Summary

Set immediately after the Battle of Manhattan, Clint is empty, tired, and can't feel a thing except pins and needles. Everyone seems far away, and he doesn't really have the energy or desire to close the distance. Phil is being patient, but Clint doesn't know how to force himself to feel something. It's a mission in South America that changes everything.

Well, that and a HYDRA poison dart.

Notes

Thanks to lexxorz for beta goodness and cheer leading. Thanks to all the tumblr gang for their awesome writing advice, too, when writer's block hit full-force. This is the result. It's totally self-indulgent, but I hope some of you get some enjoyment out of it, too.

Clint was numb after the Battle of New York, and grateful for it, really. Post-battle adrenaline was high as they made their way to the shawarma shop, and then as the food hit his stomach for the first time in three days he crashed pretty hard in his seat. He was nauseous and didn’t eat much; his body was thrumming, tingling, and everyone seemed far away, their voices coming down a tunnel. He didn’t contribute to the intermittent conversation among the others, but no one complained.
No one but Nat knew him anyway.

After the impromptu team dinner, SHIELD showed up and “escorted” Clint back to the Helicarrier and forced him to go to medical and get looked over. Natasha glared her way into coming with him, and it was while they were waiting on a tech to come take Clint away for a brain scan that she told him about Phil.

She told him, he nodded, and then he leaned back on the bed they’d cleared for him and let the idea wash over him. Phil was dead. Phil, his best friend and his lover, was dead.

Numb was good.

Stacked alongside the other deaths Clint had caused in the last few days, Phil’s death seemed a fair price to pay, just about what Clint deserved. He wanted to consider it further, to try and react, to grieve, but the numbness in his limbs was echoed in his head, and even that, which should have been a punch to the gut, a knife across his throat, was just news for him to hear. Natasha eyed him carefully and stayed quiet.

He spent the first few hours in medical getting scans, blood tests, and forcing words through his gravelly throat as Sitwell and Fury both took him through a thorough debrief. He didn’t say anything about Phil and they didn’t offer anything until they were all done. Sitwell looked pointedly at Fury and then squeezed Clint’s shoulder with a quiet, “I’m sorry about Phil. He was the best guy I knew around here.” Clint just nodded, letting his eyes fall shut in their exhaustion. Fury waited until Clint looked up again – Sitwell had already left – and said, “Get some rest. Let medical try and see what the hell happened to you, and then we’ll talk about Phil.”

If Clint had been thinking at all, he might have wondered at the vagueness, but he didn’t. He just felt his body thrum with pins and needle numbness and wondered if he’d ever feel settled again.

Natasha stayed with him after she got herself cleaned up and stitched up, but they didn’t talk much. He kept his eyes closed most of the time, the colors all around him seeming wrong, the plane of his vision seeming a little bit off-kilter. Sleep wouldn’t come, though, and about five hours later his doctor insisted on a sedative. Natasha agreed, and they both tried to bully Clint into taking it.

He refused. Loudly.

“I can’t fucking feel anything, Nat. Don’t make me do this,” he pleaded. He didn’t want to lose control again, to let someone else do something to his body. He was tired, sure, but sleep would come eventually.

“You haven’t slept in three days. Your body is going to shut down. I need you to do this,” she said, her voice raised and pain and anger flashing in her eyes.

He sighed. She wasn’t having an easy time, either, he knew. She was tired and sore and grieving for Phil and the agents Clint killed, too. But. “No,” he said through gritted teeth. “I can’t. Don’t you get it?” he asked. “Don’t you see he took my body away from me for three days, Nat. He took it. I can’t give it away again. I can’t.”

“But you’re going to get sick,” she replied, reaching out and running her hand through his sweaty hair, brushing his cheek. “I—” she broke off, looking away, and didn’t finish.

“A little more time, okay?” he offered, taking her hand from his face and holding it tightly. “Let me try and calm down on my own, just for a while.”

She nodded, moved to the doorway and dimmed the lights, and left, coming back a few minutes later
with a cup of hot tea for both of them. He managed to drink it all, letting the heat burn his throat, feeling the numbness fade a little. He closed his eyes again as Natasha climbed into his bed with him, curling into his side and absentely running her fingers over his stomach. When he finally fell into sleep, he dreamed of Phil.

