Summary

SHIELD hires for IQ, combat readiness, espionage skills, scientific expertise and intellectual ability.

Emotional intelligence doesn't necessarily enter into the equation.

Or, Five Times Clint Barton and Phil Coulson Were Locked In Together, and One Time They Weren't.

Notes

This is my ridiculously-late AO3 Auction Fic, written for the graciously patient Selenay. She requested Clint/Coulson, with a subversion of the locked-in trope.

Here's what I came up with.

With thanks, as always, to my wonderful beta readers and sounding boards, Rex Luscus, IshyMaria, Jep and gth694e.

See the end of the work for more notes

Agent Phil Coulson had long since perfected the art of reading while walking and was always surprised that this amazed people. Did nobody else have peripheral vision? It really wasn't that
hard and was a very efficient use of time. He barely kept up with the work he had to do as it was, and if this kept people from bothering him unnecessarily, so much the better.

This particular evening, he had just left an evaluation session when the conversation from a pair of probationary agents in the hallway caught his attention.

“What do you mean, Medical is sending us to Security!?” asked Caston.

“That's just what they said! Oh God, if we don't find the Quinjet keys soon, she's going to kill us!” answered Sanders.

Coulson sighed, looked up and halted. “Sanders! Caston!” he said and turned to face them.

The two probies stopped in their tracks. Their eyes went to his badge and then went wide when they realized who he was.

Oh great, what are they telling the recruits about me now?

“Y-Yes, sir?” said Agent Caston nervously.

“You're being pranked. Quinjets don't have keys. And tell Agent May that Agent Coulson said to come up with a new joke.”

“Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!” they said, and scurried back to the upper deck, swearing as soon as they thought they were out of earshot.

Coulson rolled his eyes and continued walking. Fresh Meat Week was always a trial.

SHIELD had, since its inception, a long and storied history of hazing the neophytes and, to be honest, within strictly-established and iron-clad limits, it was tacitly encouraged. SHIELD didn't advertise for recruits: any potential newcomer had to be invited to apply and was then put through a rigorous assessment period to see if (and where) he or she would fit. Only then were they permitted to enter training, and since SHIELD only recruited the best of the best, the trainees tended to have, more often than not, inappropriate attitudes for people newly placed at the bottom of such a terrifying totem pole. Fresh Meat Week was designed to take the more arrogant down a few pegs until it really got through to them that they were operating on a whole new level.

Mind you, it wasn't always so easy. A prankster could send a wide-eyed civilian newbie to fetch a hundred feet of Helicarrier mooring cable, Nick Fury's spare eyepatch, or gamma-radiation-rated sunscreen, but the recruits from the Armed Forces were more than used to games such as these. For them, the trick there was to find the most outlandish question they could possibly ask that was still a legitimate subject. One former Marine had assumed Maria Hill was kidding when the she asked him to recite the Doppelganger Protocols and had replied sarcastically. The dressing-down she'd given the hapless ex-sergeant was the stuff of legend.

It really wasn't that often you saw a grown Marine cry.

Generally, everyone settled down within a month at most, and life could return to normal.

Coulson understood the thinking behind Fresh Meat Week, but he was usually pretty glad when all the chaos was over. Not that it was all bad: he really enjoyed getting a look at the incoming recruits (with first crack at the better ones – a perk of being on the evaluation committee), but it was exhausting. He was looking forward to getting back into his regular black suits and out of his tac gear.

He headed back to his quarters – they'd just broken for dinner, and he wanted to change before
eating. The hallway to the bunks was deserted (not unusual for this time of day), but he noticed that one of the inner doors on one of the airlocks was open. As this rather defeated the purpose of an airlock, he stepped closer to investigate before calling out Maintenance.

He blamed his exhaustion for the fact that he didn't notice the tripwire until it pressed against his calf. He looked up.

“Oh shit. Look out!”

Coulson reacted on instinct as a figure tackled him from the shadows, pushing him out of the way of the brightly-colored blast in the hallway. Coulson rolled his assailant into the airlock. The door slammed shut, locking them in. Coulson dragged the uncooperative form to his feet, pulled his knife from his boot-sheath and held the blade to his assailant's throat. Only then did he get a glimpse of the man's face.

“Oh, so this looks bad,” said Junior Agent Clint Barton sheepishly.

Junior Agent Clint Barton. Why was he not surprised.

“Explain.”

“Newbie prank, sir.”

Of course it was. Some agents took to Fresh Meat Week more... enthusiastically than others. “Your intended target?”

“Probationary Agent Satterleigh, sir. He was right behind you coming out of the gym. The door opened too soon.”

He'd ask why, but the answer was obvious. Satterleigh had been getting on everyone's nerves. Even Fury was taking notice, and that was generally not a positive thing. “Dare I ask what the plan was?”

“Get him with the paintbomb, or trap him in here if he managed to dodge.”

Because the airlock was the only thing in this hallway to pass for cover. Right. “So if I were to hit the switch to open the door, I would find it disabled.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And the comm?”

“Also disabled, sir.”

So no call for an override. Right. “And how long were you planning on leaving Agent Satterleigh in here?”

“Just until I'd gotten some footage of him panicking, sir. Or covered in purple paint.”

“You know, if you put half this much effort into your after-action reports, you wouldn't have nearly so many notes in your file.”

The expression on his face clearly indicated that Barton had a smart remark at the ready but was all-too-aware that right now he was entirely dependent on Coulson's goodwill. “Very true, sir.”

Coulson suppressed a sigh and ignored the headache forming between his temples. He pulled his stopwatch from his pocket.
“You've got two minutes to get us out of here, or I'm busting you back to probie.”

