking about it.

Coulson pulled out slowly, and Clint could feel the semen and lube start to trickle down the backs of his thighs. Before he could even think to start rubbing himself off on the sheets, something small, hard, and cold breached his asshole and stayed there as Coulson moved away.

Clint froze.

He opened his mouth, paused, and closed it. Whatever Coulson had planned, Clint didn’t want to make it worse by acting up. Instead, he craned his neck, looking over his shoulder so that he could just see the flat base of the plug pressed between his cheeks, and he couldn’t help but give a faint whine of dismay.

Coulson, cleaning himself off with a smug expression, chuckled. “You can speak now,” he said, and Clint shot him a look.

“What the fuck did you do?” he demanded, but Coulson just laughed. “You can’t just leave it there.”

“I can,” Coulson said mildly. “And I will.”

Clint sputtered. “I have to sit through debriefings and disciplinary hearings all day.”

“Yes, you do.” Pulling on clean slacks and a fresh undershirt, Coulson went about his routine like any other day. “And you’re going to do it with my come in your ass. How do you feel about that?”

Clint felt sick, filthy, turned on, and terrified. “I’m gonna get suspended,” he said. “I’m not gonna be able to talk, and these fuckbags are gonna suspend me. Or have me killed.” He lifted up and levelled a glare at Coulson. “They’re gonna have me killed, and it’s gonna be your fault.”

“They’re not going to have you killed,” Coulson replied. “Having the Black Widow in our custody and cooperating is a coup, no matter how she got there. The hearings are a formality to get everything on paper, but you’re not going to get more than a stern talking-to about following orders.”

Clint raised an eyebrow. “Is that what this is?”

Coulson sat beside him on the bed and leaned in to kiss his temple. “This is personal.” He smiled cheerfully. “I don’t suppose I need to tell you that you aren’t allowed to take that out or come until I say so.”
Clint groaned in frustration and dropped his face into the pillow and mumbled, “I hate you.”

Coulson, the sick bastard, just laughed and gave him a light slap on the ass. “Get moving. You’ll be late.”

Clint figured the world would be lucky if he didn’t kill someone before the day was over.

He did get a stern talking-to from Hill, who explained, using pretty colorful language, that orders were given for a reason and that I had a hunch was not an acceptable excuse for gambling with a matter of international security. The fact that Fury was standing to the side looking gleeful took some of the weight out of her dressing-down, though, and Clint suspected Hill was probably more angry about all the extra work than she was about Clint’s behavior.

Every once in awhile, the plug shifted, and he would clench his ass in panic and pray that it didn’t fall out, which made it difficult for him to do anything but stand obediently at attention, looking chastened and trying not to squirm.

He only saw Romanov once, at a debriefing in which she explained her reasons for accepting Clint’s unorthodox offer of sanctuary. From across the room, she looked at him, locking eyes, and Clint was suddenly absolutely certain that, somehow, she knew. Maybe she didn’t know there was a plug in his ass keeping him full of come and shit, but she knew that he was enduring something no one else could see, that his mind was on some secret shame while the people in charge droned on about rules and resources. Her eyes went to Coulson, sitting silent and stone-faced, and she knew that Clint was owned, too.

Clint shifted in his seat and bit down on a knuckle to keep from groaning.

He was temporarily suspended from field duty and told that he would be held personally responsible for any malicious acts committed by the newly-inducted Agent Romanov. Clint figured that telling them to go fuck themselves probably wouldn’t help things, and his bowels and stomach were beginning to cramp, so he just nodded and said that he understood.

Coulson didn’t say a single word to him until they returned to the apartment. As soon as the door was shut, he ordered, “Take off your clothes and wait for me in the bathroom.”

Clint was stripping before he even made it out of the room. He tossed his clothes into the hamper and, since it could only help his situation, knelt on the bathroom rug. After a second’s thought, he turned facing away from the door and lowered his head to the ground, lifting his ass up like an offering.

When Coulson came in, Clint couldn’t see him, but he heard the soft tread of bare feet on tile and the astonished intake of breath.

“If you knew how good you looked right now, you’d never get up,” Coulson said quietly, skimming his fingers over Clint’s upturned ass. “Maybe I should keep you like this. That way you’d never get into trouble, and I could use you whenever I wanted.” Clint shivered. “Would you let me do that? Would you like being ready for me all the time?”

Clint forced himself to breathe and answered, “Yes, sir.”

“Good boy.” Coulson pressed gently on the plug, and Clint felt like he was going to fall apart. “Get up. Sit on the edge of the tub.”

Clint scrambled to obey, keeping his eyes down. He sat with his hands braced on either side and his ass hanging over the bathtub, and he prayed he had served at least enough of his penance to be given
some relief. Though if Coulson’s attitude was any indication, Clint still had a long way to go.

Coulson gripped him by the hair and pulled his head back, leaning down for a hard, bruising kiss, and, yeah, Clint knew the tenor of his *I love you and I’m going to fuck you up* kiss and the way it left his head spinning.

Gracefully, Coulson knelt on the rug between Clint’s spread knees and took hold of his cock. He started stroking slowly, spinning up the desperate heat that had been aching low in Clint’s belly all day. The only crack in his impassive face was the bright, unbearable adoration in his eyes when he looked up at Clint, but there was only steel in his voice as he said, “If you move so much as an inch, I will stop, and you will spend the rest of the night on your knees, begging me to let you come. Do you understand?”