When he woke and saw Phil sitting in a chair near the bed, he figured he was still dreaming, but Natasha’s gasp when she lifted her head from his chest told him he wasn’t. Phil stood right away, moving quickly to the bed and reaching out for her hand, twining his fingers through hers and looking at them both with affection and worry.

“Magic and luck,” he said softly, meeting Clint’s gaze, and Clint felt him searching, checking, and assuring himself that Clint was here, back, safe. “I don’t know what happened, other than magic and luck. I’m tired and sore, but otherwise fine, thanks to Thor’s magic. I’m pretty fuzzy on the details, but I came as soon as I could.”

“How long have we been out?” Natasha asked, letting go of Phil’s hand and climbing out of the bed.

Phil smiled at them, sitting down next to Clint and running his calloused hand up and down Clint’s arm. It felt like his arm was asleep and Phil was poking at it, but he stayed quiet. “Twelve hours, give or take. The rest of your team knows what happened and everyone’s resting, trying to regroup.”

Clint heard the word team and was startled. He didn’t have a team, hadn’t been asked to join the Avengers Initiative. He had just gone where he needed to when Rogers asked him yesterday, and Phil seemed to read his mind.

“You’ve always been on the roster,” he said gently. “We just hadn’t had a chance to brief you on it.”

Chances were something that seemed missed a lot with Phil and Clint. It had taken them years to take the chance on a relationship, something they finally did in New Mexico, during the whole debacle with Thor. Clint could see why Phil had held off talking to him about the Initiative.

Natasha looked at Clint with a smile on her face, and Clint shrugged. The thing was, he’d never had a team before, and he wasn’t sure he wanted one now. Phil was back, alive, Loki would be sent back to Asgard soon to receive whatever punishment gods doled out to each other, Natasha was safe, and Clint was still numb. Figuring in a team seemed like a lot of effort.

Natasha seemed to know what he was thinking because she moved to his bed, put a hand on Phil’s shoulder affectionately, and said, “It’s a good thing, Clint. It’s a good group.”

He just shrugged, ignored Phil’s worried gaze, and coldly said, “We’ll see.”

Medical kept him for two days. He was pissed at the end of one, but they insisted that he had been dehydrated and in desperate need of electrolytes and nutrition, and oh yeah, they wanted to do a schedule of scans to make sure he didn’t suffer any residual effects of his ‘imprisonment.’ Clint figured they really wanted to make sure they didn’t suffer any of said residual effects, so he kept his mouth shut, let Phil watch out for him when he was around, and let him convince medical to let Clint leave long enough to see Loki off – ‘closure’ was the word Phil threw at them, and they bought it, but he was back in the bed hooked up to IVs an hour after the gods disappeared.

He didn’t care.

He let them run their tests, let Phil hover, let Natasha watch him warily from the doorway and let Fury come back for multiple debrief sessions to see if Clint’s story changed at all.

It didn’t.
Yes, he remembered everything. No, he didn’t struggle. Yes, he used contacts from his days before SHIELD to recruit the mercenary army. Yes, he’d tell them the contacts’ names. No, he didn’t struggle. Yes, he remembered everything. No, he didn’t struggle. Yes, he remembered everything. Numb.

Phil listened to the debriefs, brought Clint a sandwich from his favorite deli, asked his opinion on a few things dealing with future security protocols surrounding incidents like this, and pulled away when Clint didn’t return any of his affections. There wasn’t anything Clint could do about it, though. He didn’t know what he wanted, didn’t feel enough to make a proper judgment about it, but he didn’t want to throw Phil out entirely. He welcomed the company and was grateful for Phil’s attempts to keep him busy around the IV and medical tests.

He just felt empty, cold, tingly, and didn’t figure anyone would understand. Even alive, Phil might still be the price Clint paid for his part in the whole ‘Loki incident’.

Medical released him and he mumbled his thanks to Phil and asked for a little space. Phil nodded and said he’d check on Clint the next day, and that’s how things went from there. A week later, two weeks later, a month, and Clint was finally released back into the rotation and cleared by medical. Psych took a bit of convincing, but they admitted that they were just concerned with Clint’s detachment from everything, conceding his clearance on the condition that he still attend weekly sessions. He shrugged and agreed.

Everything still seemed distant, cold, and even though he did manage to lose the tingly numbness, he still didn’t feel anything. He didn’t even get angry at Stark for being Stark, which was a pretty good sign he was off.