“Seriously?” Barton's voice cracked.

Coulson just gave him a blank look. The click of the stopwatch sounded loudly in the enclosed space.

“Back to probie, right, got it,” said Barton. He popped off the service panel and immediately set to work.

It took him one minute and forty-seven seconds. Coulson was rather impressed. The paperwork hadn't gone through yet, but he'd arranged to be assigned as Barton's Supervising Officer on the strength of the man's marksmanship scores alone, and every aptitude test since had made the man more of an interesting prospect. Barton was brilliant, with the potential to be a great agent (lousy taste in practical jokes notwithstanding), but more than that he was a good man. Coulson was really looking forward to working with him.

Nevertheless, he still assigned Barton to a maintenance team for two weeks to make up for the damage.

And if, occasionally in the wee hours of the morning, home in his bed, Phil's mind drifted to some distinctly unprofessional thoughts about how Clint Barton's magnificent arms had felt around his shoulders, those thoughts were quickly and easily suppressed. And nobody's business but his own.

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Clint Barton had made a lot of mistakes in the course of his life but joining SHIELD wasn't one of them.

Admittedly, he didn't have a lot of other options at the time. Nick Fury had come to him in the jail cell and told him he could make that very long list of very serious charges go away permanently if he'd sign the dotted line. It was an offer he couldn't really refuse.

Frankly, he expected it to be the Army all over again, but it wasn't. SHIELD specialized in people with highly specialized skills and was collectively smart enough to know not to interfere with those skills any more than they absolutely had to. He'd told the evaluation team that he shot better with a bow than a gun at lunch on day one: at 0800 on the second day they handed him the most beautiful compound bow he'd ever seen and told him to show them what he could do with it. Half an hour after that, they'd promoted him from Probationary Agent to Junior Agent and started him on a training regimen. They'd offered gym time, range time, a nutritionist, a trainer and a tutor to get him started on his GED.

To say he was unused to this level of support was the understatement of the century.

According to the terms of his deal with Fury, he owed SHIELD a decade of service (he was facing at least twice that in prison if it went to the courts) and so he decided to make the most of it. It absolutely blew his mind that he barely had to drop a hint that he was interested in increasing his skill set and a series of options would be presented to him. He started collecting languages (he loved being underestimated; it cracked him up when people assumed that that funny-looking American guy couldn't understand a single word they said), started to take studying hand-to-hand
combat seriously, and signed up to learn to fly every airborne vehicle SHIELD maintained. He even, just for the hell of it, volunteered to learn to pilot deep-dive submersibles, in no small part to find out what one was.

That last skill turned out to be handier than he might have thought.

It really didn't hurt that he'd apparently caught the eye of one of SHIELD's legends. He'd heard of Agent Phil Coulson long before the man was assigned to be his supervising officer, even before their unfortunate first face-to-face meeting (Jasper Sitwell had outright blanched when Barton told him the story of the failed prank). Apparently, Agent Coulson had been there the day Barton had wowed them all with the compound bow and had decided to take the archer under his wing. Clint was prepared to have to break in his handler, to prove that he was worth more than his horribly checkered past would suggest, but received nothing but quiet respect and top-notch support. The man was quiet, terrifying, hellishly competent and seriously, nobody should look that good in a tac suit.

Very much against his will, Clint started to find himself wanting to impress Coulson, to earn his respect in return. He curbed his attitude and made real effort towards being a team player, though it went against the grain. Even more amazingly, he started to succeed. He was “one of Coulson's protégés,” as he started to hear people whisper, and he had absolutely no problem with that.

It was fairly early on in their working relationship that they got called away on a Level-7 classified mission was high up near the Arctic circle off the coast of Greenland. They were taking the DSV to scan the ocean floor under the icepack for something so very seriously classified that Barton wouldn't have need-to-know until they'd reached 4,000 feet down. Barton ran through the equipment checks quickly, but until they got to the ocean floor there wasn't a whole lot of piloting to be done. Coulson started work on the stack of files he'd brought with him. Clint had brought his own pile of work to do but was currently ignoring it in favor of the darkening view out the window.

“Under the sea.... under the sea...” he started singing. He really couldn't help himself.

“Darling it's better, down where it's wetter, naturally...” came the response from the other side of the submersible.

Clint's jaw hit the floor.

Coulson's mouth quirked up in the closest approximation to a smile that Clint had yet seen on the man. “I have nieces, Barton. I've had to do some things of which I am not proud.”

Clint found himself blindsided by the mental image of Agent Coulson of SHIELD, Nick Fury's Attack Dog, Baddest Ass of the Professionally Badass, Terror of the Junior Agents, crawling around on the floor having tea parties and playing Barbie. Somehow he knew, just knew, that those little girls had the man wrapped around their little fingers and thought of their Uncle Phil as a total marshmallow.

The cognitive dissonance was almost too much to bear.

And the silence definitely went on too long, because this brief moment of camaraderie ended abruptly when Coulson said coldly, “Do you find that amusing, Agent Barton?”

Well, no, he found it... endearing? Really sweet? Oh for God's sake, he couldn't tell his boss and crush object that. He reached, as he always did, for rampant smartassery. “No. Just having a moment of silence for the boys who try to date them, sir.”
The sort-of-smile sort-of came back. “Exactly.”

Clint swallowed. He decided to drag the conversation to a more professional footing. “So what are we after down here, sir? I mean, we're not at 4,000 feet yet, but I'm not exactly going anywhere.”

The maneuver backfired; the sort-of-smile increased. “Tell me, Agent Barton, what do you know about Captain America?”

Clint tried not to think about what the smile did to his supervisor's eyes. “Well, I saw that Christmas special that one time...”