Clint nodded slowly. “Yes, sir. I’ll be good, sir.”

Coulson frowned, his hand still running so slowly up and down Clint’s cock. “You haven’t been very good, lately,” he said. “You did something very dangerous.”

There was no anger or accusation in Coulson’s tone, just a statement of fact, and that, somehow, was worse.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

Coulson’s hand tightened around his cock, but he kept the same glacial pace. “I don’t believe you.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Clint said again. “I’m so sorry. I won’t do it again, sir.”

“Not once today did you apologize. Not once did you back down or make excuses.” Coulson reached around behind him and took hold of the plug’s wide base. “Why should I believe you now?”


The pressure in his ass shifted by a fraction as Coulson started to work it in small circles, loosening the muscles that had tightened around it. “Convince me.”

Somewhere, in the part of Clint’s mind that resisted submission, there was a joke about debate club, but it didn’t matter. Humor and defiance were his shield against the world’s everyday horrors, and he didn’t need them, here. Here, Coulson shielded him, and all Clint had to be was good.

“I’m so sorry. I am, sir. I’m sorry. I fucked up. It was stupid and dangerous. I’m such a fuck up. I’m so sorry.”

“Not what you are,” Coulson corrected him. “Never what you are. What you *did.*”

Clint’s face burned, hot with shame and desperate need. “Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

Coulson changed his grip on the plug and began moving it slowly in and out. “Keep going,” he said.

He sounded calm and steady, but Clint could see the flush standing on his cheeks, the lines on his brow from exertion, and that was another straw on Clint’s pile of guilt, that Coulson had to work so hard to put him right.

“I’m sorry. Please. Please, god, I’m so sorry. Forgive me. I was so stupid, sir. I didn’t think. I’m sorry. I coulda got hurt, and I didn’t think. I’m so sorry.”

Coulson was using the plug to fuck him in smooth, shallow thrusts, keeping time with the movement
of his hand on Clint’s cock, and Clint felt like he was unravelling, spooled out like cheap string
between Coulson’s fingers. Words slipped and tumbled in his head, out of reach and meaningless;
the only meaning was in the jagged shard of feeling lodged in his chest and the means to get it out.


“What are you begging for?” Coulson demanded, working his cock faster, bringing him closer and
closer. Clint could feel the mess in his ass starting to seep out around the loosened plug. “Are you
begging for forgiveness or for me to let you come?”

“For forgiveness,” Clint moaned. “Forgive me. Please, god. Phil, please forgive me.”

The hold on his cock vanished, replaced by the blissful, scorching heat of Coulson’s mouth sucking
at the head, and Clint wailed, right on the hot, wet edge. Just a little more. Just a little more, and
Coulson had to let him. He had to. Clint’s insides were all fire and a flood, and he only needed just a
little more.

Something small and soft slipped around the base of his cock, tightening suddenly. Coulson gave his
cock a last, long suck and pulled away as he slipped the plug, finally, out of its place, letting the
flood of semen, lube, and shit spill into the tub.

The relief of emptiness crashed hard against the denied desperation, and Clint burst into tears. He
was turning inside out, his heart and stomach draining out with the rest of him, leaving nothing but
his white-knuckle grip on the side of the tub and his throbbing, aching cock.

Coulson reached up and cupped his face, soothing, “It’s okay. You’re okay. We’re not done, yet.”


With his other hand, Coulson pinched the soft skin of Clint’s inner thigh, just behind his balls, and
twisted hard. “What did you just say?”

“Aah! Fuck. Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“That’s what I thought.” He smoothed his fingers over the pinched skin, rubbing away some of the
sting. “You’re going to be a good boy a while longer, then I’ll take care of you. Can you do that?”

Clint swallowed past the tightness in his throat, tasting salt at the corners of his mouth. “Yes, sir.”

“What happens if you’re not good for me?”

“Spend the night on my knees, begging you to let me come,” he murmured, and he would have got
on his knees and started begging right then, if he thought it would help.

“That’s it, my smart boy,” Coulson said, standing. He ran his hand through Clint’s hair, smoothing it
back gently, and Clint couldn’t help but arch into the touch. “Do you need a minute?”

Clint hated himself for nodding, hated himself for the hot tears still creeping from his eyes, but he
nodded, anyway, and pressed his face into Coulson’s stomach as Coulson stroked a hand softly
down the back of his neck.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you. Take your time,” Coulson soothed. “You’ve been so good. You’ve earned a
break. I just need a little more from you. Just a little more.”
The commands and the punishments were things Clint understood; he could take as many orders and as much discomfort and degradation as Coulson was willing to give him. When he was being punished, he understood what he was supposed to do.

This, though. This comfort and sweetness, the way Coulson touched him, sometimes, like he was made of satin and snow. That was more than he could take.

“‘M fine,” he mumbled. Clearing his throat, he lifted his head away from the damp, warm front of Coulson’s shirt. “I’m fine, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Okay.” Coulson smoothed a hand over his hair one more time and stepped away. From the cabinet under the sink, he produced a small, plastic basket full of basic cleaning supplies and a box of latex gloves. “When you’re ready, I want you to clean out the tub. Can you do that for me?”

Clint nodded, keeping his eyes down on the basket. “Yes, sir.”

There was a breath and a pause, like the words that came first to Coulson’s mouth weren’t the ones he wanted. After a moment, he ran his fingertips lightly along Clint’s hairline and said, “Good boy.”