Professional. He was strictly professional, strictly empty, and Phil only confronted him once.

“I want to help you,” Phil said, sitting across from him at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee in his hand. It was almost time for him to head back to SHIELD for the day since things were quiet with the Avengers.

Clint just shrugged and sipped his own coffee. He didn’t know what could possibly help.

“I don’t understand,” he added. “You won’t talk to me. You won’t let me – you aren’t interested in me touching you. Being with you.” He paused, but Clint still didn’t know what to say. “You aren’t interested in anything,” he finished with a frustrated sigh.

“I’m sorry,” Clint offered. It was really all he had. He was. He loved Phil before. He supposed he still loved him, but everyone and everything still felt far away, unreachable, numb, including Phil.

“I just – I just can’t do anything, and it’s frustrating,” Phil said, shoving his coffee away.

“You don’t have to wait for me,” Clint said, and it was true. His body, his heart, still felt the same way it did in the shawarma shop after the fight, and there was nothing niggling at Clint to indicate it would change anytime soon. “I still love you,” he added. “I just don’t know what to do.”

Phil frowned. “What to do? If you love me, why can’t we be with each other, help each other?”

And Clint knew he should feel guilty for that. Phil still needed help. He wasn’t sleeping well, he was still very careful to keep everyone in front of him all the time, was even jumpy sometimes, which was completely unlike him. Clint wished he had any energy or desire to help him, but he just didn’t. And he didn’t feel guilty, which was another sign something was off. Psych was trying to help him connect again, but it wasn’t working. And if it wasn’t working with Phil, well, it wouldn’t work with
anyone, probably.

“I don’t know, Phil. I’m sorry, but I don’t know. Nothing feels right, nothing feels much of anything, really, and you deserve more than that.” He stood from the table, dumping his coffee in the sink. “Everyone does, but I can’t give it right now. I don’t know why.”

And they left it at that. Clint left the kitchen and went to the gym, working out and then sparring with Natasha until he could hardly breathe. She didn’t talk to him much, but she did watch him warily whenever they were together. She clearly didn’t know what to do for him, either, so she was just around when he wanted to spar or run, and that was all.

Clint didn’t know what it would take to jar him back to himself, and after three months, he didn’t know if anything would. Phil stopped trying to be with him, although the few things of Clint’s that had migrated to Phil’s apartment before the incident stayed there. They just worked, talked together when it was necessary, and Phil just waited. Or moved on. Clint really wasn’t sure which.

And then there was the poison.

The fight was a long one, lasting more than two hours, and in the jungle south of Lima, Peru it became an exercise in endurance and fighting through sweat and dehydration. Clint had to scramble from perch to perch in the last two hours, climbing and then dropping at least six times already. His clothes were soaked through from sweat and humidity, and he’d had to give up his bow an hour ago and switch to the rifle in order to pick off the weird cockroach-looking things the nearby HYDRA research lab sent out after them.

They hadn’t known about those. The team had been sent in to take down the lab, but they hadn’t even breached the perimeter yet. They were able to keep anyone from evacuating, they thought, but that was amidst fighting these fucking, oversized insect things. Clint hated cockroaches, having fought against the normal-sized ones throughout most of his childhood, and this was not helping his borderline phobia.

He lined up another shot through the canopy as Cap shouted down the line, “Only a few more, so Widow and Iron Man come with me to get the perimeter; Hawkeye, can you find a spot to watch our backs while Hulk takes care of the rest of the bugs?”

Clint made the shot, took out one more of the insects and then gave an affirmation while scrambling down the tree he was in to get closer to the perimeter fence. He found a good tree with sight lines to the front entrance and the rear fence line, and let Cap know. What they all realized pretty quickly was that this base was counting on the insects to defend them, and now that they were gone, Cap and the others were able to neutralize the lab pretty quickly and without a lot of effort. Another hour and the charges were laid, the research that they needed to take with them was confiscated, and any hazardous stuff was boxed up and ready to be lugged back to the jet.

They were all tired and sore and dehydrated, but they were safe.

“Fucking insects,” Clint mumbled as he and Natasha led the way back through the jungle to the jet. They stopped about a half a mile from the jet to pick up Bruce, who’d transformed back and was waiting on the path for them wearing the pants and shirt they’d stowed nearby, and Phil, who’d set up his listening post nearby, and then they headed on back to the plane.

