

Banner Year

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Banner Year

by [CanuckleheadCowgirl](#), [magnetocerebro](#)

Summary

Now that Clint is finally training to be a hero, he's impatient to get past training into, well, actual hero work. But while he might not be officially on any teams, he's already making a difference standing up for people that others want to use up. And to his dad's surprise, that includes the Hulk!

Let's Work Together, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah

Chapter by [magnetocerebro](#)

Clint had eventually worn Scott down, with Jean's help, into a compromise on training to become an X-Man. The deal was that, now that he was eleven, he could *train*, but he wasn't allowed on the team yet. But he got to be in all the right classes at the school this semester, *and* he was even working on Steve to try to get him to do some Avenger-focused stuff on weekends, since he and the other kids liked to go to the tower with Billy and Teddy when school wasn't in session.

Clint was pretty sure the argument that had won Scott over was the fact that the bad guys were coming after him *anyways*, but that had also maybe sort of prompted all the adults to get their heads together on figuring out what to do about the department creeps. Ever since Clint had gotten shot, the Avengers and the X-Men and even some other hero friends of theirs were digging into the department and uprooting projects left and right.

It was almost funny, because watching Steve go on the warpath was cool, but watching him gripe about how he hated being the one the team elected to go deal with *politicians* was even funnier.

"You're just so good at giving speeches," Tony had teased him, which got Steve to give him the dirtiest look ever on the way out the door. Tony laughed, shook his head, and then went back to what he was doing — giving K and Logan an overview of what the department had on their family. The *whole* family. There had even been information on the kids that didn't have powers but could be used as collateral.

No one was happy about it, but the people looking into it were particularly mad about the focus on James, who wasn't even a year old yet. And Clint would very much like for his little brother to make it to his first ever birthday party without bad guys getting involved.

"So what's your solution, tall, Stark, and handsome?" K asked — unable to *not* pick on him when the opportunity arose.

Tony smirked her way. "What, you mean besides the full court press?" he teased right back. "We've got Cap chewing up politicians, we've got the best minds in the world destroying their research before they can even save it on their computers—"

"That doesn't seem like a full court press to me," she said. "I want to know what the plan is when they inevitably decide to go around the legal channels they've been hiding in."

"Oh, that's the part where we destroy them," Tony said without missing a beat. "We can't touch the *legal* stuff, but once they come out of their holes?"

K shook her head at that, smirking crookedly. "And how are you gonna do that?"

"You want a sneak peek? I mean, it'll start with sparring, but we'll see where it ends up..."

"If you think you can fight them back with injuries ...I'm game."

"Mom, seriously?" Clint groaned.

"He's the one that wants me to interrogate him," K said. "Since he won't just *tell me* what the plan is, I can get it out of him the hard way."

"Try and have a little fun," Tony said, holding up both hands in a gesture of peace.

"Still didn't say 'no,'" K said, smiling now.

"Hey, as much as I'm into you and me and a dark room..."

"You're scared," she said. "And I don't need a dark room, thanks."

"Fer christsakes, just tell her what the hell you have in mind," Logan grumbled. "Because you're talkin' about two entirely different things, and I know for a fact she wants practice on interrogation before she gets a hold of one of these department idiots."

"Now *that* is a threat," Tony said, shaking his head. "But honestly, once these guys cross the legal lines the Avengers can't cross? We're sending Thor and Carol for an *opener*."

"You're opening with Thor?"

"He's pretty pissed off about the whole thing, actually," Tony said. "Something about how 'this is what happens when I leave Midgard' and how if Clint keeps getting in trouble, his *brother* is going to get involved. Guy has a thing for keeping adopted kids safe, y'know? Not *entirely* sure how I feel about it, but I think I'd wish Loki on my worst enemies, yeah."

"Does that mean I get to play with Loki too?" K asked with a grin. "Because that could be fun..."

"Could be," Tony said.

"I'm kind of okay with nothing happening to me that makes him mad enough to come," Clint chimed in. He wasn't technically *invited* to the strategy session, but no one had kicked him out thus far, so he was going to put his two cents in.

"Obviously, I'd prefer we didn't *need* him involved," K said. "But it could still be *fun*."

"Yeah, well, anyway, that's two Asgardians and Carol, not to mention the rest of the team," Tony listed off. "And Cyclops already said the X-Men would step in where SHIELD won't let the Avengers."

Logan made his way toward where K was seated, only pausing to slap Bruce Banner on the back — *hard*. "Why don't you just drop Banner on 'em?" he said with a smirk. "Seems like a better strategy than makin' Carol break a nail."

Bruce narrowed his eyes and pointedly moved away from Logan. "That's not happening."

"What's wrong? Afraid to stretch a little?" Logan asked, smirking crookedly.

"Little bit dicey, actually," Tony put in. "Ross has been poking his nose in again."

"So drop him on the department and I'll deal with Ross. Guy's a pain anyhow," Logan said as he lifted his mug.

Clint leaned forward. "Who's Ross?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"Power-hungry general," Logan summarized. "Wants to get his hands on ol' Brucey here." He accentuated the point with another hard slap on Bruce's shoulder that had him jumping just a bit.

Clint frowned, his nose scrunched up as he looked between an obviously annoyed-looking Bruce and a too-entertained Logan. "So... like the department wants you?"

"In a manner of speaking," Bruce said as he shrugged Logan's hand off and glared harder at him. "Stop that."

"Make me," Logan replied, though that was enough to get Tony to get between the two of them and give Bruce a clear exit *away* from Logan.

"Not. Smart," Tony said.

"When was the last time you let loose, Banner?" Logan asked. "Can't be smart to let it bottle up like that. Gettin' twitchy."

"*Smell the testosterone*," Carol whispered to K as Bruce glared at Logan for an answer.

"Logan just wants a good brawl," K said as if that was perfectly normal behavior.

"And with the department staying underground..." Carol surmised.

"And Sabretooth dead," K continued, though she left the statement hanging for a moment. "Something will snap."

"Then go find Ross," Carol suggested. "That actually wasn't a bad suggestion."

"Except for the part that if they're prepared for the Hulk, they should be able to catch my sweetheart too," K said. "Subtle isn't usually his strong point. If *we* take out Ross, *he* gets to hang back with James."

"Oh darn. That sounds so terrible for everyone involved," Carol deadpanned.

"I know. Pesky missions with the girls doing fun things. Oh no!"

"Just wait until your girls are big enough to come too," Carol laughed. "Katie was telling me this morning we have to not destroy all the Hydra bad guys until she's old enough to help."

"Which is great, because with the guys running things, you know we'll have plenty of Hydra for her when she's old enough," K replied without missing a step. "They can say they did it on purpose."

Carol laughed outright. "Seriously. Remind me why the X-Men have you around more than we do? You're *way* too much fun for them to hog."

"Because Tony would *cry* daily if I was here all the time."

"I see no problem with that."

"Well, in that case ..." K smiled her way. "I mean ... you did say you had a chance of bringing me a God of Mischief to play with too ..."

"I know. We have all the perks," Carol chuckled. "Only thing missing is that school." She snapped her fingers. "Darn."

"In the words of the great poet Alice Cooper ..." K started to say. "School's out for summer. School's out *forever*."

Carol grinned even wider, nodding along to every word while the boys continued their back and forth discussion. It was getting to a point where Tony was actively trying to keep Logan and Bruce apart when Carol spoke up. "It's decided, then."

"Wait, what?" Clint looked between the girls and the guys, obviously not sure which was the more interesting watch.

"Your mom and I are going to do a little recon," Carol said. "And the guys can stay here and try to *get it together*."

"I want to come," Clint said quickly. "I've got it together!"

"Sweetheart, we're infiltrating a military facility. You should babysit your dad and brother," K said. She wasn't turning him down outright, not when she knew his protective drive was high and he was itching to be a hero, but she wasn't going to let him get involved in anything he wasn't ready for, either.

"But Dad's trying to pick a fight with the Hulk, and I'm not *allowed*!"

"Not the first time he's done that," K said as Carol nodded in agreement. "If we could bring Dr. Banner with us without getting caught by the gamma he emits, we would."

"So while you boys get out the rulers, we'll get things done," Carol said, one arm around K's shoulders. "See ya!"

The two of them headed out, and Clint rolled his eyes and turned to Logan. "I can't wait to be thirteen. I hate getting left behind."

"Truth be told, even if you were thirteen, they still wouldn't let you go," Logan told him. "Hell, they wouldn't let half of either team go on this one."

Clint grumbled to himself and crossed his arms as he leaned against the wall. "Still hate it. I can keep up. I can heal like you now."

"Yeah, but you noticed they didn't ask me to go either, right?" Logan said. "Even when I'm pickin' on Banner."

"Yeah, but I figured that's because you guys were being dorks," Clint said bluntly.

"No. It's because she wants to keep it to a minimum," Logan told him. "And Carol's one hell of a backup."

"She *is* pretty awesome," Clint had to admit.

"Your mom'll be able to get out easy if it's just the two of 'em. A third would have to be able to fly on their own — and the only ones on *this* team that can fly can't sneak if their lives depended on it." He finished his statement looking at Tony — who was kind of a perfect example of how right he was.

"*Fine*," Clint said, pulling up a chair and sitting down. "Being eleven sucks."

"Being eleven doesn't *suck*," Bruce said. "How many eleven-year-olds do you know that get to hang out at Avengers Tower?"

"That's only 'cause of my parents," Clint said. "I want to *be* an Avenger and an X-Man!"

"I thought that was the plan," Bruce said with a confused look as he turned toward Tony.

"If he's still interested when he's old enough, yeah," Tony agreed.

"Ugh. I know that," Clint grumbled. "I just hate waiting."

"You know how many people *twice* your age would kill to hear that?" Bruce asked.

Clint narrowed his eyes Bruce's way and then put his head on his crossed arms, face down. "Stop being reasonable," he grumbled, which was more than entertaining to the others.

"Irritating, isn't it?" Logan said. "Bet you can rebound some Milk Duds off his forehead."

Clint picked his head up and smirked at Logan. "Too easy. Especially the green version. Too big a target."

"Nah, he's quicker'n he looks."

Clint finally snickered at that and shrugged. "Okay, where's the Milk Duds?"

"No," Tony said, stepping in front of Bruce. "You're not doing that."

"Looks like you got a volunteer," Logan said out of the corner of his mouth.

"Preliminary round before the finals," Clint said, sizing Tony up. "Mouth's too big a target, though. I'll get him in the nose." With that, he took off running, headed right for the kitchen

to grab some candy — and possibly rope the other kids into the game.

Size Difference

Chapter Summary

In which Clint does what he does best when faced with a Hulk.

Chapter Notes

A note from Mags: Okay, so a quick explanation as to why this story kind of dropped off suddenly. My husband and I got a call for a little girl who we're now in the process of adopting, and it's pretty much the best thing that's ever happened to us. But it has also meant sleepless nights, lots of paperwork, and the sudden thrust in a matter of days from being just the two of us to having a newborn at home. We're finally getting our feet underneath us again, but obviously, fanfic isn't as important to me as my original fiction and my family, sorry. CC and I are still keeping the 714 going strong because we've got that written out FOREVER in advance, and she's been putting out stuff on the stories she leads, but because this one is a story where I'm running the plot... it got sidelined. Can't promise it'll get all the attention it used to get, but I can promise I'm finally getting back into it ;)

Chapter Two: Size Difference

Anyone watching Bruce Banner with all the kids following him around trying to get him to play with them could see that he wasn't entirely sure what to make of his following of ducklings — especially when Katie started chanting "quack quack" and Clint frantically shushed her.

Tony tried — he really did — to give Bruce some backup, but the final nail in the coffin when it came to stopping the kids in their quest came when Bruce made the cardinal error of telling Katie that he liked her dress. He had been trying to redirect her attention to her dresses and not him, but somehow, he had only ensured that he would remain the kids' focus for the foreseeable future.

Still, it was better than letting Logan and Bruce test each other's boundaries. Logan was obviously ready for a fight — not that Tony blamed the guy. For as much as the Howlett-Barton-Bishop family had been through lately, he'd be itching to hit something too.

Not that he thought that meant Bruce should get in the middle. He just knew where the urge came from.

Still, Tony was thankful when the crowd of kids slowly started to disperse from around Bruce, getting distracted with their own little games. Tommy was trying to entice Katie into a game of hide and seek. Katie wanted to play Defenders instead and kept insisting that Billy had to be Mr. Frank because he had dark hair, so Tommy could be "Foggy, I guess." Which Tommy didn't seem too happy about.

Katie and Tommy were just building up to an argument when they were rudely interrupted — by an explosion that knocked everyone their off their feet.

The first thing that happened in the immediate aftermath of the explosion was that Tony rushed to check on the kids. He could hear them sniffing and was worried one of them might have gotten hurt, but when the worst damage was that Billy had banged his elbow and Katie had a bruise on her knee from falling too hard, he let out a sigh of relief.

"Alright kiddos," Tony said. "Come on; we need to get out of here *quick*." He was trying to gather them up even as his AI was running numbers trying to decipher things like the structural integrity around them and who was injured and in need of help.

"Who're we fighting?" Tommy asked eagerly.

"*We* are not fighting anyone. This is the part where we regroup and make a plan," Tony said.

"That's important too," Clint said, making his way over with Bruce, who looked slightly green, and not from nausea, though he hadn't freaked out, which Tony was counting as a good thing for the moment. "That's what I'm working on learning — remember, Katie? I was telling you how Scott said I can't be an X-Men until I learn about *plans*?"

Katie rolled her eyes toward Tony, though her desire to tease her big brother was temporarily overriding any fear over the attack. "He's *always* talking about the team, you know. It's because Scott let him do training now 'cause he keeps getting got."

"And that's what we're going to work on avoiding today," Tony said as he got them moving. He stopped and did a quick head count. "Where's the tiny one?"

Clint swivelled and frowned. "James was with Dad, but I don't see them..."

"I have him!" Jan called out. "I have him! It's good, but we should *go*."

"We can hide in the walls," Katie told Billy, grabbing his and Tommy's hands so she could lead the way. "Mom has things written in the walls so we can know where we're going, and they're kid-sized!"

"No, no no no no no noooooooo," Tony called back. "We need to go to a different building. No hiding in the walls!"

"Awww, but it's fun!" Katie pouted.

"You can hide in the walls when there's not explosions," Clint told her, trying to help. "But if there's an explosion and the wall you're in gets hit, you're not safe."

"Oh," Katie said, her eyes wide; she clearly hadn't considered that.