“The animated one or the live-action? No, never mind. Every year since 1945, SHIELD has mounted an expedition to look for Captain Rogers in the ice. It's hard to say where he might be. The icepack shifts constantly, and it's really hard to predict, but this year the glaciologists thought that this quadrant might prove fruitful, and there have been enough anomalies showing up on the surface scans to justify a manned expedition...”

Barton sat back, surprised and inwardly amused, and let the unexpected torrent of words wash over him.

They didn't find the Captain that year. Or the next, or the next, or the next.

But Clint learned to look forward to these trips up into the ice.

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Coulson was not at all sure that the latest brief he'd been handed wasn't a practical joke.

There had been reports that a metahuman with shape-shifting abilities had been spotted in south-central Pennsylvania, and Sci-Ops felt that this was worth looking into. (Coulson suspected they'd merely gotten bored ever since Director Fury had put a stop to their favorite game of messing with the FBI's X-Files division.) The initial reports were somewhat sketchy: Coulson thought it was more likely that the “eyewitness” statements were the results of a bad batch of moonshine or possibly some oxycontin hallucinations. In truth, this felt like the sort of assignment that Fury gave him when the Director felt like he hadn't taken enough vacation time, but orders were orders. It wasn't far enough to fly, so he got Lola out of storage and had the garage give her a tune-up.

He really had meant to take a newbie as his second, someone who would benefit from the field experience on a mission that was unlikely to present any risk whatsoever, but Barton had volunteered enthusiastically; Phil could only assume that he was also hoping for something that would be a bit of a break. Coulson certainly understood. It had been a rough few months for both of them – and somehow, the tempo just seemed to be increasing – but for now, it was a warm spring day, he had a sweet ride, a hundred miles of pretty highway ahead of him and Clint Barton for company. He was, however grudgingly, starting to look forward to it.

Actually, (as he was having to admit to himself under protest) it was that last part that he was looking forward to most. Surely this was a symptom of a mid-life crisis (he could just hear some of his exes roll their eyes at his attraction to a man ten years his junior) but he really couldn't be bothered to give a damn. It wasn't like anything was going to come of it. Clint Barton had only to bat those ridiculous eyes of his and half of SHIELD's male-oriented population would come
running; more if he took off his shirt at the same time. A man like Barton did not fall for the Phil Coulsons of the world. Phil had come to accept that years ago. He was careful to avoid any appearance of favoritism, so what harm could there be in enjoying a platonic friendship with an intelligent, funny, and handsome man?

None whatsoever.

Coulson glanced at his watch, picked up the itinerary and the briefing packets his assistant had prepared, and went to pack up the convertible. The object of his permanently-hidden affections walked up with a go-bag on his shoulder and his bow in its case, took in the scene and whistled.

“I can't believe you're letting me ride in Lola,” he said.

Phil tamped down a smile as he opened the trunk so that Clint could put the bow-case in. “Stop drooling, Barton, and get in the car.”

Phil raised an eyebrow, as Clint carefully wiped his feet and dusted off his pants before reverently opening the car door and gently lowering himself into the seat.

“What? She's a lady! You gotta treat her with respect!” He settled his backpack between his feet on the floor.

Phil rolled his eyes and handed him a briefing packet. “It should only take a couple of hours to get there. Hopefully we'll be able to start the eyewitness interviews tonight.”

“Got it,” said Barton, as Coulson revved the engine. Barton held up an MP3 player and adopted a pleading expression.

Phil folded like a cheap lawn chair. “Go ahead,” he said. “There's an aux-in cable in the glove compartment.”

“You're the best, boss,” said Barton, grinning.

Phil put the car in gear and set off, studiously ignoring the feelings that particular smile generated. He hoped he wouldn't come to regret it; Barton's taste in music could be... eclectic, but Phil figured he could put up with anything for an hour or two.

For all Coulson's careful planning, however, two hours later found them still in New York – specifically, part-way through the Lincoln tunnel. The Jersey state line was five car lengths in front of them.

“I'm just saying, sir, that scene from *Men In Black* was awesome.”

“We will not be flying Lola out of here,” answered Coulson. But, boy was that ever tempting. A three-car accident had completely blocked the tunnel ahead. No serious injuries, according to the news reports, but nobody was going anywhere until the wreckers on the other side finished their work.

“Didja see that one Doctor Who episode with the eternal traffic jam?”

“Yeah, I was trying not to think about it.”

Hope blossomed as the traffic shifted forward a few yards, but was quickly squelched when they ground to a halt again. They still weren't in Jersey.

Barton's playlist wasn't half-bad. Phil started to sing along. “Do you know whatever became of
Sweet Jane? She lost her sparkle, you know she wasn't the same. Livin' on Reds, vitamin C and cocaine... all a friend can say is ain't it a shame...”

Clint just stared at him. “Sir, right now, don't take this wrong, but I'm going to have to ask for your Doppelganger code phrase...”

“Relax, it's me, Barton. I promise. I spent a summer in high school following the Grateful Dead.”

“What? You ran away from home!”?

“Sort of... Mom said if that's where my spirit felt it need to be that summer, then that's what I should do.” Phil shrugged at Clint's raised eyebrows of utter shock. “She was kind of a hippie.”

Clint's face went through a complicated train-wreck of expressions, but he finally just started to laugh. “Yeah, right, good one, sir. You had me going for a while there.”

The thing of it was, that was God's honest truth. Nobody ever believed him when he told that story. Before he could reply, Phil winced as his stomach grumbled loudly. He should have snagged a sandwich before they left.

“Hungry? I did pick up some supplies...”

“Did you? Everything I brought is in the back.”