What they weren’t expecting was the ambush from a few HYDRA agents who had apparently escaped the compound undetected. Clint figured it out when a dart pierced his left bicep as he
stepped into the clearing. He’d done a sweep just in case, but the men were using some new form of camouflage blanket-thing and he’d clearly missed them. They weren’t prepared for Clint and Natasha, though, as he ignored the fiery pulse in his arm and raised his bow; by the time he loosed two arrows into two agents, Natasha had shot the other two. He and Natasha were cautious, though, and were casing the area to make sure there weren’t any other agents sneaking around the edge of the clearing when the jet exploded.

The shock blew Clint backward a few steps, and he lost his footing as he watched the others duck through the wave of heat. He found Phil and Bruce first, hoping the Other Guy didn’t show again, and he was grateful to see Bruce crouched down next to Tony, safe and still him, and when he saw Phil a few feet away and safe, he felt a warmth he hadn’t felt since before.

He filed that away for later.

Tony was pushing the release to his suit, though, with a worried look on his face, and Steve was ducking at the edge of the woods. Clint’s ears were ringing, and the dart still stuck in his arm suddenly felt white-hot. He yanked it out and stared as he tried to figure out what it had done.

“Clint?” Natasha said as she approached him carefully, and he looked up and shrugged.

“It’s a dart. They shot me with a dart,” he said, and stared at the thing again.

“Did they tranq you?” she asked, kneeling down next to him.

He shook his head. “No, I don’t feel woozy or anything.” Looking at his arm, he added, “My arm hurts like a sonofabitch, though.”

She took the dart from his hand and frowned as the others, minus Tony, came up to see what was going on.

“What happened?” asked Bruce, kneeling next to Natasha.

Clint looked up, holding his arm. “You mean besides the jet exploding?” He was worried about the dart, but the charred jet might end up being a bigger problem.

Steve shook his head as he stood over Clint. “Looks like we’re stuck for a bit, but what happened to your arm?”

“Dart,” he answered, looking down again. His skin was swelling and red, and the pain was getting worse.

Steve turned to Tony. “Call SHIELD, tell them we need a transport as soon as possible. We have the research and Clint’s going to need a doctor.”

“Yeah, um,” Tony said, yanking his helmet off after using the manual release in frustration, “I’m offline at the moment. Incommunicado.”

Natasha snapped her head up, “What?”

“The suit’s offline! I don’t have any idea why, but it’s like it got hit with an EMP or something.” Tony said, practically shouting. He undid the other manual releases to get the rest of the way out of the suit, shoved the armor to the ground in a heap and sat down next to it with his shoulders slumped. “I’ll work on it,” he mumbled, pulling the helmet into his lap.

Natasha turned to Phil, who was standing over his own set of equipment that had been strewn
around by the blast. “No go. The radio’s shot,” he said, grimly, looking back at Clint.

“The nearest safe house is about two miles to the east,” Clint said through gritted teeth. He always memorized that before they left. “This one is basic shelter, though, doesn’t have much more than a first aid kit and a food pantry, but that might come in handy if SHIELD’s gonna be a while.”

Bruce leaned forward and ran his hand down Clint’s good arm, and Clint flinched a little. “Hey, look at me, Clint,” he said gently. Clint met his gaze and tried to grin through the searing pain in his arm. “Is there anything besides the pain?” Bruce asked.

“No, but shit. Arm feels like it might fall off.” He felt his breath get shallow, trying to breathe through it.

“We need to get to shelter,” Phil said, his voice hard. Clint looked up at him and saw worry and determination in his eyes. “We need the research safe and we need to be somewhere with a better first aid kit if Clint gets worse.”

Clint nodded and reached his good arm out to Phil, who grabbed it and pulled him up.

“I’ve got your bow,” Natasha said, and Clint nodded and cradled his bad arm in his good one.

After Tony packed the armor back in his case, they set off for the safe house. Clint felt knives lance through his arm every time he stepped too hard, and with the vine and root-covered jungle floor he was sweating and shaky within a mile. Phil stayed at his elbow, casting sidelong glances every few feet. When Clint finally stumbled as he stepped and it felt like someone was flaying his arm, Phil caught him and held him up.

“Hey, I’ve got you,” Phil said, gripping Clint’s good elbow and hauling Clint back up. “What happened?”