"It's okay, though!" Jan promised. "We'll get some more marks in the ductwork when your mom gets back. I'm *sure* she can come up with more!"

"Oooh, yes!" Katie nodded and bounced slightly, still holding onto Tommy and Billy's hands as the gaggle followed Jan and Tony out, with Bruce taking up the rear and doing what he could to make sure the kids didn't fall behind or get distracted.

"Logan's already down there," Jan said — more to Tony than the kids. "He um ... he took a shortcut. He was a little mad."

"Wonder why," Tony said dryly.

"It's a mystery," Jan replied with a smile.

"It's 'cause he's *real* tired of his kids being where danger is," Katie informed Jan in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone. "He said so."

"That makes sense," Jan said. "And I have to agree, but we have to get you guys *out* of danger so he can do what needs to be done. Right?"

"I'm helping!" Katie promised, holding up the hands that were holding Tommy's and Billy's as proof.

"She's dragging," Tommy muttered, and Katie stuck her tongue out at him.

"Then don't be so slow!" she shot back, earning a noise of pure *offense* from Tommy.

James let out a noise that spoke to how unhappy he was with all the noise and the fuss going on around them, which got half the kids to focus on him for a moment anyhow. Especially since he didn't usually complain like that. But it got them all moving. Jan was half-wrapped around him and cooing to him as she tried to get him to settle down, but the upset baby's cries weren't doing Banner any *good*.

"It's okay, buddy," Jan said as she snuggled James, but it was clear he wasn't settling down as quickly as anyone would have liked. It wasn't an angry sort of cry but one that was obviously upset and confused.

"I can hold him when we get to a car or jet or something," Clint offered. "When he's crying, sometimes it works better if one of us gets him if Mom and Dad can't."

"Yeah, he still sometimes gets upset," Katie said. "Remember when Mom and Dad and Clint were gone? *I* was super upset too!"

The closer the little group got to the lower levels, the more chaos was ruling over the scene. Most of the other Avengers were trying to get the military presence outside of the building to

back off — and to *stop firing* on Logan, who was worked right up into a solid rage. Kurt and Wanda were doing their level best to both keep the building from outright collapsing and to get people out that couldn't get through the wreckage and fires that were breaking out all over the building and surrounding areas.

"That's my parents," Billy told Jan in a stage whisper, his eyes wide. "We should go help them!"

"No, no," Jan said, obviously not expecting them to want to dive into a mess like this. "We have to get everyone safe! Don't you want to help with James?"

"Oh, right." Billy was frowning toward the chaos. "It's just... I want Mom and Dad to be okay too," he said, which was the moment Jan realized this was the first time Billy or Tommy had seen their parents at their *jobs*.

"Your mom and dad will be more than fine. They're going to be *amazing* because they're heroes and they know what they're doing. But this little guy?" She tipped James so that Billy could see how upset he was. "He needs someone to watch out for him."

Billy bit his lip and then nodded seriously. "Okay. I'll watch out for him."

Which was all well and good when it came to evacuating, but to Tony's alarm, when he looked over at Bruce to check on him, the big guy didn't look so good either. His gaze was locked onto the fight down below and the soldiers around Logan, and Tony honestly wasn't sure what was bothering him more: the uniforms or the clearly enraged Wolverine.

And then James let out the tiniest whimpering cry, and that was it. The next second, the Hulk was barreling toward the fight — and didn't seem to care much if Logan or the soldiers were his target.

"Oh, wow, is that his superpower?" Billy asked at the same time Tony started swearing himself blue.

And even though Logan had been halfway baiting Banner the whole time they'd been at the tower with him, as soon as he actually started to fight him, Logan did try to get him to stop. Even if he was hitting him *hard*, too.

"Why's he fighting *Dad*?" Katie asked urgently, tugging on Tony's sleeve. "Dad's a good guy!"

"He knows that," Tony defended. "But your dad and the Hulk just... don't get along."

"But he didn't attack *us*," Clint reasoned. "He went for the fight. So he's not *stupid*."

"No, he's not," Jan agreed. "He's just mad."

Clint nodded thoughtfully, obviously working something over, but it wasn't until Logan took a hit that knocked the two of them apart that Clint *did* anything. And then, all at once, he had rushed forward out of Jan and Tony's reach and all but skidded to a stop in front of the Hulk, complete with skinned knees and wide eyes.

"Hey, so, you're absolutely focused the wrong way. My dad isn't the bad guy here okay? The idiots with guns are. So stop making a mess and help me take 'em down!"

It was such a brazen move that no one knew what to do. Even the Hulk looked stunned, staring down at this kid who had no business taking him on but who was there all the same.

"Come on," Clint said, already turning to the fight. "I bet I can get more than you!"

And just like that, it was like a switch had been flipped, and the Hulk *grinned*, running ahead of Clint to bash a path — which had Clint cackling gleefully.

"No cheating!"

"Do we... do we do something?" Jan whispered urgently to Tony, holding onto his arm.

"What do you want to *do*?" Tony replied quietly.

Jan looked down at James in her arms. "I don't know? Something?"

"Right," Tony said in a breath. "Hey! Hawkeye! Come on, bud, we gotta get your dad out of here so your mom doesn't get mad at *all of us*."

"Five more minutes!" Clint called back in a laugh. He was *trying* to keep up with the Hulk, and to everyone's surprise, the Hulk was letting him, even if he was taking all the soldiers down before they could even look at Clint. It was actually a very effective way to get the Hulk to focus on the fight and not Logan: the big guy obviously didn't want Clint hurt but was too entertained by his enthusiasm to shut him out either.

"I'll get Logan," Tony said as the armor fired up. "Take the kids out of here; you know the place."

Jan nodded quickly, grabbing Katie's hand before she could also get in trouble — and trusting Katie to rope the Wagner-Maximoff boys into following her. Which they did.

That just left Clint and the Hulk behind. Which would have been more fun if Clint could actually fight, but at least the big guy was letting him play.

Somehow, by the time the last of the soldiers was forced to turn tail, the Hulk had scooped Clint up in the course of the fight to keep him from getting trampled underfoot, which was how a grinning Clint ended up meeting up with the other Avengers on the Hulk's shoulders.

"Any word back from Carol and K yet?" Tony asked quietly once they were well away from the 'authorities'.

Jan shook her head, her attention occupied by all of Logan and K's dramatic kids. "No... but I doubt they missed this if they're paying any attention at all."

"You're assuming they're going to listen to the news when they're covering their own tails, though," Tony pointed out.

"Those ladies can multitask. You underestimate us girls!" Jan defended.

"I'm not underestimating anything to do with them," Tony replied. "I know better."

"Smart man." Jan smirked, then waved as the Hulk set Clint down and he came running over to them.

"That was *so much fun*," Clint gasped, his face flushed with adrenaline.

"Bud, that wasn't fun; that was borderline psychotic," Tony said.

"Umm have *you* ever gotten to ride on the Hulk's shoulders? Because it *is* fun!"

"Yeah, no," Tony said, trying to direct him toward a path to exit. "That's just you."

"I knew he'd be alright if he knew who the bad guys were," Clint explained happily.

"All we'll need to do is set him up with a baby bjorn, and you'll be set to go," Tony teased. "He can cart you around in a backpack to point him the right way."

"I'm down," Clint said without missing a beat.

"Maaaaybe not," Jan said, pulling a face. "Come on, buddy. We still need to regroup after all that."

"*Right*." Clint nodded and then looked toward Logan, rushing over to check on him. "You okay? They were shooting you even *before* the Hulk showed up, so it had to be brutal, and I know it hurts getting shot just *once*..."

"I'm fine," Logan grumbled. "Just ticked off they were there at all. Shouldn'ta been."

"Yeah, they looked like, um, I mean, Tony said the Hulk's been having issues, but they looked... *department*-like."

"Department *is* a military outfit," Logan replied, honestly confused, since he thought Clint knew that much.

"Yeah, but when I was hanging out with the Hulk, they were targeting him. And I thought they were, you know, an our family problem."

"They screwed with a lot of people," Logan said. "They'd love to get a hold of your mom or me, but they sure as hell wouldn't complain if they could manage to down the Hulk, either."

Clint pulled a face and looked toward where a suddenly much smaller Banner was talking with Jan and looking rather shocked himself. "That's stupid," he said. "He's an Avenger. And he's not a mutant, so people, you know, *care* more, as dumb as it is that people don't care about mutants, I mean."

"Except the Hulk has a history of doin' a lot of damage," Logan pointed out. "They don't care if they're scared of whoever it is."

"Huh." Clint shook his head. "Still stupid," he decided — and marched himself over to Bruce to wave and catch his attention. "You okay? I don't know about how you and the Hulk work, but I know getting shot hurts, and you got shot a few times while you were big and green."

"Oh, yeah, hi there," Bruce said haltingly. "I'm — I'm fine. Thanks." He looked from Clint over to Tony with a questioning expression. "Why is he worried again?"

"Kid followed you," Tony said as gently as he could. "Apparently, he and the Hulk get along. Which is weird when you consider his dad."

"Huh," Bruce looked just as shocked as the others at the news. "Are you sure you didn't get hurt, Clint?"

Clint gestured with his arms out wide. "Nah, I'm fine. I got singed a bit, but that healed right up, no problem. Besides, you were fighting my dad. You needed someone to remind you who the bad guys were," he said in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone. "You weren't gonna hurt me."

Bruce looked a little frustrated at the declaration. "There's no way for you to know that."

"Sure there is," Clint said, still sounding perfectly reasonable. "You didn't go crazy and hurt any of us even when we were annoying — *and* you were focused on the fight, so I knew that's where you wanted to be. You just needed reminding."

"Let him be," Logan advised. "Banner's totally different than the Hulk."

"Yeah, the Hulk's more fun," Clint said with a crooked grin. "Even if he hogged all the bad guys — even though I *told* him I could shoot 'em just fine."

"He's just like that," Logan agreed.

Clint nodded, then turned more serious as he locked gazes with Bruce again. "But really, me and my family deal with the department a *lot*. So if they come after you again, you can call us if you need to. It's not right for them to try and grab you or me or anyone."

"Clint, if they manage to catch the Hulk and get 'im back to their base, they're gonna get everything they asked for," Logan said.

"Then we can't let 'em do that," Clint said, his arms crossed before he stopped, turned, and pointed a finger at Tony. "You guys are Avengers. You should be doing something about the department! Them and anyone else who think kidnapping and forcing people to work for them is okay. That's what Avengers *do*."

"No," Logan laughed. "I mean they'll get what's comin' to 'em." He chuckled to himself. "I've seen him do real damage on those creeps before. It'd be hilarious."

Clint shook his head stubbornly. "Doesn't matter. It still shouldn't happen. I mean, you know it still hurts when you get caught. And maybe the Hulk doesn't get *stopped*, but it hurts when he gets hit. You can tell because he gets all tense and more upset when he's getting shot than when he's just frustrated."

"Uh huh," Logan said — and even went so far as to sock Banner in the shoulder as he passed him by.

"So... can we get ice cream now?" Katie cut in, looking up at Logan with her eyes wide and her long eyelashes fluttering. "There was a fight, so now there's ice cream, right?"

"As long as we get offa the street first," Logan said.

"Oh, I guess," Katie said, pouting dramatically before she grinned, spun around, and made a dash for the other Avengers. "Uncle Kurt! 'Port me to ice cream! I can't wait!"

Explain Yourself, Clint

Chapter Summary

In which Clint is in trouble.

Chapter Notes

I'm still not very fast at updating, so we're focusing mostly on CC-led projects, but I'm still alive, I promise! -mags

The kids were all finally coming down from adrenaline and sugar-fueled highs by the time everyone really got settled in. The Avengers wouldn't be at the tower for a while until the damage was repaired, but Tony had secondary (and tertiary) sites set up for just this kind of thing, so it didn't take too long for everyone to get relaxed and semi-comfortable.

Except, of course, for Steve, who looked like he was turning as red as his uniform when Clint saw him.

"You okay, Cap?" Clint asked, genuinely concerned.

"What were you *thinking*?" Steve started out. "You were supposed to get clear of the incident, not ... *ride the Hulk into battle*."

Clint blinked, surprised by how *upset* Steve was about the whole thing, and then held his hands up in a gesture of peace. "That part wasn't my idea. The big guy didn't want to worry about stepping on me, okay?"

"You didn't have a plan going into it — and even if you *did*, you were supposed to *evacuate*."

"Yeah, but he and my dad were pounding on each other, and the soldiers were targeting them both," Clint pointed out.

"He and your Dad *always end up pounding each other*," Steve pointed out.

Clint narrowed his eyes and tipped his chin up. "Yeah, but listen to what I'm saying about how the *department soldiers were targeting them*. Somebody had to remind 'em where the fight was — or they'd end up getting grabbed soon as they wore each other down. Duh."

"That's not ... Clint. That would have taken *hours*," Steve said.

"They'd already been shooting up my dad," Clint pointed out.

Steve blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"That's what the department *does* to my dad," Clint said in a frustrated tone. "They shoot him up until he can't *walk*."

Steve turned to look at Logan to corroborate, and when Logan simply shrugged in response, Steve shook his head. "That Why would they *do* that?" He held up one hand. "I know why the Canadians would, but why would *Ross*?"

"Dad says the Department would like to get the Hulk too, and they're part of the military too, so..." Clint shrugged openly. "I dunno. Villain teamup? Don't those things happen with you guys — or is that just in the comics from the '50s my mom let me read?"

"The Department is half in with the Americans," Logan said as he took a seat. "Thought you knew that. They've been cooperatin' since the start of the Cold War."

When Steve's frown just kept growing, Clint let out a sigh. "See, this is why you and Scott were doing all that talking, I thought. Don't you know about how those guys chased me and my mom through Washington D.C. back before she was even officially my mom?"

"I thought that was just the other side," Steve admitted. "I didn't think it was our guys too."

"It's always been both, Cap," Logan said.

"And anyway, bad guys are bad guys," Clint said with a shrug. "So yeah, I saw 'em targeting my dad and the Hulk, and I don't really care how long a shot it is for them to get screwed. They're not getting screwed on my watch."

"You okay with your kid adopting Banner like that?" Steve asked after a beat, clearly trying to find some humor while he processed it all.

"Like I got a say in who he decides he likes," Logan deadpanned.

Clint grinned even wider. "The Hulk's *fun*. You just gotta know how to talk to him," he told Steve excitedly. "He's a giant goofball if you ask him to compete — and he wouldn't let me get close to danger even after I told him I'd been training with the X-Men *and* I can heal."