“Yeah, hang on...” Clint pulled up the backpack and started to rifle through it. He pulled out two plastic-wrapped packages of mini-doughnuts: one chocolate and one with powdered sugar. He offered the chocolate one to Phil. “Not much, but it's better than nothing.”

“Oh, thank God.” Phil reached out for the proffered doughnuts, but his hand stilled. He cocked his head and looked up at Clint. “Are you sure? You always get chocolate.”

Clint mumbled something under his breath.

“What?”

“I didn't want to make a mess!” said Clint sheepishly. “I didn't want take the chance of getting chocolate on the seats.”

“Oh for crying out loud, it's not that big of a deal. At the end of the day, it's just a car!”

“Don't say that where she can hear you!” Barton gently petted the dashboard. “He didn't mean it, baby. He's just upset.”

“You're ridiculous.” Coulson rolled his eyes and grabbed the powdered doughnut package out Clint's hands. “The powdered ones are better anyway.”

“Shit, it's not a real gas-station doughnut unless you can taste the wax in the 'chocolaty' coating.”

“And the preservatives. Don't forget the preservatives.”

“I still can't believe you eat these. I hope you know the commissary staff considers you to be a total loss,” said Clint.

“If they can't appreciate American Junk Food at its highly-processed finest, then their palates are overeducated.”

Barton chuckled. “Well, I'll say this: you do know how to show a guy a good time... inching
down the closed-in tunnel with the top up, exhaust fumes settling in my hair...”

“Feel free to get out and start walking.”

“Never, sir! Trapped with you underground? I can't imagine anywhere else I'd rather be.”

Phil refused, absolutely refused to think about how it would feel if Clint actually meant those words, and pretended not to notice the twinges near his heartstrings.

“I think the lead fumes have gotten to your brain.”

“You wound me, Coulson, deeply,” Clint cried in mock-dismay.

The thing of it was, Phil really was having a good time. This was turning out to be most relaxing couple of hours he'd had in... well, longer than he'd care to think about, and wasn't that a sad, sad statement about his life. He really did need to take more vacation time.

He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as Clint started to sing along to “Here I Go Again On My Own” at the top of his lungs. Maybe they'd come back through Wrigley, PA.

He'd heard good things about their strawberry festival.

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Nothing at S.H.I.E.L.D. was ever quite ordinary. Barton had known this going in. He came into their ranks fully prepared to investigate the bizarre and the otherworldly, to spy and counter-spy at levels that would make James Bond look like a character from a children's book, and even to kill in the name of the greater good.

He drew the line at sex pollen.

To be sure, even for S.H.I.E.L.D., this one was a rarity. This particular type of incident had only occurred once before in S.H.I.E.L.D.'s history, but that one time had left a long shadow in myth and mostly-declassified legend.

It started, as it usually did, with a partially-mad scientist, who had apparently realized that whatever good he might do for humanity in finding a vaccine for malaria or curing cancer, the real money lay in treating sexual dysfunction. This particular slightly-crackpotted and definitely paranoid researcher had managed to grow human apocrine glands in the lab and was trying to engineer them to produce human sexual pheromones. He'd worked in quiet obscurity until he decided to use gamma radiation to try to beef up the potency of the output – and even then, it was definitely borderline, but still within established guidelines for ethical scientific research. The sole reason he'd pinged S.H.I.E.L.D.'s radar was that Intel wanted to question him about some of the sketchier suppliers he'd tried to contact to acquire sources of gamma radiation.

In point of fact, the only way that S.H.I.E.L.D. was going to take an serious interest in this guy was if, on the way to the conference room, he had a panic attack, screamed, “YOU'LL NEVER TAKE ME ALIVE, YOU BASTARDS!,” threw a vial of the lab-grown pheromones into the ventilation system and tried to make a break for the door.

Which is exactly what he did.
And, as it turns out, the stuff worked. Really, really well.

SHIELD, of course, had protocols for airborne chemical attack, and most people made it to the Shelters-In-Place without incident. The researcher was quickly apprehended, the ventilation systems were shut down, and a cleanup team was dispatched. All in all, only fifty-one agents out of the entire building were directly affected, but those fifty-one agents had put on quite a show. It had taken a firehose to separate some of them, and everyone who so much as winked at anyone else after that was immediately placed in medical quarantine.

Agents Barton and Coulson had been in Coulson's office at the time and were unfortunately within the blast radius. Though neither of them were exhibiting symptoms (Coulson's office was at the periphery, and unbeknownst to SHIELD, he'd upgraded the filtration systems to his office somewhat), they were still isolated in case of a delayed reaction. Since they were the only two potentially exposed who were still able to maintain HR-approved working boundaries (and the biohazard floor was suddenly out of empty beds), they'd been put in the same quarantine room, until such time as some semblance of normality could be restored.

Honest to God, sometimes Clint Barton felt like he was irony's bitch. Dozens of people freed of their inhibitions, merrily fucking away with the nearest warm and willing naked body, and here he was fully-clothed and fully-inhibited with the one person he really, really wanted not to be. And wasn't that a crying fucking shame.

Well, no, actually, it wasn't. Everyone, but everyone, joked about what had come to be known as the Sex Pollen Outbreak of 1987, but seeing this first hand? It really just wasn't funny. Mocking people who got drunk and started making out at the office holiday party was one thing; mocking people who didn't have a choice and were going to be horribly red-faced when this was all over was quite another. It would be like kicking a puppy. And the thought of ending up like that with Coulson?

That didn't even bear thinking about.