Clint shook his head and said the first thing that came to mind. “I think my arm’s actually gonna fall off.”

Phil reached into his pack as the others stopped to see what was going on, and he pulled out a water bottle. “Drink. We’ll be to the safe house soon.”

Clint obeyed, and the water felt good on his throat, but it tasted funny going down. He gagged after a moment, leaning into Phil for support. “Tastes like garbage,” he mumbled, wiping his mouth.

Phil just took the bottle back, packed it away, and pulled Clint to get him walking again. “Come on,” he said to everyone. “We need to get there quickly.”

Clint lost track of the others as he walked, his focus narrowing to his feet and Phil’s hand on his good arm and the waves of fire washing down his injured arm with each step. He didn’t realize they’d arrived until Phil pulled, stopping Clint from running into the door. He waited while Natasha opened it, and then he stumbled inside, collapsing on the threadbare couch in the open living room area just inside the door. He threw his head back and pulled his arm closer to his body. A knife-pain lanced across his shoulder and up into his collarbone and he groaned, “What the hell.”

His team rustled around him, Tony cracking open his armor case to work on the radio and power systems, Natasha and Steve commiserating about setting up a perimeter watch, and Bruce rummaging through the two first aid kits – the field kit Phil had and the kit stored here at the house – and Phil in the kitchen going through the cabinets to get an idea of what they had to work with. Bruce appeared at Clint’s side after a few minutes with a syringe.
“Clint,” he said, and Clint looked over at him. “I have a painkiller, but we’re dealing with an unknown with that poison, so I don’t really want to chance a bad interaction unless we have to, okay? Can you stick it out for a while longer?”

Clint took a sharp breath and nodded. “Yeah, I can.”

“We need to make sure you stay hydrated, okay?” Bruce added, and he looked over at Phil. “Wouldn’t be any Gatorade or something over there, would there?”

Phil rummaged a bit and said, “Yes,” before coming over and unscrewing the cap and handing it to Clint.

Clint’s hands were shaking, though, and before he knew it, he had spilled it. Phil cursed and took it gently from Clint and offered it to him carefully. Clint drank hesitantly, a few sips only.

“You need some more,” Bruce said quietly.

“Tastes awful,” he said.

“You don’t like it on a good day,” Phil said, brushing his good arm affectionately.

“True,” Clint said, and consented to drink a little more before the pain washed over him again. This time it ran up his arm, over his collarbone, and down his chest, making him curl over himself with a groan. This time, it lasted. He swallowed his groan as quick as he could, but he wrapped his good arm around the back of his head and clenched into a ball on the couch, the pain coursing through his veins.

Phil slid to the floor in front of the couch and put his hands on Clint’s shoulders, gripping tight, trying to push Clint back. “Shit. Bruce, help me lay him down,” Phil said, his voice only betraying a hint of panic.

Once they got him onto the couch and prone, the pain suddenly went away. It was like it drained away through his fingertips, and his ragged breath finally settled, and he was able to look at Phil clearly. “Whoa,” he said, sagging into the couch. “That’s weird.”

“What,” Bruce asked, leaning over him.

“Pain just left. Gone. Completely,” he said, and Bruce looked worried, and glanced over at Phil.

“I don’t like that, actually,” Bruce said. “The chemical reaction’s changing – that could be good, but it could be bad, too.”

“Pessimist,” Clint mumbled, suddenly exhausted and closing his eyes.

“Clint,” Phil said.

But Clint couldn’t answer, his body getting heavy, leaden, and he slipped into sleep.

Later, he felt himself wake slowly, hearing voices around him but he was unable to drag himself completely awake.

“We need that radio,” Phil said angrily.

“We need to get him to a hospital, SHIELD or no,” Bruce said.
“What’s his condition?” Natasha asked calmly.

“Worrisome,” Phil answered. “He was in intense pain and then it just vanished and he passed out.”

“His pulse is steady most of the time, but I’ve noticed a few times where it lags. A lot,” Bruce said.

There was a pause, and Tony said, “Give me another fifteen minutes guys. If I can power the suit then I can fly him back.”

“What about SHIELD?” Steve said. “Wouldn’t they expect us to check in?”

Phil sighed. “Yes, but it takes two missed check-ins to scramble a rescue. We missed one an hour ago but we’re not due another for four more hours.”