Steve stared at him for a long moment. "Your kid's weird, Logan."

"Pot, kettle," Logan called back. "At least he ain't wearing star-spangled pj's."

"No, but Mom got me some new long johns for Christmas Eve at the cabin," Clint said.

"She got those for everyone," Logan laughed. "More or less."

"Yeah, Katie thinks they're bunny outfits," Clint laughed.

"Say that louder and they might end up bein' bunny outfits," Logan told Clint quietly.

Clint grinned crookedly. "I'll write it on a sticky note for Mom when she gets home."

"Won't stop her callin' you duck fluff, though," Logan pointed out.

"Are you sure?" Clint asked, one eyebrow raised. "It could be *juuuust* enough of a distraction!"

Logan chuckled and messed up Clint's hair worse than it already was. "Yeah, never gonna happen. You can be bald and she'll still call you duck fluff."

Clint tried unsuccessfully to rescue his hair from Logan but kept getting it messed up again as soon as he got it lying flat. "You're totally on her side. It's not fair!"

"I'd be stupid to be on anyone else's side," Logan laughed. "Married her for a reason, kiddo."

"Yeah, well, don't forget I saw her first," Clint said, leveling his finger at Logan — because it was a tease he'd never, ever, let up on.

"Still not gonna let that go, eh?"

"Nope. Because it's always gonna be true," Clint replied without missing a beat.

"Save it for when she's around to hear it," Logan told him quietly.

Clint shrugged. "Okay," he said, then turned to Steve. "I'm gonna go hang out with my brother and sister — unless you still want to get mad at me for helping Dad and Bruce?"

"No, go do what you were going to do," Steve said in a breath, and as Clint left, he continued, "You were going to anyhow."

When Clint got to the mansion for the weekend, the *other* leader of a superheroic team came to talk to him about his life decisions. As expected.

Or, well, *almost* as expected.

Instead of coming at him and demanding that Clint explain how he could be so *stupid*, Scott stopped in front of him, frowning hard, before he asked, simply, "Walk me through what happened."

Clint grinned, glad that *someone* was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt on not being totally crazy. "It was kind of amazing, not gonna lie," he said, trying not to look like he was *too* happy about it or he'd get accused of rushing in for the thrill of it.

"I meant what happened *before* you decided to take a nearly suicidal ride on the Hulk," Scott said dryly.

"It wasn't suicidal," Clint argued. "It *wasn't*. I knew he wasn't going to hurt me!"

"But *how*?" Scott pressed. "I'm not saying you didn't know what you were doing. But I need to know how you got there. I don't want this to just be a *lucky guess*. If it was, you might not be so lucky next time."

Clint shook his head quickly. "It wasn't a guess," he said, but when Scott held his gaze, he sighed, knowing he'd have to explain it *again*. "Look, I pay attention, okay? I could see that Mr. Banner was upset because James was upset, and I watched the Hulk when he started transforming. He moved *away* from us and *toward* the fight. He wasn't going to let us kids get hurt. So I figured when he got distracted with his grudge match with my dad, if one of the people he wanted to keep *safe* came to remind him what was what, that would work better than people he was actively fighting trying to talk him down." He shrugged. "It makes sense."

Scott frowned for a long time and then, finally, gestured for Clint to sit with him. "You scared everyone there, Clint. No one knew what you were thinking."

"I didn't have time to explain..."

"And if you'd been wrong?" Scott asked, one eyebrow raised.

"I wasn't."

Scott pinched the bridge of his nose. That response was *so* much like his parents that Scott had to pause a moment before he even tried to respond. Finally, he said, "That's not the point. The point is that you ran in on a *theory*. Even if you were right this time, you might not be right the next time."

Clint shook his head. "It wasn't a theory," he said. "I knew the Hulk wouldn't hurt me, because I *saw* him avoiding us when he was growing into a giant. And he spent the whole fight shielding me." He crossed his arms and tipped his head up. "I might not know strategies like you do, but I know *people*. I know who I can trust."

Scott held Clint's gaze for a moment longer before he finally nodded. "This is why you're in training, Clint," he said. "Because you rush in. Your instincts are good, but you *need* backup. And your backup can't help you if you don't *tell* them what you're thinking."

"The Avengers don't have telepathic links, and I *told* you there wasn't time," Clint insisted. "But seeing as everyone's so bent outta shape, I'll *try* and send up smoke signals or something," he added, rolling his eyes.

"Clint, this is serious."

"Don't you think I know that?" Clint shot back. "They were shooting at my *dad*. It was the same department that shot me, too — before they even knew I could heal! I know what those guys can do, okay?"

"But you've never faced the Hulk," Scott started to say, but Clint cut him off with an irritated noise.

"So? You guys face bad guys for the first time all the time, and you have to act on first impressions and instincts and *cheating* from Jean, don't you?" Clint said. "I know what I saw, and I know what I knew, and I ran with it. That's what you're supposed to *do*."

Scott massaged his forehead. "This wasn't the first time the *Avengers* have dealt with the Hulk. You had others around you who know the guy — both versions of him. But you did your own assessment."

"And I was right," Clint said again.

Scott sighed. "Clint..."

"Still right."

"That's not—" Scott let out a breath of frustration. "I just need you to be more *careful*, Clint. I don't want you to be more reckless now that you're training with us — and especially now that you can heal."

"Um, Scott, I don't know if anyone told you, but it still *hurts*. I'm not *stupid*."

"I didn't say you were."

"Good." Clint got to his feet, then decided to give Scott a break. "For the record, you're taking this a lot better than Cap did. I thought he was gonna have a heart attack right in front of me."

"Maybe I should have one too," Scott said, only half-joking.

"Aww, don't do that. Jean and Rachel and the twins need you around!" With that, Clint flashed Scott a *huge* smile and then bounced off before Scott could figure out how to turn the conversation back to getting the kid to be more *careful*.

When Carol and K got back to the *new* Avengers' headquarters — since the tower was a mess — the two of them looked positively wind-whipped and almost breathless from whatever it was they'd been doing. It was pretty clear they'd gone *out* after the mission, too, because neither of them were in uniform at all — casual wear only. But if the flash drive K was twirling between her fingers was any indicator, they had more intel to look through regarding what exactly General Ross was up to.

"What made you think we needed a distraction *that big*?" K asked Tony when he spotted the two of them and let out a sigh of relief.

"Wasn't us — they came to us. Your timing was just ..."

"Awesome," Carol said. "We had our run of the place without even really trying." She pointed at Tony. "Oh, I should tell you. We got all this done off camera. Didn't need the help."

K slipped over to where Logan was looking pretty wiped out on the couch and took a moment to wrap her arms around him from behind and steal a little kiss. "You get it out of

your system?"

"For today, anyhow," Logan agreed. James was curled up, sleeping on his father without a care in the world.

"He got to fight the Hulk!" Katie informed K, running over to wrap her up in a hug at the knees.

"Oh good," K said, resting her hand on Katie's head. "He said he needed to stretch. Who did *you* beat up, then?"

"I wasn't 'lloved to because of how I was watching out for Billy and Tommy," Katie said, looking perfectly disappointed.

"That's good, though. They're still brand-spanking-shiny-and new, and they need someone clever and quick to keep them out of trouble," K told her before she let her voice drop to a stage whisper. "I mean ... *Kurt and Wanda* are their parents ... that's all kinds of trouble."

Katie giggled delightedly and nodded. "And Billy told me about how they met their grandpa with the cape and their grandma who's super evil! They got lots of stuff to worry about!"

"They sure do. So they're lucky to have you on their side, right?" K picked her up and hugged her tightly, then shifted her to her hip and handed her the flash drive. "Keep a good hold on that. Iron Man's gonna want it, and we have to make him work for it. Got it?"

Katie nodded dutifully. "What should I make 'im do to get it?" she asked, completely serious.

K looked over at Carol and sidestepped her way closer so that Katie was in between the two of them. "What do you think, Captain Marvel?"

"It's gotta be something good," Carol said. "He gets everything too easy otherwise."

Katie pushed her lower lip out and then lit up. "Oooh, I got it!" she said. "I got it! He's gotta get a *ring* for Miss Jan! Cuz of how she wants one!"

"We don't want to *kill him*," K said - loud enough for Tony to hear it. "He could have a heart attack if we tell him that."

"And he's *very* delicate," Carol agreed, nodding sagely. "But if you think Jan is the key, we could maybe let her help figure out what to do."

"If we're gonna *use* that intel, you girls might want to pick a finish line that ain't ten years down the line," Logan called out.

"He's got to set up more cross-team practices," Carol said. "There is no way we can let these kids all end up being X-Men."

"Um, 'scuse me, but my brother's bein' an X-Man-Avenger," Katie said, her hands on her hips. "And so am I, when I get big enough. We don't gotta *pick*."

"Well excuse me, Miss Purple-Bow Kate," Carol teased. "I just want you around more to take old Iron Man down a few notches."

"If you're nice — and lucky — then Miss Carol might even teach you to fly when you're older," K whispered to Katie. "Maybe just make sure Tony asks Jan *out* on a real date."

"Oh, and not just where they stay home and eat popcorn," Kate said, nodding her understanding.

"Yes," K said. "Tell him where they need to go to be romantic."

"Somewhere ... somewhere pretty," Katie said thoughtfully. "With a beach. No mountains, cuz that's where my first mom died, and I don't want Miss Jan to get hurt, so no skiing or nothing, mkay?"

"Can I please have that flash drive, Miss Katie?" Tony asked in a tired tone with his hand out. "No skiing. Not even waterskiing."

"Only if you promise you'll take her somewhere *super romantic*," Katie said, holding the drive tight.

"He doesn't know where that might be," Carol stage whispered to Katie.

"You gotta take her to the beach to look at the stars on the water," Katie insisted. "And... and you have to have dinner with *candles*."

Tony spared a half-hearted glare at Carol and K but bucked up to cover his heart with one hand. "On my life, I'll take her to the beach with the candles and the whole nine. *Now* can I get that drive?"

Katie sized him up carefully. "I dunno..."

"He's gotta ask her first," K said into Katie's hair. "She might not wanna go if he doesn't ask."

Katie nodded. "Yeah, you gotta ask her. Cuz you kiiiiinda look like you might not."

Tony looked supremely flustered as he spun on his heel to face Jan — who, like Carol, looked like she was barely holding back the giggles. "Jan. Miss Van Dyne. Would you *please* consider stepping out of the loonie bin with me for a night?"

"Well, not if it's just for the flash drive," Jan said — just holding it together enough to reply before she started laughing.

By that time, Logan had heard enough, and he got to his feet quickly. He made his way over to where the girls were giving Tony a hard time, then handed James to Carol before he picked up Katie and hung her upside down to tickle her until she was squealing with laughter. When he pulled her back up, he put his hand out for the drive. "Come on, Katie. No games. We want to catch the creeps, right?"

"O-kaaay," Katie said, relinquishing the drive at last. "Just for *you*, Daddy."

Logan kissed her cheek then turned toward Tony to slap the drive in his hand. "You owe me, Stark." Then, he turned to Carol. "And you've been drinking without me. Come on, let's teach the kids how to play poker. The twins should know early for as diabolical as the family is."

What Boys Want

Chapter Summary

In which Kindergarten romances are the best romances.

Chapter Notes

I've survived the first three months after having a baby, and little mini-robbie is finally getting a consistent bedtime. Not sleeping through the night, but he does at least understand that night time is for sleeping, waking up, eating, and then sleeping again. Which is enough progress for me to feel like a person and get back to this story! :D - love, mags

Clint was sure that Tony and Jan's date had gone pretty darn well, because the next time he saw them, at James' first birthday party, they were orbiting each other. Which Clint thought was good. He'd hated seeing Jan get hurt, and after seeing how good Logan was at being a dad, Clint was warming up to the idea of finding *good* people to be with women who'd met losers before.

Katie, of course, was way less subtle about noticing the way Tony and Jan were acting around each other. She was all giggles and "told you so"s — but that was what little sisters did. They were just like that.

And speaking of little sisters... Clint had to laugh when he saw Rachel trying to keep Lizzie from crawling after James while James was playing with the wrapping paper of his presents. The kids were too young to know how to share, and Rachel wasn't old enough to do anything but pick her sister up around the middle and make distressed noises until Jean or Scott came to untangle the girls — all while James smiled at both of them encouragingly and Nate used the opportunity to steal wrapping paper for himself while everyone was distracted.

Billy and Tommy were trouble, too, because they had taken one look at the smash cake Jean bought for James and declared that they wanted smash cakes too. And, well, technically, that summer would be their first birthday, so they had a good argument to make — helped along by Katie, who kept insisting that they *had* to have the *best* first birthday ever because they had already missed so many.

It was, basically, chaos — but it was a fun kind of chaos that Clint could appreciate. More and more kids were showing up at the school, and it was kind of novel to be among the oldest. He was even old enough now that some of the other students were the same age.

He sat down next to his mom and handed her a piece of cake from the not-smashed cake. His was much bigger than hers, and she'd probably end up sharing it with one of the kids anyway, but he always wanted her to remember that he had her back, so he liked to get her food sometimes.

"You are the *best* kid," K told him. "And an amazing big brother."

"Jean says that too," Clint said, gesturing toward where the three Summers kids were now having a small fight. "We've got a *lot* of kids around now to watch out for, too."

"Yeah, you gotta watch that one," K said. "She's pretty baby crazy."

Clint turned her way with wide eyes and pretended to be shocked. "She *is*?"

"I know, right? *Shocker*."

Clint snickered and leaned back in his seat with his piece of cake. "Dad's been helping me train; did he tell you about how he's been teaching me exactly what *not* to say to Scott in a briefing? Because it's hilarious."

"As if my sweetheart would coach you on what *not* to do," she replied, smiling crookedly. "I'm sure that's the most detail you've heard in weeks, too."

"Oh yeah. I tried to ask some other stuff, and then I asked as a *joke* to teach me in reverse, and wouldn't you know it?" Clint grinned crookedly. "I think my favorite so far is 'okay but what's Plan 2 because this one's no good'."

"Yeah, I might have overheard him do exactly that ... only he was down to Plan 7 and Scott was turning purple."

Clint grinned even wider, then glanced over at Jean, who was laughing. "We have an eavesdropper at six o'clock."

"She's always trying to learn how to be more like the cool kids," K replied easily.

Jean snorted from across the room, and Clint laughed, then turned toward K's plate. "Are you gonna finish your cake?"

"Knock yourself out, sweet-tooth."