God knew he wasn't the first SHIELD agent to have a crush on his supervising officer, and he sure as hell wouldn't be the last, but this irritating affection had some real staying power. What right did the man have to go around being so smolderingly hot all the time in those tailored suits? Why did dorky dad-jokes sound so adorable coming out of his mouth? How was it even remotely fair that Clint should be expected to perform under the gaze of those kind, beautiful eyes? The way they crinkled at the corners when Clint managed to earn that sort-of-smile that made his heart leap? It wasn't fair at all. And the chances of Phil Coulson looking twice at Clint the Ex-Carnie High-School-Dropout were pretty much nil.

(Even his fantasies about the man had taken a turn for the ridiculous. They'd started out along the lines of “Bend me over the desk and take me!” but had since devolved to snuggling on the couch while watching “Dog Cops” and then starting to make out. It was so goddamned domestic as to be absurdly depressing. He'd watched once, from his perch, while Coulson knocked out five HYDRA goons in four minutes – that part was to be expected – but the way he straightened his tie and adjusted his cufflinks afterwards had brought about Clint's most inappropriately-timed man-reaction ever. He felt like he'd just dropped into a cheesy Victorian romance novel.)

And it had all gotten worse since that horrible/wonderful trip to Pennsylvania when during the three-and-a-half hours they spent trapped under the Hudson river, Coulson had made a passing reference to an ex-boyfriend. It wasn't entirely casual: Clint could tell he was being watched for his reaction, but his brain was too busy rebooting from this revelation to parse whether Coulson was checking to see if he was a homophobe or whether he was gauging Clint's level of interest. At any rate, Clint had managed to say something bland and inoffensive, which was good enough
at the time, and while he'd meant to revisit the topic, the supposed to be a milk-run turned into
them finding the actual god-damned motherfucking Jersey Devil. (Thank God Coulson had
gotten him those tranquilizer arrows, or it all could have ended very badly. The cryptozoology
division at Sci-Ops was going nuts, and you could just tell some of them were near-despondent
that they'd never be able to tell that poor bastard they kept in the basement in Feeb Headquarters in
DC.)

The operation itself took longer than it was supposed to (obviously), and the cleanup was
protracted enough that Clint wasn't entirely sure how to approach the topic afterwards. But really,
what was he supposed to do? Walk up and say, “Hello. It would seem that you are at least
partially homosexual. Would you like to have dinner with me?”

Yeah, just no.

“You ok, Barton?”

Clint snapped back to the reality of their shared quarantine cell. “What?”

“I asked if you were feeling ok. You seemed lost in thought,” said Coulson.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just can't wait to get out of here,” he replied.

“I hear that,” said Coulson. “You know what the worst part of this is?”

“Seeing Ward and Blake in that position?”

Clint got a sort-of-smile and a not-quite-laugh. Awesome. He was on a roll.

Coulson tapped his tablet. “Reading the reports from Sci-Ops. Dr. Cantharid managed some
game-changing breakthroughs. If he'd channeled his abilities into something a bit more
productive, he could have really done some good.”

“Maybe it's a good thing he hit us before taking his act to the streets.”

Coulson raised an eyebrow, but Clint shrugged.

“The stuff makes GHB look like candy and flowers. A chemical attack on SHIELD HQ is going
to get him some serious jail time, and you can't tell me Legal can't manage to get the formula
buried under oceans of red tape before he gets out.”

Coulson nodded. “Good point.” He shook his head. “The world just keeps getting weirder,
Barton.”

“That's for damned sure, sir.”

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Coulson turned out to be more right than he knew. One alien god, one gamma radiation monster,
one thawed supersoldier, one alien invasion and a near-fatal stabbing later, Phil Coulson found
himself as SHIELD’s liaison to a team of bona fide superheroes.

His life was *awesome.*
Or at least, very nearly.

The recovery and the therapy that came with it had been pretty much the opposite of fun. Tony and Pepper had swept him off to recuperate in Stark Tower, which he was reasonably certain hadn't had a state-of-the-art medical suite and PT gym before the attack. (He'd tried to argue, he really had, but the combined stubborn expressions of Stark, Rogers and Barton had been more than even he could handle.)

What's more, he worried about Barton. Clint had stayed with him every step of the way, seeing him through every procedure, every exercise rep, every setback – and for that he could not possibly be any more grateful. Clint's presence made the best days better and the worst days endurable, but Phil remained convinced that Barton's attentions stemmed nothing more than a misplaced sense of obligation and guilt over his role in the attack on the Helicarrier. Coulson tried to explain, over and over again, that this was unnecessary, that Clint was in no way responsible for what happened, but the man refused to listen and carried on with his apparently self-appointed penance. It was becoming excessive. Phil even considered consulting the shrink SHIELD had assigned to Barton once they returned him to active duty, but his status as the Avengers' liaison meant that he was no longer considered Barton's direct supervisor and as such was no longer entitled to view the restricted parts of Barton's file.

Neither of them would have been restored to duty so quickly if SHIELD had not been recovering from the attack, but one of their cold cases suddenly turned hot. Immediately after the War, more than a few Hydra operatives were among the Nazi war criminals who had escaped to South America, and some of them had set about continuing Johann Schmidt's work. This was far more common in the popular imagination than in reality (as countless spy novels would attest), but the grain of truth in the stories meant that every decade or so another cache of weapons or a disused laboratory was found. Coulson had made it his pet project to track these down, and a blip on one of SHIELDs new scanners sent Barton and Coulson flying off to the Chilean Andes with a team to hunt down a source of what they now recognized to be tesseractic energy.

On a personal level, Coulson couldn't be any happier to be truly back in the field, and he honestly hoped that maybe this would restore some sense of normality between him and Barton.