Clint struggled, and finally convinced his eyes to open and his throat to work. “Feels funny, guys,” he said weakly, and Phil was at his side in an instant.

“What?” Bruce asked, intense.

He looked at Bruce and then at Phil and he took a deep breath. “I’m dizzy – my stomach feels like I’ve been riding rollercoasters all afternoon.” He paused and added, “I’d rather be riding rollercoasters. Hey, Tony, can you build a rollercoaster inside the Tower? I’ve heard of indoor coasters and, man, that would be awesome.” He swallowed and noticed everyone looking at him funny. “What? I love rollercoasters. There was this one time I got to go to Six Flags in Texas and holy shit do they have some good ones.” He wondered if he was slurring his speech the way everyone was staring, when he suddenly realized maybe rollercoasters weren’t what they were talking about before.

He tried to sit up, but the world spun completely, and he blanched, feeling nausea rake through his stomach. Phil turned him on his side, which he was grateful for because he proceeded to throw up Gatorade, making a red mess and leaving him shaky and cold. He laid back down as Natasha moved to the kitchen for some towels and he looked at Phil. “What’s going on, Phil?” he asked, because he didn’t really know where they were or why everyone seemed to be standing around just staring at him.

“No,” Bruce answered with a shrug. “I’m glad you’re not in pain, though.”

Clint closed his eyes and felt a hand on his forehead.

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“Shit,” he heard Tony mutter, and Natasha was suddenly at Clint’s side, cleaning up his mess, looking worriedly at Phil.

“Clint, you were shot with a dart and are clearly suffering memory loss from that. We’re stuck here at the safe house and can’t contact SHIELD.”

Clint closed his eyes and felt a hand on his forehead.

“How are you feeling?” Bruce asked, looking at him intently.

“Shaky, doc,” Clint answered. “Any ideas?”

“No,” Bruce answered with a shrug. “I’m glad you’re not in pain, though.”
He supposed Bruce was right about that. “Yeah. Stomach feels pretty fuckin’ precarious, though.”

“Okay. Try to rest.”

Clint did, closing his eyes as Natasha came back and ran her fingers through his hair and down his check in soothing motions. He swallowed the nausea and focused on her touch. It felt good, and Clint realized he hadn’t let her touch him since Loki. He sighed and leaned into her hands, falling asleep a few minutes later.

When he woke next the room around him was quiet, and it wasn’t his room. He saw Phil and Bruce, so he knew he was probably safe, but his stomach hurt, he had the chills, and he didn’t know where he was. He felt panic start to creep in.

Phil was sitting on the floor with his hand on Clint’s chest, which was odd, and he stirred when Clint felt his heart start to race. Phil was on his knees next to him right away, and Bruce stood from where he’d been sitting in an armchair nearby reading some sort of report. He had files strewn on the floor around him, too. Natasha, Steve, and Tony weren’t around, and neither was Thor, and Clint really didn’t recognize the room.

“Clint?” Phil said, catching his eye with unhidden worry. “How do you feel?”

Clint looked at Phil before he answered. Phil was wearing a tac suit instead of his office suit, his hair was disheveled, and he looked exhausted. Clint looked over at Bruce and realized he was wearing the stuff he usually wore post-Hulk, and his eyes were filled with worry. He looked back at Phil and answered, “I feel sick, and where the hell are we?”

Bruce and Phil exchanged a glance. “What do you remember, Clint?” Bruce asked.

Clint closed his eyes and thought for a minute. “Nothing? I mean, I was back at headquarters before.” He felt so wasted, sick and shaky and cold. “Is there another blanket?” he asked. Bruce nodded and moved to the other room to find one.

“Clint,” Phil said, his own voice shaky. “You’ve been dosed with some sort of poison and it’s affecting your memory. Tony’s suit got fried in the battle so he can’t use it yet, and we’re stuck here until we can get a transport.”

“Where are we, Phil?” Clint asked, burrowing into the blanket he already had and shivering.

“South America,” Phil answered, and he moved closer, reaching out hesitantly toward Clint’s face. Clint felt so tired, so wiped, and suddenly the thought of Phil helping him through felt good, right. He leaned into Phil’s touch and felt warmth spread through his chest as Phil stroked his hair, his cheek, his arm.