"He knew you weren't gonna finish it in the first place," Katie pointed out as she came over and climbed into K's lap, parking herself on an adult as a way to get out of playing with the other kids when Tommy was being *weird*, in her opinion.

"We have an agreement about that," K told her as she wrapped one arm around her and kissed the side of her head. "You can steal most of my cake on your birthday, if you want."

"Yes, please," Katie said brightly, then made a face at Tommy when he came over. "I don't wanna play right now, Tomahawk. I'm *snuggling*."

"Whatcha up to, Tomcat?" K asked. "Cruising around and following all the pretty girls?"

"Uh-huh!" Tommy grinned at K enthusiastically. "Dad says you gotta tell pretty girls they're pretty. It's a *rule*."

"It's a good rule to remember," she agreed.

Katie rolled her eyes. "Mom, I don't wanna be *pretty* right now. I wanna be a '*Venger*. He's bein' *weird*."

"Do you think I can't do both at once?"

"No," Katie admitted. "But that's not what we're playing!"

"I can threaten him," Clint said, sounding like it was the best possible option — and a present to *him* on his brother's birthday.

Katie giggled. "He's too *new* to threaten! That's like threatening a *baby*!"

"I'm not a *baby*," Tommy insisted, his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed. "I'm as big as you are!"

"Yeah, but you're not as *old*," K said, joining in the teasing just to get Katie giggling more.

Tommy looked betrayed. "But I'm *not* a baby. I'm not. I can walk and talk and — and Lizzie and Nate can't do those things and they're only a few months older!"

"It's just different rules," K told him. "Does Billy hate only being a year-ish old too?"

"Nope!" Billy sang out from where he was helping himself to more cake. "Summer birthday bash in a few months! Mom says we're getting a *kiddie pool*."

"And by 'kiddie pool' she means 'Stark's idea of a kiddie pool', so do with that what you will," Kurt chuckled, gently nudging Billy away from the cake so he didn't have any more sugar.

"Billy-boy," K called out to catch his attention. "Katie was just calling dibs on my cake for her next birthday ... you want to pick someone's birthday to steal my cake?"

Billy completely missed the dry look his dad was giving K over the top of his head. "Oooh, yes! Can I pick *yours*?"

"I don't know," K said, turning to Clint. "Can he pick mine?"

Clint sighed as if this was the greatest possible imposition. "I *guess*."

"Then you can have a latte with me that morning," K told him. "As your consolation prize."

Clint's whole expression shifted, and he bounced slightly on his toes. "Really?"

"Don't see why not," she replied. "You've been drinking a little of the regular brew for a while. You *did* like my latte last time I shared, didn't you?"

"Um, who *doesn't* like chocolate and caramel?" Clint said, scrunching up his nose.

"Oooh, I want some!" Katie said. "That sounds yummy!"

"You can taste one next time I get one," K promised.

"Oh! Oh! Me too!" Tommy said, bouncing up and down with his hand in the air as if he was trying to get called on. "Me too!"

"I'll buy an extra one when I get one for myself — and I'll pour it out in little tiny glasses for each of you if you want."

"You mean we get a latte *and* we get special us-sized glasses?" Billy looked like he was about to fall over with happiness. "For *real*?"

"Of course," K said with a grin, already plotting out how she was going to do it with shot glasses — purely for the looks the adults would all be wearing when they saw it. "It'll be fun."

"You're spoiling them," Kurt said, shaking his head — but if he was trying to be a stern parent, he was betrayed by his tail moving behind him in the lazy pattern it always did when he was entertained.

"You'll enjoy it too," she said, smiling up at him. She waved Billy over and pulled him into the snuggle — since Katie seemed to be okay with *Billy* at the moment. "Should we do it tomorrow?" K asked him at a stage whisper. "I can get up early and bring some home ... or ... we could ask *Logan* to get it for us. I bet he will."

"Oooh, definitely," Billy said, his eyes wide as he nodded along with her. "Dad says if someone you love asks you for something, you should try to do it if you can because it shows you love them. So that means Logan's *gotta*."

"It doesn't mean you guilt trip them into it, though," K told him, shaking her head at his logic. "But it never hurts to ask."

Billy scrunched up his nose. "Um, why would you feel *guilty* about doing something nice for someone you love? That doesn't even make *sense*."

"If he has other things he needs to do, then it's alright to say no without feeling guilty about *not* doing something for me," K said. "Does that make sense?"

"I guess so," Billy said slowly, one eye closed. "Dad never says no to Mom, though."

"Logan doesn't say no either," K said. "And most of the time, he does things before I can even ask."

"He's so *romantic*," Katie sang out, complete with a dramatic little eyelash flutter.

Tommy gestured wordlessly at Katie as he met K's gaze, obviously making the case that he'd been *trying* to be romantic from the start.

K shook her head at him. "Everyone's a little different," she said as she held Tommy's gaze.

"Well, how do you know *how* different?" Tommy asked grumpily.

"You just have to get to know them," K said.

"Yeah, it's *hard*," Tommy sighed — and Billy slipped down out of K's lap to hug his brother, since he looked so crestfallen. He could sympathize; it was a lot harder to be a person when they hadn't had enough time to get used to life. It was even harder to navigate complicated emotions right off the bat.

"No," K said. "It just takes some time."

"I'm not very patient," Tommy grumbled.

Billy grinned and leaned toward K. "Mom taught us that word. She uses it a *lot*."

"Yeah, well, she's not very patient either," K told him at a mock whisper. "And your Dad ... he's *awful* about patience. Most of the time."

Billy leaned forward to match her. "She says that too," he said, also speaking at a mock whisper.

"I'll bet she does. She could probably use some snuggles and spoiling too," she told him. "Maybe ... you could bring her some ice cream and share with her. I bet she'd *love it*."

"Ooh, yes, she would!" Billy said, already rushing off to do just that, with Tommy right behind him insisting that he wanted to help too.

"Okay, Katie," K said, letting her volume drop so they wouldn't be overheard. "What did Tommy do?"

"We were playing 'Vengers, and it was my turn to be the bad guy, but he said I was too *pretty* to be the bad guy." She pulled a face. "It's not fair! It was my turn, and everyone else got to be heroes, so how come I can't let them take a turn too? I can do it! I'm not *really* a bad guy!"

"Well," K said, weighing it out. "It's not your fault that he doesn't see it like that. He just knows you're too pretty inside *and* out to be evil. He's not as old as he looks, remember. He has to learn. And learning that pretty girls can be evil too might be a really good lesson for him. But ... I still don't want you to be mean to him just to teach him a lesson. Just take your turn next time — and if he argues it, *capture him first*. He can be your damsel in distress. See how he handles that."

Katie thought it over and then grinned crookedly. "He'd be a cute damsel," she decided.

"He'd probably get all ruffled about it, too." She kissed her head again. "If he thinks pretty girls can't be the bad guy, he *probably* thinks he can't be caught. And *that* would be a really good lesson for him to learn, right? So he doesn't get in trouble with Hydra guys or anyone like that."

Katie's eyes were wide as she nodded. "I don't want him to get in any trouble!" she said sincerely. "He's my friend, and I like him when he's not being *weird*."

"Oh, sweetheart. You better get used to weird," K told her. "You're going to have lots of boys being weird around you. They can't help it. They get around pretty, and their brains shut off."

"Yeah, like, think of Barney," Clint said with a crooked smile. "And *Ana*."

"Don't throw stones, handsome," K warned. "It *will* come back to bite you."

"No prospects, Mom. I'm too busy being *awesome*!" Clint called back.

"Yeah, I did that for a long time too ... then 'long comes trouble ..."

Katie giggled. "Yep. Dad says boys are trouble. That's true."

"He's the best kind of trouble, though," K told her.

"Um, no, *I'm* the best trouble," Katie said. "I'm a whole handful! You say so all the time!"

"You sure are," K agreed as she started tickling her. "A whole handful of *sass*."

Clint grinned as Katie squirmed and giggled until the tickling was over. He knew Katie was a handful because she was five, and that was a whole handful, but Katie sometimes missed that part of the joke. Then, once the two of them were settled out, he offered to take K's plate and his to the trash. "You're hilarious, Mom."

"It's a high bar, keeping up with you," she shot back.

"Yes. Yes, it is," Clint said, grinning before he headed back to the kitchen — not at all surprised to see that James had fallen asleep on Logan after all the excitement. "Mom's trying to teach Katie about boys already," he informed Logan as he threw away his plates.

"*Why?*" Logan asked, frowning at him.

"Tommy." Clint shrugged, knowing if he left his explanation short, the results would be funnier.

"Ah. Yeah, that'd do it," Logan said. "She'll be fine. Should be fun to see what she teaches her about boys. Probably somethin' to do with knockin' the wind out of their sails if they're bein' a pain."

"She says Katie should capture Tommy and make him be a damsel in distress next time they play Avengers," Clint said, still totally entertained by the mental image.

Logan chuckled at that, low and rumbling. "Yep. That'll do it alright."

"Mom made it sound like she needed to do it to keep him safe from getting scooped up by Hydra like she was that one time. Katie got all protective after that."

Logan was smiling to himself and nodding. "And she says I'm the troublemaker. She got anything else lined up with her following of half-grown trouble?"

"She's buying a latte and sharing it with all of us tomorrow just because Kurt tried to cut off the sugar," Clint whispered with one hand to his mouth.

"Makes perfect sense," Logan said, smiling outright. "Kurt and Wanda wanted to watch the kids tomorrow."

Almost on cue, Wanda made her way over to where Logan and Clint were chatting quietly. She looked as if she'd been having a great time, though it was clear she was looking for *something*. And that something was James — that much was obvious when she shifted around Logan to look at James as he slept peacefully on his dad's shoulder.

"If you wanted to take a minute with K—" Wanda started to say.

"I do, but that won't happen with the crowd," Logan said.

"I can hold him if you like," she offered, her hands already half lifted to pick him up.

But Logan shook his head and turned away from her. "Get your own."

She broke into a smile, already well-aware he was giving her a hard time about *cheating* and skipping all the tough stuff when it came to kids. "Oh come on."

"Hey. If you wanted a baby, you'd have wished for one. You wanted big kids. Took me friggin' forever to get a baby. You can get your own." His tone was pure teasing — but it was a line that Kurt had heard already a few times that day. "Even Jeannie bit the bullet. You're slackin' for not even tryin'."

"And you can't wish for a baby," Clint clarified, knowing exactly where his dad was going with the teasing and more than willing to help. "You gotta *have* a baby. No cheating!"

"You've got your kids *helping you*," Wanda laughed.

"I didn't recruit him," Logan said. "He's just got the sense to see it himself. Besides, princess, you're takin' all the fun out of it."

"The boys are *fun*," Wanda defended.

"Not what I meant and you know it," Logan replied. "Maybe they need a sister. Or a little brother. What do you think, Clint?"

"Yes."

"See?" Logan said. "Whatcha waitin' for?"

Wanda shook her head, though she was smiling. "You're in a good mood," she said instead of answering him. "We should let you fight the Hulk and then eat cake with your son every other weekend."

"Sure," he said. "I could use a stretch."

"And the Hulk is *fun*," Clint said. "I'm in!"

"Right *after* you figure out how afraid of natural-born twins you are in your family," Logan said as he and Clint started back toward K and Katie.

"You're terrible, you know that?" Wanda called after him.

"I've heard it already," Logan called back.

Clint snickered as he fell into step with Logan. This was, in his opinion, the best possible way to celebrate his little brother's first birthday.

You're a Bad Guy

Chapter Summary

In which General Ross gets a Talking To

"I don't see what your issue is with this," K was saying to Tony. After the last attack — and after all the intel that she and Carol had gone through — she'd taken all of two minutes to convince Tony to work with her on making her a few customized items. He just didn't seem to realize that he'd agreed to customizing a few things for Clint, too. And K was happily setting him straight while teasing him relentlessly.

"My issue is that he hasn't hit puberty yet," Tony said, though he was smiling all the same — in part because K had shown up ready to distract and convince him. She and Clint both were going low key to keep from drawing any attention, but for her, that meant tight jeans and a tank top — and for Clint, it was a Hulk t-shirt that Bruce positively hated. But they *looked* like part of the crowd.

"I'm his mom. If I tell you he's responsible enough for *small* explosives, that's like hearing it from a higher power, right sweetheart?" K said, glancing over at Clint.

"Oh, definitely," Clint said, nodding along. "Gotta listen to Mom. It's a law. Look it up."

"See? Kid knows what he's talking about, *Mr. Stark*," K said, laying it on a little thicker just because she knew it would get to him. "Come on. I'll give you nefarious ideas that we can build off of for things that go boom."

"Small enough for arrows, please!" Clint sang out.

"I ... I can't do that," Tony said, smiling and shaking his head at their persistence.

"So..." K tipped her head. "Tony, I *really* need some explosive arrowheads. For *me*. *Totally* for me."

"She *does* shoot," Clint supplied helpfully. "She taught me and Barney, you know."

"I did not," Tony said, looking between them. "Do I get a demo before I consider it?"

K turned to Clint with a sparkle of trouble dancing in her eyes. "What do you think, sweetheart?"

Clint tipped his head to the side and smirked. "If he thinks it'll help him ease his conscience about helping *you*..."

"I'm not sure it's his conscience that's talking," K whispered to Clint. "But the outcome is the same."

"Mom, Tony doesn't think I'm *old enough* for talk like that," Clint said with faked wide-eyed innocence.

"Which is probably why he talks that way anyhow," she said.

"Well, if I'm old enough to listen to him try to get in your pants, I'm old enough for explosives," Clint said decisively.

"That's like ... eighty percent of my argument," K agreed.

"So he'll agree," Clint said, smirking hard when Tony looked exasperated and amused at the same time, since the two of them building off of each other was a sight to see too.

"You're not playing fair, either one of you," Tony said, though he put his arm around K's shoulders to steer them toward the lab. "But ... let's see what we can come up with." K winked at Clint but let Tony steer, joking around as they headed off.

But when they were almost to the elevator, the doors opened to reveal an Army general in full uniform, who looked grumpy at first — and then positively shocked — before he shifted into what looked like angry and calculating.

"Well this explains *everything*," General Ross said.

Tony stopped, though he didn't shift his position as he drew in a deep breath and held it. "General Ross. What brings you here ... unannounced, uninvited, and frankly ... a little unwelcome after the last time we crossed paths? You know ... with your troops playing toy soldier on American soil?"

"As much as you hate to be reminded of it, Stark, you have a contract to uphold with our government. You know, the guys who pay you the big bucks while *authorizing* my men to conduct operations necessary for the safety and security of our nation."