When Coulson left the room, Clint felt a momentary, familiar pang of cold abandonment, and he reminded himself, with the steady deliberation of ritual, that he wasn’t alone, that Coulson would come back, that Coulson always came back. He breathed in deep and let the air out slowly, feeling his pulse even and slow, bringing himself back to center.

The tenuous calm did nothing to ease the awful throbbing in his cock, but Clint would take what he could get.

Clint slid gingerly to his knees and pulled the basket of supplies within easy reach, careful not to let his ass - still slick and filthy - touch the clean rug. The sloppy mess in the tub reeked, and he tried not to dwell too much on the details as he cleared it away and rinsed the thick fluid mixture down the drain.

He worked slowly, both to ensure that he got everything and because any quick movement jostled his cock and made him want to curl up on the floor and die. By the time Coulson returned, all the remains had been washed away, and Clint was spraying disinfectant on the white porcelain.

Coulson stood in the doorway, out of Clint’s vision, and said nothing. Clint wanted to turn, to see him, to catch his look and judge his mood and revel in the way his eyes fell sometimes on Clint’s skin, but Clint had work to do and hadn’t earned permission to lift his eyes. Instead, he leaned further over the tub, arching his back and raising his ass just a little bit higher.

Behind him, Coulson gave a huff of amusement. “Is that an invitation?”

“Is if you want it, sir,” Clint answered. His ass felt sore and used, but the idea of Coulson fucking him with the slick of his own come was too good to dismiss out of hand.

“How very magnanimous of you,” Coulson remarked dryly. “I ordered pizza. Maybe I should let the delivery driver come in here and fuck you. Would you like that?”

Clint shuddered. “No, sir, I wouldn’t.”

“Good. I don’t trust anyone else with you.” There was something strange and dark in Coulson’s voice, an intimation of what he might do if anyone ever laid a hand on Clint, if anyone ever broke him.
Clint paused, breathing slowly and trying not to think about how hard he was and all the ways that Coulson owned him. “Don’t want anyone else, sir.”

“But you want me, is that right?”

Clint did look up, then. He turned to stare over his shoulder at Coulson, standing barefoot in his slacks, white undershirt pulled tight across the lean muscles that his suit hid so well. Coulson was sipping from a wine glass, watching Clint over the rim, and what Clint felt wasn’t want; it was so much bigger.

“Yes, sir.”

He watched the shift of muscles as Coulson swallowed, hard and slow. “Get back to work.”

Clint licked his lips and smiled as he turned back around. “Yes, sir. Almost finished, sir.”

“Good boy.”

Anxious as he was to get on with things, Clint disinfected and wiped down the entire tub twice, rinsing it out in between. Sanitary concerns aside, he knew from experience that Coulson appreciated thoroughness. When he was finished, he was pretty sure the tub was cleaner than it had ever been. He tossed the gloves and set aside the basket, then sat back on his heels, waiting for approval.

Coulson rested his hand on Clint’s head, scratching lightly as he made his inspection. Clint leaned into the touch and nearly purred.

“Very good,” Coulson said, still dragging his fingernails gently over Clint’s scalp. “That’s very good. You’ve done so well.”

Those little bits of praise were better than chocolate, better than handjobs, and almost as good as the way Coulson leaned down and kissed his forehead. “Thank you, sir.”

Coulson smiled. “Get in the tub. Hands and knees, facing away from the faucet.”

Clint obeyed without a second thought, positioning himself with his knees spread, and the tub was small enough that he could brace his hands and feet in the corners to keep from sliding. It wasn’t the most uncomfortable position he’d ever been in, but he hoped Coulson wouldn’t keep him here too long.

Coulson snapped on a fresh pair of gloves and took down the detachable shower head, kneeling beside the tub. He stroked one warm hand over Clint’s back as he opened the taps, and Clint felt a surge of water swirl around his feet. When he was satisfied with the temperature, Coulson switched to the shower head, and massaging streams of water, pleasantly hot, beat down on the backs of Clint’s legs, warming his skin as Coulson moved up to wet his back and ass.

“How does that feel?”

Rivulets ran between Clint’s legs and over his tender cock, and he hung his head, trying not to move. “‘S good, sir.”

Between the warm thud of the water and Coulson’s hands, every inch of Clint’s body felt soothed and softened, and it somehow made the ache of his erection worse, all that comfort and no relief. When Coulson ran a finger down the wet cleft of his ass, Clint closed his eyes and moaned low in his throat.
“That’s it,” Coulson said. “Let me hear you.”

He spread Clint’s ass so that the spray hit straight on his stretched-out hole, and Clint jerked away with a cry. For that, he got a hard slap on the back of his thigh.

“Keep still,” Coulson snapped, and Clint whimpered. “On second thought, why don’t you hold this open for me?”

Clint glanced back to see if Coulson was serious and met a stony glare. Swallowing a groan, Clint braced his head against the end of the tub and reached back to grip his own ass cheeks and spread himself wide. Coulson changed a setting on the shower head, and the spray started to hit Clint’s ass in short, stinging pulses that made Clint wail against the porcelain.

Something cold dripped onto the top of his ass, and Clint felt the slick slide of soap as Coulson spread lather over his thighs and between his cheeks. Clint shook with the effort of holding himself still and moaned when Coulson rubbed soap up against the underside of his balls.

He was breaking apart, expanding and exploding like a bright star, hovering breathless on the edge of collapsing into a final, impossible density. He was already there, suspended in the white hot moment of ignition, and every touch set him spinning in an endless ouroboros of almost.