The lab they found was small and isolated, at the top of a remote peak. There was no sign of the lone scientist who had manned this outpost for decades (the last date in the man's journal was May 12th, 1964), but whether he'd given up and run away or fallen to some accident, it wasn't clear. Regardless, he'd left behind a HYDRA-issue pistol, which was what had triggered the alarm.

They were packing up the contents of the lab to return to SHIELD HQ when Barton had ventured a little ways down the glacier at the edge of the tiny compound to investigate something. Coulson followed him to order him not to go too far. He had very nearly caught up with Barton when several loud booms echoed across the terrain.

WHUMP. WHUMPWHUMP. WHUMP.

Time slowed to a near-standstill. Coulson saw the crack open in the snow. He was on one edge, Barton was on the other.

Barton was on the wrong side.

Their eyes met. Barton's face grimaced in horror, but there wasn't time to do anything but stare. Heedless of everything, Coulson lunged across the spreading divide to snatch at Clint. For a split second this seemed like it might work, might keep them both safe, but they overbalanced and the freed snowpack swept them away.
To the end of his days, Coulson would never exactly be able to remember how he'd managed it, but when the freight-train rumbling stopped, somehow he found himself clinging to both an arm and the trunk of a tree, in a tiny, tiny void in the snowpack. It was pitch-black; he couldn't see the hand in front of his face. He took stock quickly: he hurt like, well, like he'd just been tossed around in an avalanche, but he seemed to be free of serious injuries. Working as fast as he possibly could, he tore at the snow surrounding the arm he still held. The heat from the movement had melted it somewhat, but it had now re-frozen and felt as hard as rock. Slowly, painfully, the arm became a shoulder, he traced the shoulder to a neck, and finally to a head and a face.

Coulson managed to twist around to put his ear to Barton's nose.

He didn't feel breath coming.

“Goddamnit, Barton, don't do this to me! You can't leave me again!”

Barton under Loki's influence had been, bar none, the worst experience of Coulson's life – and that tally included his own death. He clawed at more of the snow around Barton's chest and opposite shoulder, heedless of the fact that he’d lost his left glove and the fingers on that hand were going numb.

After what surely felt like an eternity, Barton started to cough. “Where the fuck are we, sir?”

Oh, thank Christ. “Good question. But safe, for the moment.”

There was a pause. “This seems to be stretching the definition of the word 'safe,' Coulson.”

“The snow isn't moving anymore, is it?”

“Point.”

It was only now that Coulson remembered to turn on the locator beacon he'd brought with him. “The rest of the team should be on their way soon.”

“Good.”

Coulson started to feel around, to take stock of their tiny sanctuary. It was what he'd imagined. He'd been in roomier car trunks, but he knew damn well how lucky they were even to have this. By rights, they should both be dead. Grabbing for Barton had been a suicidal maneuver, he very well knew.

He also knew that he really didn't care.

Barton started to try and free himself further, wriggling in the snow, then stopped with a stifled groan.

“I think you dislocated my shoulder,” he said.

“Sorry about that.”

“Yeah. Coulson, I'm pissed as hell that you saved my life. What were you thinking.”

Phil snorted. He worked some more at the snow surrounding Barton's shoulders.

“Geez, sir, if you're gonna grope me, at least buy me dinner first,” joked Barton weakly.

Coulson shifted again, trying to pull Barton free from the ice, but got nowhere. He ended up with Clint was in his arms, and his forehead was pressed to the man's cheek. Even given the fact that
Clint was in his arms, and his forehead was pressed to the man's cheek. Even given the fact that they were at least several feet under and in the middle of nowhere, he couldn't tamp down the thought that this was a nice position to be in.

“Sir,” said Barton quietly.

“What is it?”

“Why did you grab for me?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“You were above the fault line. You could have jumped away. Why did you grab for me?”

Coulson would have done the same thing for anyone on his team. He would have done the same thing, but it wouldn't have been the same, not even remotely. It wouldn't have held the same desperate need to ensure that, whatever horrors the immediate future might hold, Clint Barton wouldn't face them alone. He wouldn't have felt the same abject terror at the idea that he'd have to face any length of future at all without Clint Barton in it. Here it was. They were about to die in the icy, frozen wastes of the Andes. Time to man up and tell him. Time to utter the words: *I love you, Clint. I think I've been in love with you for years.*

He drew in a breath. He opened his mouth. But what came out was, “You wouldn't have done any differently if you'd been in my shoes, Clint. You've saved me so many times, you don't even know.” Coulson cursed his own cowardice. He tried again. “What I mean to say, is – ow!”

“Ow?”

“Something's poking me!” There it was again. Coulson grabbed for it this time and held on tight.

It was an avalanche probe.

Coulson held fast and tugged back on it. The two men heard, ever so faintly, the sound of someone shouting above them.

Oh, thank God, he was saved.

That is to say, they were saved. *They* were saved.

Barton figured he'd used up all his second chances years and years ago, but now that he was presented with one more, he didn't quite know how to proceed.

If Natasha hadn't been keeping such a close eye on him during the first few horrible days after the Battle of New York, it's entirely possible he might have done something drastic and irreparable. She dragged him back to be checked over by the medics and for following seventy-two hours, he had spent all his time in interrogation answering the same questions over and over and over again. He was finally sprung by Steve Rogers, of all people, who had decided that he needed a break and dragged him off to Stark Tower to rest.

Sending Loki back had helped. Not as much as stabbing him through the heart would have, but it had helped. Stark and Banner had gone back to their super-scientist clubhouse, Rogers had
headed off to see what had changed in the world, Thor had gone home, and Clint and Natasha went back to SHIELD. (At least for their day jobs. Stark Tower beat SHIELD quarters hands down and had the added bonus of being completely free of angry glares from people he’d been trying to kill just a few days ago.)