"Well, hello to the handbook you swallowed too," Clint said before he'd even thought about it.

"We can catch up to you later," K started to say as she put a hand on Clint and turned to leave, but Tony quickly took a better grip with a quiet 'nope' that made it clear they were better off staying where he could keep them away from the entourage that Ross undoubtedly had with him.

"If you want to make an appointment," Tony said, making a face at the general, "we can work out whatever it is you want me to change from the latest contract. But I can't discuss details without the legal department ... so"

Ross chuffed and tucked his hat under his arm. "Got more pressing appointments with *terrorists*? How does that outrank your own government?"

"Nope, just not operating outside of office hours," Tony said, determined to keep it light and avoid escalation.

"It's two o'clock in the afternoon."

"And office hours ended at one."

"You can't just ignore me, Stark," Ross said. "We're the good guys in this fight. You're going to want to come out on the right side of it."

Clint burst out with a laugh that seemed to surprise the men in the room. "The *good* guys? Seriously? Get your eyes checked, General."

"Kid, you've got a skewed interpretation of things." Ross turned his attention to K. "Not that I'm surprised."

"Huh. Well, see, the thing is, you're with Department H, right?" When Ross blinked, Clint took that as confirmation. "Working with them, working for them, whatever. You've teamed up with the bad guys."

"I'm not sure where you get ideas like that, young man, but even if that were true — and I'm not saying it is — that's so far above anything you have any *right* to have an opinion about, it's not even funny."

Clint shook his head, squaring up in all his lanky preteen glory. "When I was seven," he said in a slow but dangerous tone, "the department threatened to hurt me because they wanted my mom. They didn't care who I was, just that I was leverage. When I was eight, they let a creep tie me down and experiment on me. They didn't know or care if I was even human. They just let him do it because I was with my mom. When I was ten, they kidnapped me — twice. The second time, they shot me in the leg. I'm eleven now and spending all my time looking over my shoulder and worrying about my *baby* brother, who just turned one. So yeah, they're the bad guys. Which makes you one too. Obviously."

Ross's gaze softened slightly — but only for a moment. "I don't know of any outfit that would do that to a kid, but it's a nice story."

"Honey, come on," K said, her hands on Clint's shoulders. "Some people aren't worth trying to talk to."

Clint kept his chin up — he was getting taller and was almost tall enough that he didn't have to look too far up at the general. "He just called me a liar, Mom."

"And there's nothing we can do about that, sweetheart," K said softly. "So we should just go before things get out of hand."

"No," Tony said, putting himself in between K and the General, though he was facing K and Clint. "You two can stay. I don't want you going anywhere. General Ross knows he's supposed to make an *appointment*." From there, he pushed Ross back toward the elevator, not

taking no for an answer. He gave K a quick glance, hoping she and Clint would get back a little bit — just in case.

Clint tipped his head back to look at K, and when he *realized* how still she was, he signed, *How many guys do you think he brought?*

Not risking it with you. Neither is Tony.

That bad?

Yes.

Clint bit his lip and nodded slowly. *Alright. But he's still an idiot.*

Smarter than he looks, K replied carefully.

He'd have to be.

"I need to call Logan," K said quietly, once they were around the corner and a little distanced from the ongoing argument at the elevator. "I don't know how the hell we're going to get out of here safely otherwise."

Clint stopped and blinked, his stomach dropping. "I didn't even think about that," he admitted — which was frustrating in and of itself because he was *supposed* to be working on strategy and thinking ahead because both leaders of the teams he wanted to join thought he didn't think ahead enough. And here he was doing just that.

"I don't know if Tony's gotten that far yet either," K told him.

"That's because he's pushing the idiot into an elevator. One thing at a time, Mom," Clint said with a small smile, trying to get her to relax.

"Yeah, I know," she agreed. "Still." She waited, out of sight, but listening in all the same, and when Tony came toward them, he was moving at a good clip.

"We need to get you out — and we need to do it so they can't track you. Sooner the better."

Clint looked between the two adults in the room. He'd never seen them look this stressed.

"So, can someone explain to me who this guy is — after we get home, I mean? You two are way too freaked to talk to me."

"He's a general, Clint," Tony said. "One with a lot of pull and a lot of friends in high places. The fact that he knows who your mom is on sight should tip you off on how dirty he can be."

"He's also the guy that's after the Hulk," K told Clint quietly.

"Huh." Clint held his breath. "I had a feeling. Threw the department at him to see, but..." He looked over his shoulder toward the elevator Ross had gone through. "Tony, how come you have the guy who wants the Hulk captured making appointments with you?"

"I don't get a say in who acts as liaison for the government," Tony said. "Used up all my picks when I pushed to get Rhodey to rep the Air Force."

"He's a freakin' supervillain, Tony!" Clint threw both hands in the air. "You know that or you wouldn't be trying to get me and Mom out of here!"

"And I still have to deal with him," Tony pointed out as he handed K his phone. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess you have your own ideas on how to leave?"

"Maybe one or two," she agreed as she called Logan and stepped into the next room over to make the call, leaving Clint with Tony for a moment.

Clint glanced up at Tony and took in the nervous way he shifted his weight before he spoke up. "Thanks," he said quietly.

"No problem," Tony said with a little nod. "I'll ... ah ... I'll take a look at your mom's specs and see what I can do."

Clint perked up instantly. "You mean it?"

"Sure. I was going to do it anyhow, just ... havin' a little fun," Tony said with a shrug.

"Thanks!" Clint probably would have done more celebrating, but under the circumstances, all he could manage was a bright grin and a bounce. "I promise I'll use 'em right. Like screwing with the department next time they bother me."

"Yeah, I know you will," Tony said with a little smirk before K came back around the corner with a sigh. "Keep away from the windows — just in case. How long before Nightcrawler comes in?"

"Any time," K replied, then handed him back the phone. "So. Raincheck?"

"On the ideas or the flirting? Because only one of those is really acceptable."

"Yes," she said. "Both. Sorry, the atmosphere went south too fast."

"Ugh, can you *not* rain check the flirting?" Clint asked, rolling his eyes.

"You do know that the only way I'd ever actually risk it was if she wasn't married, right?" Tony said, raising one eyebrow his way. "I don't have a death wish."

"Oh, so you're *not* as stupid as you come off," Clint said, looking perfectly shocked.

"Didn't say that."

"That's what I thought." Clint grinned crookedly up at Tony and then waved when Kurt arrived in a poof of blue and black. "Hi, we're trouble magnets," he called out to Kurt.

"No one is surprised," Kurt laughed, though he looked around the room all the same. "How bad is it?"

"General Ross and Department H both pulling the government funding card thinking that gets them in my door," Tony said, his eyes narrowed. "For the record, I've refused to supply the department. Didn't know Ross was tied in this deep."

"Makes sense though," K pointed out. "Department sent my sweetheart after the Hulk with some success. Ross wants the Hulk at all costs ..."

"Tony pushed him into an elevator," Clint put in helpfully.

"But not down the shaft like he was asking," Tony said. "He's got soldiers following him all the time. They wouldn't have been able to go *home* if you didn't show up."

Kurt frowned but put his hands on Clint and K's shoulders. "Then it's a good thing we can simply circumvent the tedium of doors," he said.

"One big 'screw you' bamf," Clint agreed, still looking toward his mom and trying to get a solid smile out of her, since he didn't like anything that made her nervous and dealt with his *own* nerves over the whole thing by joking around.

K gave him a quiet smile but didn't say anything until after Kurt teleported them back to Westchester. And then, what she said was, "Where's Logan?"

"With Scott," Kurt told her — and didn't get to say anything else before K made a beeline down the hall.

Clint sighed and glanced up at Kurt. "So," he said slowly, "how freaked should I be?"

Kurt sighed heavily. "The fact that your mother looked that serious even after the initial contact would tell me that you should be *very* freaked. But ... considering that you are no longer in that precise situation but are now sheltered by the combined might of our entire team — *and the Phoenix* — I feel as if you are much safer *now*."

"Good point," Clint said. "Jean would totally roast that guy and the army he rode in with."

"Exactly."

Clint was quiet for a long moment before he said, "Yeah, but the thing is, that guy is going to keep bugging the Avengers. He's gonna keep coming after the Hulk. We can't just take care of *us*."

"Clint," Kurt said softly, "do you think that the Avengers won't take care of their own as well? Tony and Bruce are good friends. I am very sure he'll do all he can to protect Bruce."

"Then you didn't see how stressed Tony looked," Clint replied. "Because it was pretty obvious he's *worried*. And we can help. I know we can."

"Then we'll have to see if the two groups can work together," Kurt said. "And considering that Wanda is an Avenger, I think we can manage something."

"Yeah, that probably helps," Clint said, glancing up at Kurt again. "*Probably* a good thing you guys weren't there, because that guy thinks the X-Men are terrorists and Billy and Tommy aren't old enough to get the whole... leaving bad guys alone thing." He grinned crookedly. "Me either, but I got enough practice to back it up."

"You had good backup today," Kurt said. "We'll be more careful with you kids and anyone close to the military."

"Yeah, well, that general thought *he* was a good guy, and it still makes me mad. He called me a liar and everything." Clint rolled his eyes. "I can't wait until I'm an Avenger and an X-Man so I can give it back to idiots like that."

Kurt watched Clint and shook his head quietly. This kind of thing was exactly why the adult X-Men had been united on slow-walking him in his quest to join the team. He was *too* eager.

Not that Kurt could judge. Not that *any* of them could judge, considering their own paths. But as the X-Men became parents and the mansion filled with small children, caution was the byword.

Hopefully, Clint would figure that out sooner rather than later.

But in the meantime, it was obvious Clint was still brimming with nervous energy from his encounter with Ross, so Kurt put his hand on his shoulder with a troublemaking smirk. "In the meantime," he said, "why don't you and I practice your swordplay while your parents discuss their plans?"

Clint looked up at Kurt with one eye closed. "Are you just trying to keep me out of their planning?"

"On the contrary," Kurt said. "We don't want you getting rusty when there are obviously so many wrongs you need to right when you get older."

Clint narrowed his eyes at Kurt but finally decided it wasn't worth an argument and nodded. "You're on. Winner picks the colors in darts."

Since Barney was around for the winter, he had gotten to see more of what Clint was doing to prepare for both teams and had even signed up for the same self-defense class. He was older, so he got combat classes, too. And he still didn't think Clint was as ready as he thought he was.

That was the thing about kid brothers. They were always getting into trouble.

But with Clint, it was a whole other level of trouble. Barney still wasn't over the fact that an evil scientist had turned him into a healer, much less the most recent incident when Clint had been shot and dragged off *right in front of Barney*.

So when Clint came in after sword training with Kurt wearing a familiar determined look, Barney knew trouble was brewing.

It looked like Clint and Kurt were headed for the darts, but Barney beat them to it, sliding over seamlessly to snatch up the blue darts for himself. "Who won?" he asked, because those two always turned training into a competition.

"Kurt — *but just barely*," Clint said, looking supremely irritated.

But Barney was glad to hear it. He worried about Clint more than he was sure his brother knew, and it was nice to hear that the adults in the X-Men were treating Clint more like a prospective teammate and less like a kid. Letting him win meant he would think he was ready to take on stuff he wasn't ready for.

Not that Clint wouldn't do it anyway, but Barney could dream.

"Reclaim your throne?" Barney said, offering Clint the red darts.

"Kurt and I were gonna—"

"No, no," Kurt said, smiling between the Barton brothers. "You and I can play at any time. It seems you've been neglecting your brother."

"He means you're scared you'll lose to me," Barney told Clint.

"Oh, you are so on."

Kurt smirked and teleported away, leaving the boys to their game, knowing that Clint couldn't resist a challenge and *also* knowing that Barney had been more concerned about Clint since his last run-in with the department than either boy was willing to admit. A run-in with Ross had to have Barney concerned, and he was showing that concern in his own way.

Still, there was a competition to be had, and the boys played several rounds of darts before Barney casually asked, "So, who was the idiot who ticked you off today?"

Clint raised both eyebrows and turned Barney's way, then let out a huff and tossed a dart a little harder than usual. "Some loser general who called me a liar and is working with the department."

Barney frowned, turning the dart in his hand a few times. "You have *way* too much experience with those guys, you know that? You're, like, four."

"Eleven."

"Same difference."

Clint rolled his eyes. "It doesn't matter anyway," he said. "Mom says this guy is strictly hands-off. You should have seen her when he showed up. She doesn't usually *freeze* like that." Although Clint had started out complaining, by the time he finished telling Barney about what he'd seen, Barney could hear the honest worry ringing in his tone, too.

With good reason. "Mom froze?" Barney breathed out.

Clint nodded. "She kept hanging onto me, holding me back. Didn't want me to take on the general. And *Tony* pushed him into an elevator."

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah, surprised me too."

"Was the elevator car still there?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Then he didn't do it right."

Clint blinked at Barney and then burst into a laugh that lasted longer than he meant it to — Barney turned out to be just the right antidote to the worry and anger that had been following him around like a dark cloud ever since Ross showed up. "Come on," he said once he had his composure again. "Let's go convince Mom to give us another lesson toward horseback archery."

Barney's First Heartbreak

Chapter Summary

In which Barney has to say goodbye to his first flame :(

Chapter 6: Barney's First Heartbreak

Things had tightened down considerably since General Ross's mini invasion with Tony. The labs that the Avengers were using were in a different facility entirely, since the tower was still undergoing some repairs, and because of it, everything was in a bit of disarray. New personnel, new feel to the workspace, new view. All of it was enough to pull people off-balance.

And though Bruce was trying *very hard* to pay attention and go under the radar, he still was having trouble recognizing all the new people he was forced to be around due to the change in locale. Because of that, he was keeping to himself and his assistant and, of course, Tony when he insisted on popping in and being a pain.

Bruce was just going over the latest data on the long-running experiment he'd been forced to re-start when his lab assistant set a cup of coffee down at his elbow like he usually did. Bruce barely looked up as he thanked him, then absently picked up the cup and started to try to wake up.

He was halfway through the cup when he realized he wasn't waking up *at all*. And in fact, he seemed to be slipping. But even on realizing it, his heart rate didn't jump like it usually would, and his adrenaline didn't spike in the least. It was, in fact, the most relaxed Bruce had felt in ages, even knowing that he'd been drugged.