The tip of a finger skimmed his entrance, and a spike of heat stabbed through him. He spasmed, knocking his elbows against the sides of the tub, and wailed, “God. Oh, god, please.”

Coulson hummed, so quiet Clint barely heard it over the water and the roaring in his ears. “Begging already?”

Clint arched back, spreading his ass further. “Yes, sir. Yes. Please.”


There was no reason to hold back and nothing left of himself to form a barricade. Coulson had stripped him down to nothing but raw, unbearable need.

Two fingers pushed into him, curling inside him, and Clint didn’t understand how he hadn’t died, how his body could withstand this. The spray of water shifted, sending a shower of even streams against the underside of his cock, and hot tears ran out of his eyes with hard, wracking cries. He was so overwhelmed with sensations that he barely registered the touch as Coulson reached down and gently released the catch on the cock ring.

Suddenly, he was coming. All the spinning pieces of him crashed into a single, bright point of feeling, and he screamed as he came, doubled over and shooting his own release into his face.

The world vanished for a moment, like the blindness left behind by a flash of light, and all Clint knew was white.

There was a hand on his skin -- Coulson’s palm, now bare, running in soothing strokes across his back. Coulson was speaking, low and even, murmuring meaningless comforts that resounded with the softly slowing rhythm of Clint’s heart.

The water was off. Clint started to shiver, but he was still floating in the soft, pale place that was his reward for being good. Gently, Coulson coaxed him upright and helped him slither ungracefully out of the tub, wiping him down and wrapping him in a big, soft towel that enveloped him like a blanket. They sat on the bathroom rug, and Clint curled up safe in Coulson’s arms as the storm in his head
settled into a state of simple, restful peace.

The door buzzer sounded, and Coulson said gently, “I need to get that. Is it alright if I leave for a minute?” Clint nodded, yawning, and Coulson pressed a light kiss to his forehead. “I’ll be right back.”

As Coulson padded out to get the door, Clint wrapped himself tighter in the massive towel and breathed in the smell of detergent and cotton and his own clean skin. It wasn’t enough to keep the chill out on its own, and Clint could feel gooseflesh rising on his arms. He would need to move soon, to get dressed or to burrow naked into the warm bed, but he wasn’t quite ready to go anywhere until Coulson came back for him.

At some point, Clint thought, part of his life had become a strange combination of romance novel and cheap porn, and he couldn’t track exactly how that had happened.

Coulson appeared, a bundle of clothes under his arm. He smiled, and Clint’s chest flooded with a feeling like sunshine through white curtains. Clint didn’t really care how things had turned out this way; he was just glad they had.

“I thought you might want to get dressed,” Coulson said. Clint nodded, and Coulson pulled the towel from his shoulders, helping him ease into a worn-out sweatshirt and a pair of soft sleep pants.

Clint’s legs shook a little as he stood, but Coulson’s arm around his waist kept him steady. Before Coulson could lead him out, Clint tugged on his collar and pulled him in for a slow, sweet kiss. There was no urgency or demand, just a touch of open mouths that made Clint’s blood cells feel like embers, shifting and smoldering inside his skin.

When they broke apart, Coulson pulled back to look at him with an expression of such overwhelmed adoration that Clint had to look away. Coulson opened his mouth to speak, swallowed, and ran his hand gently down Clint’s arm, smiling.

“Pizza’s here,” he said, and Clint nodded.

Clint folded himself into a corner of the couch and dug into the pizza sitting on the coffee table while Coulson retrieved drinks from the kitchen. Coulson settled in beside him, and Clint slipped under his arm, resting his head on Coulson’s shoulder and soaking in the simple comfort of touch.

After a minute of familiar silence, he said quietly, “I made the right call.”

There was a pause, then Coulson’s arm tightened around Clint. “Yes, you did,” Coulson answered. “You were incredible. You trusted your instincts, took a risk, and convinced one of the most dangerous people on the planet to come fight for the good guys. No casualties, no collateral. By a certain standard, that was the single most successful mission I’ve ever witnessed, and you pulled it off with nothing but one good shot and a pair of brass balls. You were amazing.”

Clint could hear the but underneath the praise, the undercurrent of loss beneath the recounted success. “So what’s this about?”

Coulson took a deep breath, his chest expanding and compressing against Clint’s side. “This... This is because I thought she was going to kill you.” He turned, pulling Clint closer. “We had video surveillance on the room. I saw her point the gun at you, and I was so sure that I was going to have to sit there and watch her kill you.”

“She wasn’t going to.”
“Bullshit.” Coulson rolled his shoulders, like he was shaking off the memory. “I saw her, and I... I’ve never been so terrified in my life.”

Clint tilted his head back, looking up at him. “As opposed to all the other times you’ve seen me in mortal danger?”

“This was different.”

“Well, variety is the spice of life.”

“Clint.”

“What?”

Coulson sighed. “I love you.”

Clint gave him a look. “You always say that when you think I’m not taking you seriously.”

“It’s the only thing you never have a come-back for.”

Clint looked down, plucking idly at the sleeves of his sweatshirt. “I thought about ‘I know you are but what am I’, but that didn’t have the right zing.” To Clint’s relief, Coulson laughed. “Y’know, usually people are scared I’m gonna shoot them, not because someone else is gonna shoot me.” He looked up again and caught Coulson’s eye. “Sorry I scared you.”