For the first time in a very long time, Clint had found himself at loose ends. His status at SHIELD was still being discussed at the time, and though his term of service had expired some four years previously, his major reason for staying was no more. (Coulson had called him into his office on the tenth anniversary and had offered to accept his resignation, if indeed, Clint wanted to resign. He’d even worked up a retirement package, and a portfolio of offer letters from other agencies, if Clint was so inclined. He’d refused, obviously, without even having to think about it.)

He had pulled out that file and started to page through the offer letters when Fury called them all in for a meeting, a little over a week after Loki had been sent back. (Fury really had meant everyone. He’d even sent a Quinjet to collect Rogers.) Fury led them to a locked room on the secured medical floor.

There was a lot of shouting to be sure, and he never did find out who landed the punch on Fury. He was too transfixed by the figure in the bed to do anything but stand there and stare. He quickly came to two conclusions: one, hell yes he was staying at SHIELD, and two, he was going to do everything in his power to help Coulson get well again as fast as humanly possible.

The problem was this: he’d spent hours and hours thinking about what he'd do, what he’d say and how he’d say it, if he had the opportunity to do it all over again. He'd repeated over and over to himself what he'd give for a second chance, how he'd never let it pass him by. And now Coulson was alive, and Clint had his chance, but all the doubts and fears that kept him from trying in the first place started insinuating themselves back into his consciousness. He did not – honestly, he could not – leave Phil's side until the man was better, but he retreated into himself as he kept tying his psyche into bigger and bigger knots.

He might have backed down again completely, if it hadn't been for that charlie-foxtrot in Chile. They’d gotten home with nothing more than his dislocated shoulder and some minor frostbite. Coulson had hung out with him this time, as he was completing his physical therapy, but somehow neither of them managed to bring up the subject of what Coulson had been about to say down there in the dark, under the snow. It came down to this: Clint was starting to let himself hope that his affections might be returned, and somehow that terrified him most of all.

Natasha told him he was being a fool, that everyone knew Coulson was in love with him, that it was plain on as the nose on his face. That they were both being idiots, that this continued mooning was imbecilic, that he should just pull his head out of his ass and get on with it, and a whole lot of other nasty things in Russian that didn't translate very well. He promised he'd think about doing something.

Unfortunately, SHIELD missions didn't wait on the resolution of craniorectal inversions.

This time, they were being tasked to investigate a possible AIM incursion into eastern Mongolia. There had been reports that some prospectors had found vibranium deposits in the mountains there, but that the prospectors had all vanished under mysterious circumstances. Supply movements into the area seemed to indicate some sort of mining activity, but satellite photography showed nothing. In the age of retrodeflection panels, the lack of satellite visual meant only that the existence or nonexistence of a facility would have to be confirmed the old-fashioned way.

Preferably by a discreet task force of two.
Clint wasn't surprised that he got called in on this one – one of his old contacts had supplied the initial intel – but he'd been surprised that Coulson had been assigned as his handler. (Maria Hill had just rolled her eyes and walked away when he asked about it.) Nevertheless, they got in, confirmed that it was an illegal AIM operation, got the photos that would allow a full-sized strike to be planned, and got the photos uploaded to the cloud. Their improvised extraction plan, however, was not one of Coulson's finest. It ended up with them flying out on a plane that was slightly on fire while seeing how far they could get before they had to force it down.

Rattled from the impact, they stumbled out of the cockpit to start sucking in lungfuls of actual air.

“Should we see what we can salvage from the...” said Barton, but a boom and a shockwave from the plane knocked them over. An orange fireball flew up into the sky, followed by a column of black smoke.

“We've got to get away from this as fast as possible. They'll come looking for sure,” said Coulson. “Let's go.”

They set off and ran until the smoke from the wreckage was a smudge on the horizon, whereupon they stopped to rest, panting. Coulson's canteen had gotten smashed when the plane went down, so Clint handed him his and pressed it into his hands when Coulson tried to refuse. They took stock: the explosion had apparently triggered an EMP device that fried everything they had on them – their comms, their cells, their tablets, everything. Communications-wise, they were dead in the water.

“Stark says the subcutaneous GPS transponders he came up with can survive any EMP weapon out there,” said Clint. (Tony had come to him after the incident in Chile with a device to inject the chip and had started running at the mouth. “Cap was worried, and have you ever had to spend time around a worried Capsicle? For all of our sanities, Barton, you have to take this.” He'd obviously been lying about who exactly was doing the worrying, but Clint was touched by the slightly-creepy sentiment. He'd let Tony put the chip in – after all, he could always dig it back out again, if he had to.)

“I don't plan on ever counting on Stark tech for my personal safety, Agent.”

“That's not fair, sir. Stark can be a weaselly little shit, but he takes the stuff he does for the team very seriously.”

Coulson frowned slightly. “You're right, Clint. That was uncalled for. I'm sorry.”

Coulson's canteen was trashed, but they had four rat bars between them, which would last for a day or so, if they were careful. (SHIELD had asked the head of their catering division to come up with tasteless, odorless rations for field use. The idea of food with very little taste so appalled the chef in charge of the project that he'd rebelled by creating nutritionally-complete bars that tasted, literally, of nothing. It was like chewing flavorless cardboard, and usually described as unnerving at best.) After that, they'd have to live off the land, but this was where Coulson came in, with his SERE training from the Rangers. This wouldn't be the first time Barton had to rely on Coulson's foraging skills (his stomach still heaved at the thought of those grubs in the Kalahari), and it probably wouldn't be the last. (On a side note, was it weird to find a guy's survival skills to be so hot? That was weird, wasn't it.)