Barney hung up the phone in Westchester looking like someone had hit him with a truck and then looked up at K, who had been the one to pick up Miranda and Paul's call. He wasn't sure how much she'd heard when she was being polite and giving him distance to have a private conversation, but she looked perfectly sympathetic.

He let his shoulders drop. "Ana's grandparents aren't doing well," he said quietly, trying not to get upset because the whole thing was such a *reasonable* reason to go. "So... so her parents are moving the family to Pennsylvania and leaving the circus so they can take care of them." He took a stuttering breath. "So... so she won't be there this summer."

K let out a deep, weary sigh. "I'm so sorry, Barney. What can I do?"

"I dunno," Barney said, doing a horrible job of acting like he wasn't heartbroken. "They're leaving next month."

"So ... you need to see them before then."

Both of Barney's eyebrows shot up, and a small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, of course."

"When can we go?" Barney's mind was racing as he tried to figure out what he was even going to *say* when he and Ana had been kissing for long enough to get teased about longer-term prospects now that they were both in high school. He hadn't even *thought* about what a *goodbye* would be like.

"When would be best?"

"I guess before they're packing up..." Barney bit his lip. "Soon? Yeah. Soon. That would be good. Just as soon as I figure out... anything. At all. With her."

"I'll talk to Logan; we'll make it a quick trip. He can stick around with James and the little ones; we'll hit the road like we used to. It should be easier for you to think that way."

"Can we bring Clint?" Barney asked. "Then it would *really* be like we used to do."

"I think he'd like that," K agreed. "I'll let you talk to him about it. You don't get to surprise him as much as I know you want to."

Barney broke into a grin. "Thanks, Mom," he said, trying not to rush off like he wanted to because he didn't want to look like an idiot kid.

As it turned out, Clint was with Kitty, teasing her relentlessly about her crush on someone so much *older* — which had Barney pausing in the doorway, since he'd had a crush on Kitty and knew the age gap there made Clint laugh, too. Telling him that Ana was moving in front of Kitty could open up a whole new avenue for teasing that he did *not* want to deal with from his obnoxious little brother.

Clint spotted him anyway, though, and waved him over. "What, are you a lurker now?" he teased.

Barney rolled his eyes and kicked off of the doorway. "Just wasn't sure if you were done telling Kitty what to do with her love life. Real smooth, Clint. I hear girls like being dictated to like that."

"First of all?" Clint turned toward Barney with his whole body. "At least I know when someone's old enough I don't have a chance and don't want to have a chance. And second, I'm not taking advice on girls from the guy who thinks the height of romance is hiding for kisses where you have to step around animal droppings."

"You're too busy picking fights with every bad guy in the world to notice if *anyone* has eyes for you. What do you know about romance?"

"Still more'n you." Clint crossed his arms. "Lurker."

Barney let out a frustrated noise. "Clint..." He shook his head, pinched his nose, and tried again. "I came to ask you if you wanted to go on a road trip just you, me, and Mom, but obviously, you're too busy being better than the rest of us, so I'll just tell Mom you can't make it."

"What?" Clint looked like Barney had completely thrown him off. "Wait!"

"No, you didn't sound like you were interested," Barney called back. "Might be better if you just stay here with the *little kids*."

"I'm the one who *found* Mom," Clint argued. "We were doing campouts and road trips before you even *called* her 'Mom'!"

"She must have realized I'm the superior brother. Too bad for you."

"Shut up, Barn; you aren't even here half the time."

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder or something."

"She feels bad for you not getting attention. It's pity, not favoritism."

"All the more reason to leave you here, then," Barney teased. "So she doesn't *feel* like she's favoring anyone."

"Shut up, Barn. When are we leaving?"

Barney grinned. "Well, Mom has to make sure Dad isn't gonna be swamped with the girls and James..."

"Then I guess we should start packing," Clint said. "Where are we going?"

"Does it really *matter*?"

"Nope," Clint agreed, then waved to Kitty and headed off with Barney to start packing — leaving Kitty shaking her head, bemused as always by the two Barton boys.

K had made the arrangements with Logan, and Logan had agreed quickly enough when he heard what the trouble was. Of course, he had also insisted on panic buttons and *team comms* just in case. But considering how off in the edges Barney felt most of the time, a little trip with his brother and mom sounded like the kind of thing that would remind him of who loved him. And the boys *needed* it. Always.

Besides, the preparation for the trip alone was already serving as a reminder for Barney of where he stood with the family. Not only were Katie and Susie helping with the packing but

the Summers twins were "helping" by taking clothes out of the bags, while Rachel actually tried to help and kept putting the clothes back in after the twins would take them out.

Barney might have missed the outpouring of love, though, because he was so focused on trying to figure out what to say to Ana. He definitely wanted to say goodbye to her, but on the other hand, he didn't want to come off as too sappy... so he was circling in his mind, going back and forth between ideas, and generally being quieter than usual.

Of course, K made sure to stop at some of Barney's favorite places to eat while they were on a road trip, so the mood didn't last, and he ended up enjoying himself despite the impending heartbreak all the same.

And it *was* nice to hang out just the three of them. It felt a lot like it had been when Clint and K had first found each other — eating out at restaurants, taking travel-tired naps in the back of the truck, and trying to out-do each other playing games like trying to find the farthest-away license plate on passing cars.

Eventually, though, they reached the rest of the circus, and Barney had to swallow down a nervous lump in his throat. Ana had been the first girl he'd actually been able to *date*. And now, he had to figure out how to say goodbye. He *still* hadn't worked that part out, actually.

Clint, of course, completely misinterpreted Barney's nerves. "Hoping you don't find your girl with a winter boyfriend?" he teased.

"Oh, shut up, Clint," Barney said, flushing without meaning to.

"I'll be here when you need a shoulder to cry on," Clint teased, not entirely realizing that he'd actually have to follow through on that promise soon enough.

Barney sighed, let his shoulders drop, and decided to ignore Clint for the time being as he made his way through the small crowd of his second family. Everyone that knew him threw up enthusiastic hellos and "when did you get here?"s, but...

There she was.

Ana looked completely caught off-guard when she saw Barney, but he was relieved to see her smiling when he came to join her where she was sitting outside trying to find some peace and quiet to read a book.

"Hey, so... so I heard you're leaving," Barney said, fully realizing how awkward he sounded and wishing he knew what to *say*.

Ana's expression softened, and she leaned toward him. "So you came here when you heard?" she asked. When he nodded, she smiled even more and then leaned forward to kiss him.

And, well, who was he not to run with a response like that?

By the time Barney caught back up with Clint and K, he was looking both more relaxed and more upset, somehow at the same time. He obviously still wasn't happy about Ana leaving,

but on the other hand, it was plainly apparent the goodbye had fixed his mood right up.

And if Clint had been a little older, he might have thought twice about the teasing. Even if Barney was doing better, his shoulders were dropped, and he was staring at the ground despite the smile locked at the corner of his mouth. All the signs were there that he wasn't in the mood to be messed with.

But, as little brothers were wont to do, Clint ignored all that and went for the jab. "So," he said as he sidled up next to Barney, "good goodbye?"

"Oh, shut up, Clint," Barney grumbled, his smile dropping fast.

"Long goodbye?" Clint pressed.

"Shut *up*, Clint."

"I think, if you've settled business for now, it's probably time to feed your little brother before he starts chewing on whatever's closest to him," K said before Clint could get going.

Barney snickered and nodded. "Feral child that he is."

"Hey," Clint said.

"Oh, I should take offense to that," K said loftily.

"Didn't mean *your* kind of feral, Mom, but it was funny, you gotta admit," Barney said, grinning wider.

"I'm *not* — I'm not even *that* kind of feral!" Clint insisted.

"The kind that can't put his clothes on right or speak in sentences? Sure you are."

"Glass houses, non-blond Barton," K said, reaching out to brush his hair the wrong way.

"What? I talk goodly," Barney said, grinning somehow even wider down at K.

"Passable," she said. "Though it should be 'speak' or absolutely anything other than 'goodly,' you ridiculous little corn-pone."

"Oh, right," Barney said, nodding semi-seriously. "I speak bad-notly."

"*Det är bra att du är vacker*," K said.

"Not that pretty," Clint said under his breath.

"Passable, though," K replied as she squeezed Clint's shoulder.

Clint shrugged. "Only because he looks so much like me."

"Small miracles," she agreed, then tipped her head for Barney to catch up. "I'll leave it between you on where we go next. The only thing I know for sure is that you'll likely be

looking for something *sweet*."

"Hot chocolate and peppermint sticks," Barney said after a moment's thought. "Please."

"Then, Clint, I guess it's up to you to pick dinner."

"Umm... what about that place with the volcano wings?"

"Works for me," K said, then turned to Barney. "You ready to burn your face off?"

"If it's the only way Clint can feel like he's better-looking than me..."

K sighed dramatically, matching both of them for their level. "You're *both* pretty. Stop that."

"Can't," Barney said.

"It's hard-wired," Clint agreed.

"You're both lucky I love you so much."

"Love you too," the boys chorused back to her.

The three of them headed off to get dinner — and the hot chocolate — but when they were done and they were nearly back to the car, K whistled shrilly and tossed the keys to Barney. "You're up."

Barney stared at the keys. "I'm what?" he asked at the same time Clint said, "He's what?"

"We'll stay in the parking lot, but it's time you learned how to drive. Shift anyhow," K said. "And don't worry; Logan said he had to re-do the clutch soon anyhow. So ... you're up."

Barney looked like Christmas had come early as he climbed into the driver's seat, his eyes wide as he put his hands on the wheel and then looked over at K, grinning madly. "You're totally sure? I mean, last time I drove your car, I totally wrecked the gears."

"Yeah, I'm not worried about it," she promised. "And you might have been under a little stress last time."

"Yeah, just a little," Barney said, making a face as he thought of how he'd jackrabbited several times on his drive to find Logan and stop Creed. He shook his head. "This is totally different, though. No jerks, just me and my brother and my mom."

"So you'll do great," she said. "Just relax and try not to kill any guard rails or light posts."

"Which he will," Clint put in from the back seat, making a dramatic show of strapping himself in.

"Then it's a good thing Logan's ride is steel reinforced," K said. "Whenever you're ready — don't let him get in your head." As soon as she coached him through getting the seat in the right spot for his longer legs, she walked him through the basics. "It's not hard," K promised.

"Just work on first gear to start. Keep the clutch in, give it a little gas, and gently feather off the clutch."

It took two tries before Barney got that far without either stalling out or lurching forward, and then it was clear he didn't know what to do and he was afraid to hit the gas or to try and back off — mostly because K was encouraging him to 'keep it steady' and trying to guide him through feeling *when* he needed to use the clutch, gas, or brake. And every time they'd start off, it would be with a good lurch ... not just from the take off, but when he got bold and decided to try shifting to second, too.

Of course, that meant quicker speeds — and faster turns — and more anxiety about when to use the clutch. At that point, his coach was laughing hard enough that she was of no use whatsoever. "You've got it; you do," she laughed, holding her stomach. "Try not to crash land."

She was the only one out of the three that picked up when she needed to brace herself for a lurch or a short distance stop, laughing all the while until Barney finally *got* it. It was all at once, and though it wasn't the easiest on the *engine*, he did figure out the clutch without launching his passengers or himself toward the dash. "Good, now feather with the gas, too," K said, wiping her eyes. "And if you take your foot off the gas, just press the clutch in. That'll buy you time anyhow."

Barney *thought* he had it down — and it was getting smoother — until he barked the tires in third and K broke down laughing all over again. "Was that too much?" Barney asked through a grin.

"No, no — do that *every time* in *every gear*," K laughed. "Bonus points for reverse."

"She's trying to test my healing when you send me flying into next week," Clint put in helpfully, though he was laughing as well.

"Don't listen to him," K said. "More peel outs."

"Mom says more peel outs," Barney called to Clint.

"Mom heals better," Clint called back.

"He needs the practice!" K defended. "How else will he win drag races at stop lights?"

"Lipstick," Clint said without missing a beat, and Barney just about swallowed his own tongue with the noise he made.

The boys kept picking on each other back and forth for the rest of Barney's lesson, building up to an excellent mood until they finally stopped so K and Barney could switch places and, as Clint put it, get home safely.

"Such a weak stomach," K teased. "I'm sure Barney will be dying to go when *you* learn."

"I don't heal," Barney said without missing a beat. "I can't go."

"Chicken," K shot back before Clint could even get there, and Clint simply gestured toward K with one hand as if to say "what she said."

"Okay, fine," Barney said. "But only so I can rub it in when he takes an age and a half to get gear shifting down."

"I dunno," K said as she fixed the seat. "He was pretty fast with archery ..."

Clint grinned triumphantly. "Besides," he sang out when Barney looked like he would argue, "I've got a big brother to watch make all the mistakes first."

"I think you mean you get to learn from me when I do it *right*."

K shook her head and put it into gear to get moving. They still had a way to go before they set up camp again, and fun as it was to play in the parking lot, it was time to move.

Baby's First Kidnapping

Chapter Summary

In which Barney gets to find out firsthand how much trouble his brother is perpetually in.

K had driven to the end of the lot and just turned to head for the road when a big, black SUV pulled across the entire exit, blocking them from even going around. She narrowed her eyes and didn't say a word as she threw the car in reverse and squealed the tires backward, slamming it into first as she whipped the front end around, drifting the car until it was facing the other way. The tires were smoking before they caught, and they rushed to the far end of the lot to try that exit — only to stop short at the same results. And by that time, more SUV's, vans, and larger vehicles were lining the edges of the lot beyond the guard rails, blocking them all the way around.

"Mom," Clint said quietly, but he didn't say anything else. He knew how much trouble they were in, and he couldn't quite hide his fear when he knew who they were likely dealing with.

"Hit your button," she said, throwing it into reverse again. She might not have been able to get them *out*, but she figured she'd take a few out while they could. Or that was the plan until the armed troops came out with the rifles raised. She swore under her breath but didn't take her focus off of the soldiers around them. "Okay. So. Barney, you know how to drive now. Tell the guys this was Army."

She put the car in neutral — not park — and left it running, though she pulled the parking brake. "Don't forget to release the lever before you *get out*," K instructed before she gave them both a tight smile and then slipped out of the car.

"What about you?" Barney asked, though he was automatically climbing into the driver's seat — and couldn't believe that he kept getting driving lessons the hard way.

"I'm going to try cooperating," she said. "Maybe they'll leave you two alone."

"*Mom*," Clint breathed out.

"It's the only play I've got that can keep you two out," she said. "And the guys will come looking if you can tell them *who* it was. Carol has everything. She'll lead the charge."