Coulson breathed slowly out, and Clint felt some of the tension drain from him. “Thank you,” he said, resting his forehead against Clint’s. “Thank you.”

It didn’t take long for Clint to fall asleep, wrapped in a fragile haze of warmth and safety, his head pillowed on Coulson’s shoulder. He didn’t put much faith in divine justice or karmic returns, but his last thought before he drifted off was that somehow, somewhere along the line, he must have done something right.

8. The other time with the belt.

It could have been worse, but not by much.

Everything went so wrong so fast, it would take the analysts a week to piece together exactly what happened. Phil was on enforced leave, pending review, and the idle days left him more than enough time to revisit the thousand things he should have done differently, all the little details that could have made the difference.

The only thing Phil had been sure of, at the time, was that he would have been dead on the ground with the rest of the team if Barton hadn’t made an executive decision and dragged him out. Phil had kicked and fought every inch of the way, and Barton had gotten a split lip for his trouble. The sight of it now made Phil’s stomach twist.

He got through his backlog of paperwork on his first day of leave. The second day, he spent running, training, punching anything and anyone that would let him until he was too exhausted to think. He fell asleep on the couch and woke to find himself covered with a blanket and Barton sprawled on the floor, snoring.

He was climbing the walls. The weight of waiting made his skin crawl, and the unfilled stillness gave
the echoes of screams clear reverberation in his head.

He slept through most of the third day and still managed to start a fight with Barton over something trivial that ended with two broken plates and Phil spending the night alone, awake, and feeling like an incompetent ass.

The fourth day, he spent on the couch, and the fifth he spent in bed. On the sixth day, he took all of the shoes out of the closet, cleaned every last one of them, and put them on the rack in neat pairs; then he went back to sleep.

Barton made him eat, reminded him to shower, and tried, on occasion, to draw him out, with marginal success and increasing frustration.

Phil slept through the seventh day and spent the eighth day staring at the lines on the ceiling.

On the ninth day, Barton crawled into the bedroom on his hands and knees, naked and clutching a belt between his teeth.

Phil’s heart pounded in his throat, and he sat up on the edge of the bed. “Oh my god.”

Barton crawled forward to stop at Phil’s feet, offering up the belt. When Phil took it, Barton sat back on his heels, waiting.

The belt was old, the leather soft and faded with wear. Phil looked from it to Barton and shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

Barton raised an eyebrow. “Are you confused about what to do with a naked man in your bedroom?”

“Precedent would suggest the answer to that is whatever I want,” Phil said, and he was gratified to see a flush rise on Barton’s ears. “I’m a little puzzled as to what you expect me to do.”

Barton sighed. “Okay, here’s the thing. I don’t know what you need right now. I know you’re taking what happened really hard, and I know you’re going nuts being stuck with nothing to do. There’s nothing I can do to fix anything, but, I don’t know. Seemed like maybe you could use a chance to, uh, vent your frustrations. So I guess I expect you to beat the shit out of me. Sir.”

Phil glanced down at the belt, folded over in his hands. It was an offering, a sign of faith that Barton would invite him to transgress that boundary and overwrite the beatings of his childhood with something new.

He looked back to Barton. “Why?”

“Because I know you need something, and this is what I’ve got to give?” Barton shrugged.

“Knocking me around always seems to put you in a good mood.”

“That’s... different. That’s punishment. This is...” Phil shook his head. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Today. That you know of,” Barton pointed out. “Anyway, I’m not saying you have to. I’m just saying, if it’ll help, then I want you to.”

Phil ran his thumb along the frayed leather edge, thinking. “What about the belt?”

Barton swallowed and dropped his eyes. When he raised them again, his face was resolved. “I trust
you,” he said, and Phil’s heart raced.

“You’re sure?”

Barton nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Phil reached down to touch the sharp red scab that split the soft swell of Barton’s lip. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t, sir. Please,” he said. He nipped at the pad of Phil’s finger, his mouth hot and wet. “Please, sir,” he said again. “Please.”

Phil huffed. “Look at you, asking nicely,” he said, and Barton sucked his finger in deeper, looking up at him with wide eyes. He was perfect and stunning, and Phil thought of bypassing the whole thing and taking him straight to bed.

He thought about it, but not for long.

“Get the cuffs and go to the closet.”

Barton started to rise, then paused, looking to Phil.

“You can stand,” he said, and he watched the ripple of muscles as Barton went smoothly to his feet.

There was a strap tethered to the hanging bar in the closet, long enough to loop over the top of the closet door. The entire closet was reinforced to serve as an emergency panic room, and the door was sturdy enough to support Barton’s weight on the strap. This application had been tested. Thoroughly.

With the cuffs around Barton’s wrists, Phil hooked them to the strap and settled it in place over the closed door so that Barton’s hands were secured just above his head. Phil stepped back to admire the strong expanse of Barton’s bare back, his strong shoulders and perfect ass, and the pits and lines of scars that were the inheritance of a hard-lived life. He ran his hand down Barton’s spine, and Barton arched into the touch with a sigh.

Phil stripped down to his shorts and, finally, picked up the belt. He approached slowly, letting Barton wait until Phil was close behind him, bare skin just a breath apart. Phil’s senses burned with the nearness of him, and his head buzzed with power.

He settled his hand on the back of Barton’s neck, sliding his fingers up through the short hair and back down to rub across his broad shoulders. By inches, Barton melted under Phil’s palm as the touch warmed his skin, and Phil rubbed down every bit of his back, down onto his ass and thighs, and up his sides. When Barton was relaxed, Phil stepped in and pressed himself against the long line of Barton’s body, reaching around to run a hand over his chest and stomach and down the rising shape of his cock.