Clint suddenly wondered. “Did I figure it out?” he asked quietly, not sure he wanted the answer.

Phil went still. “What?”

“Did I figure out how to let you back in?” Clint answered, wondering how much time he’d lost, if it’d been enough for him to loosen, to become less numb, to figure out how to be with the others again, with Phil again.

Phil was quiet for a minute and then answered, “No. Not yet.”

Clint felt disappointment sink into his stomach. “Oh. I’m sorry,” he said, and he tried to just focus on Phil’s hands and how good they felt. The tingling that had been plaguing him since Loki was gone,
so he was surprised by Phil’s answer. “I’ve been trying to figure it out,” he whispered, hoping at least he could give Phil that.

“I know,” Phil replied, starting to stroke Clint again. “Maybe once this is over we can try to figure it out together. Maybe I shouldn’t have backed off.” His voice was filled with tenderness, reminding Clint of a few times in medical after missions over the years, when Phil’s handler façade would crack for just a little while, until Clint was out of the woods.

“No,” Clint said, finding Phil’s eyes with his own. “You were totally right in that. I’ve been an asshole.” He paused. “I haven’t been able to feel anything, Phil, but this – you feel really good right now.”

Phil nodded and smiled as Bruce came back out with a blanket. “Well, that’s a start,” he said, continuing to sooth Clint with his hands. Clint struggled with the blanket for a minute and then Phil tucked it around him.

“He should drink something else,” Bruce said.

“God, Bruce,” Clint said through chattering teeth. “I’m too fucking cold to drink anything.”

“Just wait,” Phil said, running his hands over the blanket and Clint’s arms. “Let’s see if we can get him warmed up.”

Natasha came in from a sweep of the perimeter and sat down on the table next to the couch, her knees brushing Phil’s shoulder. “What’s going on?”

Phil gave her an update and Clint watched her squint and then frown. “It’s incremental,” she said. “What?” Bruce asked, pausing from where he was rummaging through another closet.

“The memory loss. It’s incremental. He’s forgetting a little more each time he sleeps,” she answered, and Clint considered it.

Something occurred to him and he gave a strangled laugh. “Can I sleep long enough to forget Loki?” he said, his voice shaking along with his body.

“Clint,” Phil said darkly, but he didn’t say anything else.

“Well, I’d like to fucking forget him,” Clint went on, unable to stop himself. He had a fleeting thought that if he held anything in he might literally explode right now, the way his body was acting. “Forget him, forget how far away every single fucking one of you is right now, the way he took me and left me at the other end of a tunnel so I can’t get to you guys. I’m trying to get to you, but I can’t and I fucking hate him,” he ended with a groan. He tried to curl into a ball to keep warm, but Phil was there, rubbing him down like a masseuse. “Fuck, Phil,” he growled, shivering frantically.

“Shhh,” Phil said, rubbing Clint’s arms and looking over at Bruce. “We’ll figure this out, we’ll get you back to us, okay? We’re all waiting for you, you know,” he said with a grin.

Bruce moved to the chair and picked up a file, looking at Clint. Clint tried to focus on him as he started to talk. “I’ve been reading their research and it looks like they gave you a trial drug – they describe it pretty thoroughly here.”

“Can you figure out an antidote?” Natasha asked as she reached down and went to work trying to warm Clint’s legs.
Bruce shrugged. “Maybe? I see what they’re trying to do, but they wanted quick amnesia results, so whatever’s happening to Clint isn’t what they were hoping for.” He headed toward the door. “I’m going to run an idea past Tony and see how he’s coming on the suit.”

Clint listened to Bruce, but he was more focused on the warmth of Phil and Natasha’s hands, and when Bruce left the house to go find Tony, Clint closed his eyes again.

“Clint, no,” Phil said, grabbing Clint’s face, and oh, god, his hands felt so good. Clint opened his eyes again.

“If you’re losing more each time you pass out, we want to keep you awake,” Natasha explained.

Clint really didn’t like her logic. “I-I’m not k-k-kidding, Nat. I’m okay f-f-forgetting Loki.”

Phil rubbed Clint’s cheek and glared at him. “You don’t need to forget, Clint. You need to work through it and realize that you’re not really any different now. You’re the same guy we loved before. You can be you again.”

Clint laughed and wrapped his arms around himself. “Yeah? You know that? Is that what you know?” He ducked his head to his chest.