Barney was nodding even though Clint was shaking his head. "I'll get Logan, too," Barney promised.

"Pretty sure he'd come looking without direction. Even if he shouldn't," K said before she winked at them and started toward the soldiers — hands up at shoulder height, palms to them.

She walked slowly, ignoring the sounds of rifles cocking around her, and when she was halfway between the car with the kids and the soldiers, the shouting really started up. It was hard to hear what exactly was being said with a dozen guys or more shouting on top of each other, but K could at least decipher what was going on. She stopped, then slowly turned in a circle before a couple dozen armed soldiers came up on her, rifles up and shouting more orders. In a matter of a few moments, she went from standing to kneeling to on her stomach, the whole while keeping her hands in view as the soldiers circled closer, fingers on the trigger every step of the way.

There were clearly conflicting orders — easy even for the boys to hear where they were — as several soldiers were shouting for her not to move while others were telling her what they wanted her to do. So, K did the only thing that made sense to her and stayed quiet, not moving until one of the soldiers came close enough to shove the muzzle of the rifle against the back of her head, pushing her into the concrete. That was the one she listened to as he shouted for her to cooperate as one of the others yanked her arms behind her back and cuffed her with something that hummed. A moment later, the same soldier was turning out her pockets, tossing anything she had in them in a small pile just out of sight. Wallet, cash, keys ... a pack of gum, and the panic buttons. They even went so far as to yank her boots off and toss them into the pile as well before one of them dragged her to her feet backward and another stepped forward to hold her other arm as the general made his appearance.

Her attention was drawn as one of the soldiers set fire to her things, and the instant she took her focus off of the men around her, *someone* took it as a threat and emptied half a clip into her torso.

And *that* was too much for either of the boys to ignore. Clint and Barney didn't even need to say anything to each other before Barney gunned it, at first aiming to get out and then, when the soldiers seemed to think the vehicle was a threat, aiming toward K, figuring he could give her some cover to heal while Clint pulled her into the car.

It was about as good of a plan as they were going to get when the soldiers around them were already trigger-happy and nervy. Barney *did* make it to K, but as soon as he slowed down close to her and the soldiers nearest her, several other men started shouting orders for him to stop or they'd shoot up the car.

"Barn..." Clint swallowed as he looked at how surrounded they were. "This looks bad."

"No kidding," Barney said — and he would have pulled off a perfectly dry delivery if he wasn't obviously scared, his hands tight on the steering wheel as he tried to figure out what to do. K had told them to get out, but they hadn't been *able* to in the first place... and now they were in trouble too. "You still got your panic button?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Think you can keep it hidden?"

"Um... against the Army?"

"You could always play it like we used to with the bad fosters. You're *close to* young enough to be wide-eyed, right?"

"You know these guys aren't the same level as the guys we dealt with as kids, right?"

"Yeah, but remember how you redirected those department guys at the circus by crying?"

"I was also seven."

"Hey, it's worth a shot."

Clint sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face, but he also could see the soldiers squaring up and knew they didn't have any *good* options, so he did his best to look scared and innocent — and he was very successful at *one* of those, anyway. He really was scared as they got out of the car with their hands up.

He was scared for Barney, too, because he might have been young enough to maybe get some sympathy from the Army (not from the department, though, he knew) but Barney was fifteen and mean. He was in trouble; Clint just knew it.

"Don't shoot!" Barney said, his hands high — but the soldiers were already moving in on him, considering he was the *driver*.

But that was really just a sign of how inexperienced Barney was. Clint watched in horror as his big brother got swamped and restrained, and he saw the moment Barney went from defiant to panicked. Barney hadn't even been kidnapped like this. He'd heard stories, though, and he was smart enough to know getting dragged away by guys in uniform like this was *so far beyond bad*.

Clint swore and fought back, but he was restrained and subdued soon enough too, which was how both Barton boys found themselves being put in separate vehicles. Three different transports for three different prisoners — all of them worried about each other, especially since both boys had been searched and they weren't sure if the X-Men or Avengers would be able to *find* them.

Barney was freaking out.

He'd gotten used to looking over his shoulder and looking out for his little brother. He'd stood up to abusers and drunks. He'd spent his winters in a school that was constantly being targeted by genocidal maniacs. But he'd never faced anything like *this*.

No one had ever dragged him off in a military vehicle. No one had ever handcuffed him. He'd had guns pointed at him before, but other than when he'd dealt with Creed alongside Logan, he'd never been in *so much trouble*.

The soldiers were all jumpy. Barney figured that was because they were dealing with K, and they knew she could take them down with both hands and a foot tied behind her back. He and

Clint were with K — she was their mom — so these guys had every reason to treat him like a major threat.

Except he wasn't like Clint and K. He couldn't heal. He'd never *done* this. And he was surprised by how much he couldn't get his terror under control. He'd always thought he'd be okay after being a big brother to Clint and taking the hits for him. This... was *not* the same.

Eventually, he was manhandled out of the vehicle, and he wound up trying in vain to spot Clint or K. That was only serving to make him panic more, of course. His brother and his new mom had been through *way* too much already; not knowing what was happening to them was only making his imagination go wild. And he had a pretty vivid imagination, too.

He didn't get any explanation before he was taken to what had to be a cell and locked in, left to his own thoughts and the overly loud heartbeat in his ears. Or, at least, he thought it was a heartbeat until he realized that what he was actually hearing was something else. Something *big*, way deeper in the building.

Barney was suddenly very sure he didn't want to know what that noise was.

"If you're smart," the guard nearest him said. "You'll just be quiet and do as you're told, kid."

"Not really known for being smart," Barney said almost automatically; it was an old answer.

"You might want to be anyhow."

"Right." Barney swallowed and glanced around the cell. "So.. you gonna read me my rights or what?"

"Nobody locked up here has any rights to be read, kid. Just keep your head down."

Barney narrowed his eyes at that but leaned against the wall of the cell all the same. He... wasn't very good at keeping his head down, but he was scared enough to try it. At least until he knew what the heck was going *on*.

He waited until the suspense had him pacing, and then he waited some more, spending every second convinced that something terrible was happening to Clint and K. Probably some new evil scientist or something. They called down the *worst* kind of trouble.

And then he heard the unmistakable sound of his little brother swearing in English and Swedish and even some Korean that Katie had taught him in giggled secrets.

Barney couldn't see far past his cell, but from what he could see when he strained, Clint was swearing and just generally being a pill for the guards trying to lead him down the hall. Barney wasn't sure if they were just taking Clint to a cell like his or taking him somewhere worse, but he was, at least, reassured to see Clint doing well enough to be that creative with his swearing. It was when Clint was *quiet* that it was time to worry.

And hey, it looked like they were headed his way, so maybe he'd at least know where *one* of his family members was while they were stuck there until one of the teams could get them out.

"...you didn't even know were physically possible to *have* your foot," Clint was saying as the guards dragged him forward. He was doing the exact opposite of keeping his head down, drawing attention from everyone around them and doing a good job of forcing the guards to work harder by being dead weight they had to drag.

Which was all the encouragement Barney needed to join Clint's crusade to annoy the guards.

"Hey, you're staying at this hotel too?" he called out to Clint.

Clint stopped fighting — just for a moment — and then grinned as he called back, "Apparently. I'm gonna run up a room service bill and then dine and dash, though. They've got *terrible* bellhops."

"Room service sucks, though," Barney said.

"Yeah, you try it out?"

"Got an order of 'stay quiet' and a side of 'you have no rights despite being an American citizen,'" Barney said, shooting a pointed glare at the guard who'd told him to keep his head down.

"Oh, you got *words*?" Clint was getting closer now, so Barney could see his wide-eyed look of pretended shock. "I got glares and threats. Jealous."

"Oh, I got glares too."

"They're complimentary. Come with the place."

"You both need to keep it quiet," the guard who had tried to advise Barney said.

"What, I can't talk to my own brother? Jeez," Barney said, rolling his eyes.

"You two really can't take a hint, can you?" The guy said, leaning toward Barney and lowering his voice. "Wait. Just wait."

Barney's every instinct said to screw the rules, but hey, *one* person in this place was being helpful, might as well at least try that out for size. "Fine," he said with a shrug.

Clint took his lead from Barney, if only because it was hard to keep up a back and forth with only one half of their duo, and the two of them had a whole conversation in dry expressions instead as the guards let Clint into Barney's cell.

In a second, Clint ran over and hugged Barney, then stepped back and started to sign furiously. *They took my button when they looked me over. We're gonna have to wait for Dad to realize something happened, and then he'll find us. Don't let them do anything permanent, okay?*

Like healing? These aren't those guys.

They're working with those guys. Clint bit his lip, glancing toward the door. They're letting us see each other. That usually means a carrot or stick. At least that's how this usually goes.

Trying to analyze the situation?

That's what I'm supposed to be learning to do, right? Plus, I've got experience.

Yeah, I hate that experience, you know that?

Me too.

Do you know what they want? Barney asked. He didn't realize he was putting himself between Clint and the guards, but he was already falling back into the same patterns he and Clint had established growing up together.

They haven't told me yet. But they must want something, Clint said. *They probably want us to get Mom to behave. That's happened before.*

With Sinister, Barney finished for him, nodding along; he still remembered the stories Clint had told after all that, especially since Clint had had nightmares about Sinister ever since. He *still* had those nightmares, too.

Clint had his arms crossed and was holding onto his elbows. *Yeah. With Sinister.*

Barney frowned when he saw how nervy Clint was, then bumped shoulders with him in an attempt to pull his attention into the present. *Hey, this isn't Sinister.*

I know, Clint replied, though he was still holding his arms tight to himself.

And you know Mom is going to escape soon and make them all regret grabbing us.

At that, Clint finally cracked a smirk. *True.*

These guys aren't at the same level as Sinister or the department, Barney reasoned. *As much as I hate to agree with that guard, if we keep our heads down, Mom will have us out in no time.*

Clint nodded. *It's what happens while we wait that scares me,* he admitted.

Barney didn't admit that he was worried about the same thing, because he didn't want to freak Clint out — especially because the guards were stepping back into the room to separate the boys again. Instead, what Barney said was, "Give 'em hell, Clint."

"Don't I always?" Clint said — proving the point by already making it hard for the guards to manhandle him.

Who's Controlling Who?

Chapter Summary

In which Clint's friendship with the Hulk is weaponized.

At that point, the guards were content to let Barney stay in his cell, but for Clint, they still had other plans, taking him deeper into the place, where the rumbling sound was easier to comprehend as roars and thuds. He couldn't identify *what* was roaring when it was still far below him, but that didn't exactly make him feel any better about the situation.

Especially not when they got far enough down the hall that he could see his mom behind one of the cell doors — still healing from how much she'd been shot when they took her in.

"Mom," Clint breathed out, then tried it again a little louder, really hoping that she was more alright than she looked.

"Don't waste your time, kid," one of the guards said, so Clint kicked him as hard as he could from the angle he was being pushed along.

"What did you losers do to her?" he demanded.

"You're not the one asking questions or making demands, kid."

"Like hell I'm not!" Clint twisted and dropped and did everything he could to be a pain. "Let me see my *mom*!"

"No," the other guard said, tightening his grip on Clint so he couldn't move as much. "And she'll stay right where she is in that dampener. If you're lucky, you'll get to see her before she's transferred to a Department H facility."

Clint was shaking his head hard by then. "You can't give her to *them*; they're the *bad guys*. I already *explained this* to your idiot boss!"

"You're the one siding with a known terrorist and fugitive—"

"Oh, wow, it's like talking to a brick wall."

"I'm not going to argue with you, kiddo. I'm sure she's told you all kinds of things to explain away why she was killing people like me that were just doing their jobs."

"Maybe you should ask your *buddies* in Department H who was ordering the hits," Clint shot back angrily.

"I don't have any buddies in Department H, kid," the guard said wearily. "I'm just doing my job — and you're just being belligerent."

"Being belligerent is *my* job," Clint insisted, though by that time, the guards were simply ignoring him, leading him past his mom toward the loud noises, deeper and deeper until Clint did, in fact, recognize the voice.

It was the Hulk.

Clint's eyes were wide, and he stopped fighting or even back-talking as he and the guards went deeper and deeper into the facility. The walls were starting to shake from the force of the Hulk trying to break out, and this time, without being able to see the situation, Clint was actually scared. He didn't want to get hurt in the collateral damage of a Hulk escape, even if he'd heal and even if he and the Hulk were on good terms. Actually, he *especially* didn't want to get hurt if that happened, because then the Hulk would be upset on his behalf.

Outside of a massively reinforced cell, a pair of differently-uniformed guys was waiting for them, which was when Clint realized this really was as bad as he was afraid it would be.

"We've got it from here," one of them told Clint's assigned guards.

Clint actually felt the guards hesitate, because they both held onto him a little tighter, but then, they seemed to relax a little bit more than normal as they stepped back and let each of the new guards take hold of Clint to push him forward.

So yeah, something screwy was going on.

Clint's original guards were well out of earshot when the new guys turned to Clint and gestured toward the vibrating walls that had just absorbed another hit. "Make him stop."

Clint blinked, his lips parted. "...what?"

"For some reason, he listens to you," the first guard said.

"Probably some baser instinct," muttered the second. "Considering who his parents are — animals that recognize each other."

Clint had heard his mom and dad being referred to that way, but somehow, it stung just as much to be on the receiving end of that kind of talk — which was itself a surprise, since he normally didn't care as much if *he* was getting flack. His mom's good work to build his own self-esteem suddenly meant he cared about being torn down like that. "*Hey.*"

The guards ignored him. "We'll start with something simple. Make him stop. Even you can understand commands like that, can't you?" When Clint glared, he smirked. "We'll start working on more complicated commands and controls down the line."

"Are you serious?" Clint stared at him. "He's my *friend*. He's not — he's not some *pet* or something. I'm not *in charge of him*."

"That part's true enough; you'll just be relaying orders."

Clint shook his head at that. "No way. I'm not working for you losers. I'm not helping you make *him* work for you either."

"Mm." The first guard turned to his partner. "You have the incident report drawn up?"

The second guard nodded. "Assault with a deadly weapon. Vehicle. Only option was to shoot the driver and stop the car. The two healers survived, but the teenage driver..."

Clint looked green. "Stop it," he said without thinking. "What are you talking about? Stop it!"

"Or what?" The first guard chuckled. "You'll yell at us some more?"

"You don't even know if it'll work," Clint said breathlessly — which was about when General Ross came down to see what the Hulk situation was. The General seemed surprised to see Clint so *close* to the cell, especially when Clint was understandably terrified (albeit for his brother, not necessarily of the Hulk).