Laying a kiss at the base of Barton’s neck, Phil said, “Tell me if it’s too much.”

“Yes, sir,” Barton murmured, already beginning to drift in that strange space in his head.

Phil kissed his neck again. “I love you,” he said, and stepped away.

The first fall of the belt was a loud smack, and Barton yelped in surprise.

Phil kept his swings light, peppering Barton’s ass and thighs with patches of bright pink until Barton was whining and straining back toward him, wordlessly begging for more.
Phil paused to let the hits settle. He ran his hand lightly over the reddened skin, and Barton moaned. “How does that feel?” he asked.

“How, sir,” Barton sighed. “God, so good.”

“Good.” Phil rested his palm flat between Barton’s shoulderblades, savoring the feel of heat under his fingers. He moved in close to Barton’s ear and said evenly, “From now on, I’m going to give it to you exactly how I want it, and you’re going to take it until you can’t. Do you understand?”

Barton nodded. “Yes, sir. Please, sir.”

“Good boy,” Phil said, and he stepped away again.

This time, the belt fell hard across the curve of Barton’s ass, and he cried out in pain. Phil gave him no time to rest, landing the belt in alternating strokes over his shoulders with a relentless rhythm. Barton bowed his head and bared his shoulders for the beating, and a whimper escaped with each fall of leather.

After a dozen strokes on each shoulder, Phil hauled back and whipped his ass hard. The impact and the answering wail rattled deep in the hollow parts of him and loosened the hard knot that had twisted in his stomach for days.

He returned the strikes to Barton’s shoulders, now heavy and deliberate, and every hit drew a loud, strangled gasp. This time, he broke after an odd number and brought the belt down on Barton’s hip in three quick falls that made Barton twist away with a cry.

“God. Fuck!” His knees shook, and he braced himself with his forearms flat against the closet door. “God, sir, please.”

Phil snapped the belt across his other hip. “Please what?” Barton didn’t answer, his shoulders heaving, and Phil snapped the belt again. “I asked you a question.”


“That’s right.” Phil moved in so that his breath would puff hot over the red welt on Barton’s shoulder. “You can beg all you want, but I’m not done with you yet.”

Barton’s reply was so soft and small that it might not have been a sound at all. “Yes, sir.”

Instead of raising the belt again, Phil waited, watching the colors rising in the mottled red marks. A sheen of sweat made the blotches bright and slick and showed the ridges of the welts in sharp relief. There was no broken skin, not yet, but there would be black bruises by tomorrow.

He slid a hand into his shorts and squeezed his hard cock. He thought of tossing the belt aside and dry-fucking Barton into the wall, of jacking off and shooting come all over those bright new bruises, but he wasn’t finished, not yet. Instead, he just stroked his cock slowly and waited.

After a minute, Barton’s breathing steadied. He was still shaking, but Phil could see his head raised, listening. He would be wondering if Phil had left, when the next blow would fall, whether he had done something wrong, but he knew better than to look around or to speak until spoken to. He would have waited for hours in perfect obedience, as if Phil could ever stand to leave him for so long.

Phil let him wait, let the uncertainty set in, then said simply, “I’m still here.”
Barton let out a soft sigh. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Even from behind, his relief was so pitifully obvious that a sharp stab jarred Phil’s heart. A stab of anger at Barton for thinking Phil would leave him that way, of shame at himself for letting him believe it, and of fierce, nameless rage that Barton would rather be trapped and beaten than left alone for more than a moment.

That, somehow, was more than Phil could bear.

It was the last crack in the wall he had been shoring up for nine days, and now all the fear and frustration of the failed mission flooded his system, drowning him in a hot, red haze.

He let loose and laid into the beating with vicious fury, pouring all his ire into Barton’s battered skin. The strikes fell without rhythm or pause, leaving crisscrossing lines and splotches of dark red. Barton wailed and sobbed, tensing and twisting away from the blows, but there was nowhere for him to go. Phil just kept swinging.

It wasn’t about causing pain; it never had been. It was about power and control and the blissful satisfaction of giving Barton as much care and attention as the hours in a day would allow. At that moment, though, all other desires were subsumed by the simple, exhilarating need to hit something.

There was sweat standing on Phil’s brow. He was so hard that every impact made him feel like he was coming undone. The belt buckle bit into his palm, and he clenched his fist tighter, letting the metal dig in deep. His pulse thundered in his ears, a crashing roar beside the continuous slapping of leather on flesh and the sharp staccato of Barton’s cries. His shoulder ached with the constant motion, and he kept swinging, uncertain of time.

He missed the moment it happened. He missed the line of Barton’s shoulders folding into a tight, quivering curve, and he didn’t see the flinch as Barton fought the impulse to curl into himself, to make himself small and quiet. The red haze in Phil’s head only splintered away into awful, crystalline clarity at the sudden, jarring sound of Barton shouting, “Red! Red! Fuck. Red!”

Phil threw the belt aside and rushed forward, fumbling open the cuffs, and Barton sank shaking into his arms. Carefully, Phil lowered him to sit on the floor, murmuring, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

With Barton seated, Phil dashed to the bed and dragged off the light coverlet to wrap around Barton’s shoulders, folding him into a soft cocoon. He settled close on the floor so that Barton could lean in to rest against his chest, and he kept up a quiet litany as he ran his fingers across Barton’s hairline, down over his ear and jaw, around the back of his neck, touching and soothing. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Barton mumbled. “I’m fine. Just need a minute.”