Needless to say, this was not Clint's comfort zone. Drop him in the seedy end of any major city in the world, and within a couple of days he'd have for you the lay of the land: the major players in the underworld, the important government and law enforcement officials in the overworld, and the best way to avoid all of them. Drop him in the middle of absol-fucking-lutely nowhere and ask him to survive?
Yeah, not so much.

He panned the horizon for three hundred and sixty degrees, but even his superior eyesight spotted nothing but grass, more grass, some slight hills to the north (covered in yet more grass) and a whole lot of wide-open blue sky. They opted to make for the hills to pass the night and then to try and work out a plan of action in the morning. The land wasn't completely uninhabited. They passed a sheep paddock and a ger but decided to give its residents a wide berth after filling their canteen from a nearby stream. Not all of the locals had been opposed to AIM's mining operation, and while there had been a time once when a man could stay lost for years, even decades in these featureless steppes, in the 21st century when every nomad had a satellite phone, those days were long since gone.

The sky was growing dark by the time they made it to their intended goal. The landscape had skewed their perspective: the hills were much smaller than they'd thought, but were the closest thing they had to cover for the night. Completely exhausted, they each munched a rat bar in silence, and Coulson volunteered to take first watch.

Barton lay down and tried to rest. He was wiped out but keyed up, and improbably, the stars were making it too bright to sleep. You didn't end up in his line of work without being an adrenaline junkie, and today had been pure, unadulterated crack. He was pretty wound. Ordinarily, he'd go spar, or run, or find a willing partner with whom to burn off all this energy, but none of those options were appropriate here. The landscape was getting to him. He was no poet, but the scope of it was enough to drive a man mad. There was grass that stretched on forever, and stars that looked down impassively. It had been here before him, would continue on afterwards, and would not note his passing if he died here. What really mattered, in the face of all that?

He had an inkling that he knew the answer.

He must have dozed off, though, because he opened his eyes and saw those stars in a different position. “Coulson?” he rasped.

“It's barely nine-thirty, Barton, not your turn yet. Get some rest,” said Phil from the top of the rise.

“'Barely nine-thirty.' What's the matter, the Rangers didn't teach you how to tell time to the minute?” he sassed.

Coulson's mouth quirked a half-smile. “I ought to tell you I learned to estimate to the second from an Apache tracker or something, but...” He held up his stopwatch. “It's completely mechanical. Nothing for the EMP to zap.”

Barton laughed. Of course it was. He watched as Coulson turned back to face north, pulled something from his pocket and started fiddling with it. He held it up to his eye and looked up towards the stars. Barton got curious, got up, and walked over to see what he was doing.

Oh, no way. “Sir, is that a sextant?”

“Yeah – like it? It's World War One US Army issue pocket sextant. Look, it's even got a compass built into the lid. I found it at an antique shop and just couldn't resist adding it to my field gear.”

“That's... very impressive, sir.” This was Coulson at his antique-nerd, adorkable best. Clint tried to keep a lid on the smile that was breaking across his face.

Coulson lowered the device, then continued. “I like new tech as much as the next guy, but there's a lot to be said for not having to rely on it... if I've got this right, we're only a little ways south of Ulan Baator and given our last known longitude, as long as we keep heading west, we'll
be going in the right direction. We should be running across some sort of road fairly soon but we'll want to keep to the open country until we get closer into a populated area. It'll be a bit of a yomp, as the SAS guys used to say, but we'll manage. What do you think, Barton?"

That was the absolute last straw. Clint's brain-to-mouth filter short-circuited.

“I love you.”

Coulson stilled completely and looked over at him with raised eyebrows. “Come again?”

“I love you!” His mouth was a goddamned quisling, and when this was all done he was going to cut out his own turncoat tongue for betraying him. However, it was too late for anything else, so he continued, his volume rising with every word. “I dream of you all night and all goddamned day! I want to find out what it feels like to kiss you and to take you to my bed and let you fuck me! I love you, you icy son of a bitch, and I can't take it anymore!”

There ought to have been echoes, after a rant like that. Or a crash of music, or some appropriately dramatic weather. Or, possibly, as the seconds ticked by without Coulson responding, a large hole to open in the ground to swallow Clint up. All he had right now was Phil's stare, and the desolate sound of the wind rushing through the grass.

“You. Want to kiss me. Of all people, you want to kiss me,” said Coulson. Was he... surprised?

“Among other things, yes. Sir.” Clint's voice cracked as he fought down the panic, but he'd come too far to walk any of it back now. “And really? That's what you're taking away from that rant?”

Phil calmly strode up to Clint and stared straight into his eyes. His face drew into a big grin that made the sort-of-smile pale in comparison. "That's what I'm starting with," he said quietly. "If all that is what you want, Clint, then what the hell are you waiting for?"

Clint stood still, utterly gobsmacked for a split second, then pounced.

End Notes

OBLIGATORY MARVEL FIC AFTER-CREDITS SCENE:

As it turned out, Tony was right. The subcutaneous GPS transponders were ruggedized enough to survive an EMP blast. Mercifully, the repulsor whine from Stark's suit made enough noise that they had time to cover what was left of their respective modesties, at least in the physical sense. There was no hope at all of hiding the traces of what they'd just been doing.

And Tony's reaction was only partly what they'd expected. “Oh, thank FUCK. The UST around the Tower was getting so thick, I thought I was going to have to get JARVIS to
lock to two of you in an elevator until you gave up and started kissing.” He flipped up the faceplate and shot the pair his lewdest grin.

“So... how do you say 'Brokeback Mountain' in Mongolian?”

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