Phil moved to Clint’s neck and massaged him there. “Yes, Clint. I know this. You’re making it clear right now. You understand what the problem is, which means we can fix it. You need to let us in, tell us what you see and feel.”

Clint groaned again, and the shaking felt worse and worse, like he was being rattled from his core. “I feel like shit, Phil. That’s how I feel, god damn it.” He’d never felt this cold before, even when he went through the ice during an op in Alaska a few years ago. He couldn’t stop his teeth from chattering anymore, and he just resigned himself to shaking into the couch, and as Phil called out his name, he tipped back into darkness.

He woke slowly, which was a bad sign and probably meant he was in medical again. Soon, he heard the monitors beeping, and he tried to assess himself. He was cold, his stomach felt tight and cramped, and he felt limp, weak, like he was going to sink right through the mattress he was laying on. He pushed his eyes open and a spike of warmth rushed through his limbs as he saw Phil sitting right next to the bed with his head resting on Clint’s side.

The warmth surprised Clint. No matter what happened to land him here, the last time he saw Phil he hadn’t felt anything at all. He reached down and laid his hand on Phil’s shoulder, feeling his muscles under his shirt, watching with a smile as Phil woke up, raised his head, and grasped Clint’s hand worriedly.

“Hey,” Clint said, his voice hoarse.

“Clint,” Phil said, sitting up and reaching for the call button.


Phil sat back in his chair and gave Clint a measured look. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

Clint thought for a moment, pulling the blanket up to his shoulders. “I had a psych appointment yesterday that sucked. I spent some time on the range this morning, probably tried to avoid talking to you, went for a run, and hoped for an op to come through?” He paused. “Did an op come through?”

Phil smiled. “Sort of. You remember Loki, then?”
Clint shivered and felt the warmth rush out of him. “What the fuck, Phil? Of course I remember – what the hell happened to me?”

Phil explained that it had been months since Loki and that they’d been on an op in South America when he’d been poisoned. Tony had flown him back when things got really bad, and Bruce and the SHIELD scientists figured out an antidote, but they weren’t sure what Clint would remember.

Phil pushed the call button and a doctor came in. Phil stepped back so she could do some tests, and Natasha showed up a while later, just watching and leaning into Phil’s shoulder.

The doctor told Clint that she wanted to keep him until his strength improved and the cold feeling went away, and she left him with a bowl of soup and some crackers and tea. Phil sat down on the edge of the bed and Natasha leaned against the wall nearby. Clint ate the soup slowly and considered how he felt. He was grateful they were here, and that was new. He hadn’t been glad about anything lately, and it felt good.

“I’m glad you guys are here,” he said without looking up. They didn’t answer, but Phil reached out and put his hand on Clint’s leg. He finished the soup in silence and then leaned back and looked at them. They were watching him carefully, like they wanted something but were afraid to ask. “I’ve been a dick lately and I know that,” he said, hoping an apology would do. “I don’t know why, and I can’t help it, but I’m sorry.”

Phil shrugged and smiled. “We’ve been willing to wait, and maybe we should’ve pushed you a little more to tell us what was going on.”

“I don’t know,” Clint said, closing his eyes. “Everyone has seemed so far away. Not now, though,” he said, looking up at Natasha. “Something changed.”

“Good,” she said, and leaned over and kissed his forehead. “Get some rest. I have to go spar with Steve and then try to explain to Thor what happened while he was gone.”

He watched her leave and then looked at Phil. The warmth came back and he let it pull his mouth into a smile. He picked up Phil’s hand. “I don’t have much sense of time right now, but if I’ve been a jerk for a while, I really am sorry. I’m am glad you’re here, though, and that’s more than I’ve felt since Nat kicked my head.”

“We’ll take it slow, Clint,” Phil answered, rubbing small circles on the back of his hand. “If you feel like you need to get away sometimes, that’s okay. Just try and come back to me.”

Clint nodded and pulled on Phil’s arm so that he had to climb into the bed. They leaned against each other carefully. Clint felt Phil’s body against his and it felt like a radiator to his cold skin, and he sighed. “Just stay close for a while?” he asked sleepily.

“As long as you want,” Phil whispered, and Clint let his eyes slide shut. He felt Phil pull him close, tight, safe, and he didn’t feel far away at all. He felt like close against Phil’s side was right where he was supposed to be.