“God, Clint, I’m so sorry.” He pressed his face to Barton’s hair and held on tight, grounding himself in the solid warmth of Barton’s skin. “I should have known. I’m so sorry.”

“No, no. Hey, come on.” Barton wriggled out of his hold and moved so that he could wrap the blanket around both of them. “Look at me. I’m fine.”

Phil looked at him, at his bright blue eyes and crooked smile and the sharp red scab cutting through his lip, and the hard knot twisted up in Phil’s stomach frayed and, finally, broke. He curled into Barton’s arms and cried quietly. There were no great, wracking sobs or wrenching wails, just hot, silent tears that ran across his face and collected in the dips and curves of Barton’s shoulder.
“It’s okay,” Barton soothed gently, rubbing his hand in wide circles over Phil’s back. “It’s over. I’ve got you. We’re okay.”

In his time at SHIELD, Phil had lost a total of twelve agents, and he remembered every one of them, their names and faces, how they died, and the last things he said to them. Sometimes the weight of them seemed to hang around his neck like a stone, dragging him toward the corner of hell that awaited him. Sometimes, every drop of blood and jolt of fear felt like a penance for all the ones he couldn’t save.

Now, for once, with Barton whole and sound and holding him together, he thought that maybe, finally, he could begin to let them go.

“Thank you,” he whispered, his voice wrecked and raw. “Thank you.”

Barton shook his head and held him closer. “Don’t. It’s done. Just... take it easy.”

Phil swallowed, dragging words up through the mire in his chest. “You saved my life. You got me out.”

“I got myself out,” Barton huffed. “Just figured I’d drag you along with me.”

Phil sighed. “Thank you for saving yourself.”

“Yeah, well, you’d be useless without me,” Barton drawled with just a shade too little humor. After a moment, he asked, “Any way we can get this party horizontal? My ass is killing me.”

“Shit. I’m sorry. I should...” Phil pulled away, trying to disentangle himself, but Barton stopped him.

“No. Hey, it’s fine. The first aid part can wait. I just need to lay down.”

He pushed gently until Phil was stretched out on the floor with Barton draped over him, the blanket still wrapped around them. Phil turned his head, nose to nose with Barton who smiled back at him uncertainly.

“You okay?” Barton asked, and Phil paused.

“I will be,” he said, and it was true. “Thanks to you.”

“Yay, me,” Barton yawned. “Hey, Phil?”

“Hm?”

“Love you.”

“I know,” he said, and he laughed when Barton punched him in the arm, grinning.

9. The time Clint got it wrong, again.

It could not have been worse.

Well, it would have been worse if Coulson had actually died, or if Loki really had enslaved all of humanity. As far as Clint could see, though, it might have been better to die under the icy blue thrall than to wake with the memory of everything he’d done.
He slammed the office door and leaned back against it, arms folded. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

Coulson looked up at him, startled. “Excuse me?”

“It’s been two weeks, and you’ve barely looked at me,” Clint said. “So either it’s coming, and you want me to beg, or it’s not coming, and you’re too much of an asshole to tell me.”

Coulson shook his head. “I’m sorry. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The fuck you don’t,” Clint spat. “Punishment, yes or no?”

“Punishment? For what?”

“What do you mean for what?”

“Okay, this is turning into a comedy bit.” Coulson held up his hands in surrender. “Can you please explain to me whatever it is I’m not getting?”

Clint gaped back at him. “I killed people. I almost got you killed. I shot Fury, trashed the carrier, tried to kill Natasha...”

“Wait, wait.” Coulson fixed him with a look of disbelief. “You want me to punish you for being brainwashed?”

“Well, yeah.”

Coulson opened his mouth, closed it. Finally, he said, “No.”

Clint’s heart broke. “Oh.” He wouldn’t let his shoulders fall, wouldn’t let it show that his insides had turned to shattered glass. “Okay. Sure. Well, thanks for being straight with me, anyway. Guess I’ll see you around.”

“Stop,” Coulson said. Not an order or command, but a simple, uncertain plea. Clint paused, his hand on the doorknob. “Are you... are you breaking up with me?”

Clint blinked. “Isn’t that what you want?”

The expression on Coulson’s face was one Clint had never seen, somewhere between stunned and devastated and trying desperately not to laugh. After a moment of dead silence, he said, “Clearly, I’ve missed something, here.”

Maybe this was his punishment, Clint thought, having to spell out his sins and all the new reasons for Coulson to walk away. “You’ve been avoiding me for two weeks. I mean, after everything I did, I get it, but...” He shook his head, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “Look, you want me to wait, I’ll wait. You know I will. But, if we’re done, you gotta tell me.”

“I haven’t...” Coulson gestured him forward. “Please, please sit down. I feel like you’re about to make a break for it,” he said miserably. “I haven’t been avoiding you, I’ve been... avoiding talking to you.”

Clint dropped heavily into the chair across from Coulson and gave him a look.

“I thought... I just didn’t know what to say. After I nearly died and what you went through...” He sighed. “I’d say I wanted to give you space, but I was really just scared.”

Clint frowned. "Of what?"
"Getting it wrong? Making it worse? Admitting things might have changed?" Coulson stood and came around to lean against the desk in front of Clint. His movements were still careful after the injury, his face still pale and tired. “But you thought it was because of what Loki did to you.”

“What I did,” Clint corrected. “And don’t say that Loki made me and it wasn’t really me, because it was. It was me. I was there for all of it. I remember everything.”

Coulson gave him a look of such unfathomable pity that Clint wanted to fold himself into a slip of shadow and vanish, unmissed, through a crack in the floor. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t,” Clint snapped. “I don’t want sympathy. I just want to pay for it.”

“But you don’t...” Coulson shook his head. “In this case, I think saving the world probably makes up for it.”

“Tell that to the bodies in the morgue.”

For a long, still moment, Coulson just stared at him, and Clint fought the impulse to squirm or run away or do anything. He was right on the edge of begging, when Coulson commanded, “Lock the door.”

Something clicked in Clint’s head. Some little clockwork piece that had been ticking wrong suddenly righted itself and put all his tangled gears back into place, and the tension coiled in his chest began to ease.

He locked the door, and Coulson beckoned, “Come here.” When he was close enough, Coulson pulled him in for a slow, soft kiss. “Do you remember when you first signed on with SHIELD?” he asked.

Clint pulled back, surprised. “What?”

“When you first got here,” Coulson said again. “Do you remember?”

Clint couldn’t help but smile. “I remember they stuck me with the sexiest junior agent they could find.”

Coulson turned them so that Clint was pressed back against the edge of the desk, and he bit and sucked an aching trail down the side of Clint’s throat before he asked, “Did you know you were a punishment assignment?”

“Yes, I’d heard that.” Clint closed his eyes and made himself breathe as Coulson pulled down the zipper on his vest and sucked hard at the base of his neck. “You got into a fight, or something.”

“I got into several fights.” Coulson pushed the vest off of Clint’s shoulders and slid his hands up beneath the undershirt. “Regularly.” He eased the shirt over Clint’s head and caught him in a kiss. “I had a quick temper and an uncompromising sense of justice.”

“Had?”

“Have,” he amended. “But I’m less of a self-righteous punk about it.” Clint snorted, and Coulson smiled. “One day, they just put this beautiful, dangerous, broken boy in front of me and said Take care of this. I nearly had a heart attack.”

Clint laughed. “Little more than you could handle?”
“Much more.” He bit down on the heavy muscle of Clint’s shoulder and trailed smaller bites down his arm. “I wasn’t prepared for you.” Gently, Coulson lifted Clint’s wrist, sucking along the lines left by his arm guard. “I realized, if I didn’t get it together, they might take you away.”

Clint watched Coulson’s mouth move across his hand, leaving red marks on the rise of his knuckles. “Nobody else woulda wanted me.”

“He’s an unparalleled marksman with stunning combat skills and record-breaking aptitude scores.” Coulson kissed one palm, then the other. “Given the chance, everyone would have wanted you.”

He began to trace the same path up Clint’s other arm and Clint groaned. “Guess you didn’t give them the chance,” he said, and Coulson looked up.

“No.” He raked his fingernails down Clint’s back, carving long lines of fire into his skin, and Clint gasped. “I never trusted anyone else to look out for you.” He slid his hand around and dragged a mirror set of scratches over Clint’s chest. “As long as you wanted to stay with me, no one else could touch you.”

Clint’s whole body felt raw and tender, like Coulson had stripped away some outer part of him and was marking up the soft thing underneath. Every inch of him became new under Coulson’s touch, restored and reclaimed from Loki’s corruption by the application of red lines and wet bruises.

“I can’t protect you from everything,” Coulson said softly, working open the front of Clint’s pants. “I can’t promise I’ll always be here.” He dug his fingernails into Clint’s hip, like he was carving out furrows for himself in the soft flesh. “But as long as you want to be, you’re mine.”

Still digging his fingers in, he looked Clint in the eye, and Clint swayed under the force of it. “Do you understand?” Coulson asked. “You belong to me. Not Loki, or SHIELD, or anyone else. To me.”

He was so certain, so sure, that Clint could feel it in his blood and bones. All his sins and successes, somehow, were bound up in the simple choice to be here, to be loved and wanted and owned.

Coulson slid his hands up Clint’s sides, his palms hot and bracing. “I am telling you that what happened to you is not your fault,” Coulson said, and Clint thought he meant more than just what Loki had done. “It’s not your responsibility to fix it or to pay for it. You don’t have to carry it anymore. You can let it go.”

Something in Clint’s chest broke. Something rusted shut cracked open, and he breathed in to clear away the ash of all the dead things inside. After years of punishment and penance and the promise of reward, the last thing left for him to take was simple, sweet permission.

“Yeah,” he breathed. There was open space inside him that he hadn’t known was there. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Coulson heaved a massive sigh and rested his head on Clint’s shoulder. “Good,” he said wearily. “Because that was all I had.”

Clint pressed a kiss into the side of his neck. “Thank you.”

“You don’t ever have to say thank you,” Coulson said, pulling Clint close. “All you have to do is ask.”

Clint relaxed into his arms, into the soft rasp of his suit and the flutter of his breath against Clint’s ear, into the solid warmth of him and the smell of cotton and skin, into him.
After a moment and a lifetime of quiet comfort, Clint said, “So are you gonna fuck me or what?”

Coulson pulled back and gave him a slow, calculating look. Clint replied with the biggest shit-eating grin he could manage, and Coulson rolled his eyes. “Fine. Take off your pants.”

Laughing, Clint kissed him. “Yes, *sir*.”

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