"It'll work," the second guard said flatly. "You've already done it."

"Yeah, when we were *having fun*. If I try to *make* him... I mean, what if he decides I'm with you? He's not *stupid*; he's gonna figure out I'm doing what *you* say!" Clint was desperate, trying to find a way out that wouldn't hurt Barney.

"You'll heal."

"Hold on a minute," Ross cut in. "That's not the kind of thing *our* military tolerates. We don't use *children*."

"I tried to tell you—" Clint started to say, but the first guy cut him off.

"You saw the same footage we did, General. You wanted help containing the Hulk? You need to think outside the box."

"I didn't authorize kidnapping a *child* to have anything to do with the Hulk," Ross shouted back.

(Clint very nearly argued that he wasn't a child, but hey, it was nice to have the general backing him up, so he didn't.)

"Incidental catch," the guard said. "He was with his mother. We just saw the opportunity."

"The very definition of an *incidental catch* is one you didn't mean to get — but you *targeted* this kid." Ross gestured wildly. "The woman isn't a viable asset for now *anyhow*. You know that. It's too big a risk."

"She will be," the second guard replied. "And in the meantime, her kid can *direct* the Hulk. You saw it."

"*No one* wants to get a handle on the Hulk more than I do," Ross said. "But you are willfully insisting on doing the same things that got hundreds of *good men* killed."

The first guard grinned crookedly. "That's the beauty of it, General. The kid heals like his mom. No necks to risk."

It was clear that Ross was under the impression that the man in front of him was far stupider than he'd initially thought. "That doesn't change the fact that you are *trying to utilize a child!*"

"Mutant," the second guard put in.

"Bite me," Clint snapped.

"Don't push your luck," the second guard shot right back, glaring daggers at Clint — so Clint bit him, resulting in a very quick fight until Clint was pinned and snarling out every swear word he knew.

Very suddenly, the tone shifted with the general. "Do as you're told," Ross said toward Clint. "This will all go easier if you learn quickly to follow orders."

Clint looked away from the guard he was trying to kick toward Ross with an open look of disbelief. "What are you even talking about?"

"You need to tell the Hulk to back off," Ross said. "And you need to do it before I lose my patience and do something with your brother or mom." He tipped his chin down. "Do I make myself clear?"

Clint blinked a few times, his jaw slightly dropped, before he nodded quietly. "Uh-huh," he said, though he was trying to figure out what he'd *missed* that made the general switch sides so quickly.

Maybe he needed to ask Jean to look around when the X-Men came to get them. Which they would. Because Jean had told him after the last snatch job that she was *this* close to burning some creeps to a crisp. Which Clint thought sounded like a great idea.

With that, the guards let him into the *huge* area where the Hulk was being held — and where he was screaming and stomping and generally being as terrifying as the Hulk was able to be. Clint froze in the doorway, suddenly aware of how much smaller he was than the Hulk. It was easier to be scared of the guy in close quarters than it had been when they were racing each other trying to smash more bad guys.

Clint heard the door close behind him and swallowed, edging around the room to see if he could get in the Hulk's line of sight. A few times, an angry roar or a swinging fist or foot was too loud or too close for comfort, and he froze, cringing. He was being too quiet. He needed to catch the Hulk's attention when the big guy was focused the other way and trying to break free.

"Hey," Clint said, though it was too quiet and bubbled in his throat. He swallowed hard and tried again. "Hey, uh, fancy seeing you here," he said, which sounded very stupid when it came out of his mouth.

Still, the way the cell was built, even Clint's feeble attempt at sounding brave echoed slightly, just enough that the Hulk heard it and turned Clint's way, his chest heaving from the effort of trying to break out and his gaze more manic than Clint had seen it before — but Clint did, at least, see recognition there too.

So he could work with that.

Maybe.

He cleared his throat, unconsciously moving so his weight shifted from one foot to the other. "I... I, um, hi." He waved with one hand. "I got caught too. You okay?"

That single question seemed to get the Hulk's attention, and suddenly, Clint found himself being almost studied by massive, green eyes. "Hawk got caught," Hulk said in a rumble, his angry scowl turning into a deep frown.

Clint nodded. "Yeah. Me and my brother and my mom. Not fun, huh?"

The Hulk shook his head, still watching Clint carefully.

"So, uh." Clint cleared his throat and shifted nervously. "So, uh, if you could not bring the place down on me and my family, I'd really, really appreciate it. I know it totally sucks, though, right?" He gestured around the cell. "Worst amenities in New York."

The Hulk snorted. "You said it," he said, then gritted his teeth and let out a roar that sounded more hurt than angry.

Initially, Clint had backed up against the wall, but when he saw the way Hulk was shaking his head like he was trying to dispel whatever lingering hurt was still clinging to him, Clint took a step forward again. "Hey, what's wrong?" he asked. "How the heck did they hurt *you*?" He tried not to sound like he was scared, but, well, he was. For oh so many reasons.

The Hulk shook his head again. "Head hurt."

Clint frowned and glanced back toward the door, then jumped when the Hulk banged his head on the wall. "Woah, hey, maybe not?" he said, rushing forward, both hands out. "Don't hurt yourself worse!"

The Hulk let out a gravelly sound and hit his head again.

"Oookay." Clint ran around the Hulk again. "Hey. Something screwy is going on here, you know?" he said. "I'm pretty sure someone is — I think maybe a telepath. Something controlling. Something like that." When the Hulk shook his head hard again, he got even closer. "I'm pretty sure someone's controlling that general."

That finally got the Hulk to pay Clint more attention again. "Ross," he practically growled like a curse.

Clint nodded. "Yep. That guy." He gestured toward the door. "He was mad the bad guys caught me cuz I'm a kid. Next thing I know, he's all 'do as you're told, you pawn'." Clint

puffed his chest out and even did a passable imitation of Ross's speech patterns.

Hulk stopped what he was doing and even let out a sharp laugh. "Yellow Hawk is funny."

Clint grinned outright. "I do my best."

The Hulk smiled wider and crouched closer to Clint. "Yellow Hawk come with Hulk. Get out. Hulk smash more bad guys than Yellow Hawk."

Clint's smile dropped fast. "I'd really like to prove you wrong, but..." He looked toward the door. "But my mom and my brother..."

The Hulk frowned as he watched Clint. "Yellow Hawk scared?"

Clint nodded. And then, without even thinking about it, he rushed forward and did his best attempt at a hug at the Hulk's chest level. He was shaking and worried his brother wasn't going to live through this and scared out of his mind that the department was going to use him up like they did his mom... and it was weird, but the Hulk was safer than all of that out there.

The Hulk seemed downright surprised by the gesture and looked around the room as if someone would help him piece together why this small boy had attached to him. Then, awkwardly, he put a hand around Clint. "It's okay," he rumbled.

Clint nodded into his chest but didn't look up for a long time. When he did, his eyes were shining. "My brother doesn't have any powers," he whispered. "They're going to kill him if you and me don't do what they say."

Hulk narrowed his eyes and huffed angrily. "We smash them first."

"Please don't," Clint whispered.

The Hulk sighed, but he had never had to face a crying little boy who *cared* about him before. He was used to kids crying because they were scared of him. This was new.

And it was that simple fact — the newness of the situation — that made the Hulk nod his agreement.

Sublime

Chapter Summary

In which this escape attempt is not at all coordinated, and it shows.

As for K, to her surprise and irritation, the soldiers hadn't yet tried to find a use for her like they were using Clint. They kept her where she was and didn't let her heal more than to bind her wounds so she didn't bleed out in the dampener. But other than that, she was still nursing gunshot wounds and blood loss.

But that wasn't what had her annoyed.

She'd overheard the soldiers talking down the hallway about how she was the perfect *bait* for Wolverine. That was who they *really* wanted. She was nothing more than the honey in the trap.

She hated being underestimated. Especially when she could hear the soldiers talking about how she couldn't be a threat because she was a *woman* — and even more so now that she was a *mother*.

As if those things made her *less* likely to kill them — especially when they'd also taken two of her boys.

Still, K played into that assumption, slowly acting more and more injured than she actually was and simply watching the guards as they started to relax around her. They didn't think a small, hurt woman was much of a threat in a cell — especially not compared to the monster in the basement who had been surprisingly quieter lately.

They'd dressed her wounds — mostly — but they'd done a half assed job at best, and with the collar on, K really was losing blood. So it wasn't even a matter of good acting when she quit trying to hide the fact that she was shivering. Still, she exaggerated her level of awareness by simply curling up on herself a little tighter. She let her eyes slowly drift until they were almost closed — just leaving herself enough space between her eyelids that she could see a little of what was going on around her.

She wasn't stupid. She *knew* that they didn't want her *dead*. And she'd come close enough to bleeding out plenty of times to know what that looked like and how to replicate it *perfectly*.

Eventually, the guards got nervous enough that one of them came to check on her, and when she didn't respond to anything, they started to move from nerves into something more like controlled panic, eventually going so far as to call in someone she *wasn't* likely to stab to make a more thorough inspection.

"Make sure she's still alive," the guards told a fairly shocked Barney as they brought him to K's cell — which was the first time he'd seen her since they were captured, so he had *no* idea she was that hurt.

Barney approached K carefully, wary of how pale she already looked and of the fact that he could see she'd been wrapped up instead of allowed to heal. She was lying on the floor... He reached out to touch her and panicked almost instantly when she felt cold. "You need to get her out of here!" he insisted, spinning around to face the guards with wide eyes. "She needs to heal!"

"She still breathing?" one of the guards asked, though he looked nervous at what the answer was.

Barney was just as nervous, especially since, as he crouched down to check, K held her breath — and didn't blow her sneak when Barney blew straight past panic into freaking out as he rushed back to the door. "You *have* to let her out. You can't just let her *die*!"

The guards shared a look but didn't look as if they knew what the right answer was — and the more senior of the two turned into his radio to call for backup. And when the request from the higher ups was for him to go in and check for himself, he didn't look thrilled. He blew out a breath and handed his weapon to the other guard as he stepped into the cell to check on her himself, anxious as he crouched down next to her.

"C'mon, K," Barney whispered, on the verge of an honest to goodness breakdown even as the guard checked her over. "Please, Mom, c'mon."

It took a long moment for the guard to *find* her pulse, and he looked more edgy when he did as he reported back that she had a pulse — but it was slow and faint. He couldn't count her breaths reliably — and told his superiors as much — which set off a whole level of panic outside of the cell and down the halls, even as Barney sank to the floor, watching in disbelief.

He'd already lost one mom, and he couldn't — he just *couldn't* — lose another.

The guard situated her flat on the floor, and it looked like he was fully expecting the doctors on the way to get to work with equipment and extreme measures. So, not one of them was expecting it when the lead scientist — swearing at all of them for their incompetence — knelt down next to K and promptly dropped backward minus his head.

They'd turned the inhibitor field off as the scientists showed up, and since K was *mostly* playing possum anyhow, all she really needed was to feel the buzz of the healing *working* to know she could start tearing into them. The guards were the first to go — since they were more likely to shoot *more*; then, she turned to the scientists and doctors to finish the job.

When K was finished, she turned to Barney, who was hastily trying to hide the evidence of his quiet breakdown, even though she'd been aware of him the whole time and, even if she hadn't, she could smell the saltwater on him.

"I'm sorry," she told him quietly, taking the time even in the middle of the cell in the middle of an escape to wrap her arms around him when he so desperately needed the reassurance. "I wasn't expecting them to bring you here."

Barney took a hitched breath and nodded into her arms. "I'm okay," he lied. "You're okay. So... yeah."

"Sure, we'll go with that for now," K said, helping him to his feet once he had stopped gulping in air. "Take a gun — I'll take one too — and we need to find your brother and get *out*."

"They wanted him to do something," Barney told her as he forced himself to focus and grabbed one of the guards' guns. "I don't know what. But they were dragging him around last I saw him."

"Show me where; I should be able to find the scent," K said. "Especially if I have a solid starting point — and everything *here* is kind of ... just blood."

Barney nodded and led the way backtracking down the hall toward where he'd been kept. "I only know which hall he went down after he saw me, sorry. That was yesterday..."

"Should be all I need," K promised. "I've worked with less." She closed her eyes and just breathed in the scents as she slowly walked a circle at the end of the hall, then leaned in the direction Clint's scent trail went and started down it, waving for Barney to keep up. She didn't *like* that they were going deeper into the facility. And she didn't like that they had to go down lower into the complex. Nothing about this felt like they were going to escape. But she couldn't leave without Clint. And she couldn't send Barney ahead outside to deal with the guards and full force of the military on his own. She honestly didn't know how *she* would get out — even without the boys in play.

What K and Barney didn't realize was that Clint had overheard the call for backup on the radio one of the men who brought him back down to the Hulk's cell was wearing. He'd *heard* his brother panicking, and he knew *exactly* the tone Barney had been using, too — the same one he'd used when he had to tell Clint their parents weren't coming back.

It was a familiar kind of dread, and Clint's hearing fuzzed out as he stopped listening to anything but Barney on the other end of the radio — and then to nothing but his own whirring heartbeat that he couldn't get under control enough to listen to what the creeps wanted out of him and the Hulk that morning.

"...understand?"

Clint blinked at the man giving the orders, his ears still rushing. "I... I can't ... I need my mom," he said. He felt like he was barely four years old all over again, trying to wrap his head around his mom never coming home again. It was the same thing. All over again.

The man glared at him, his eyes flashing. "I don't have time for this. Get the Hulk to follow you or lose what's left of your family. *Go*."

Clint tried to swallow down his panic, but he couldn't. He *couldn't*. He needed his mom. He needed to be with Barney.

Barney.

That was enough to get his feet to move again, at least. Barney didn't sound like he was in a position to defend himself. Or even function. Not that Clint was doing any better at that. So he had to keep him alive.

Clint was almost shaking from head to toe when he practically stumbled in to where the Hulk was. He was trying — he really was — but all he could think about was that his mom wasn't breathing, and Barney was freaking out, and this was all really, *really* bad.

"Hey," Clint said, then cleared his throat and tried again, because he hadn't actually managed more than a whisper. "Hey, uh, we're supposed to go..." He gestured vaguely toward the door, blinking too many times because he did *not* want to cry.

The Hulk turned his attention to Clint and frowned deeply. It was obvious to anyone that Clint wasn't okay. "Yellow Hawk hurt?" the Hulk asked, sounding like he was ready to go to war for him.

"No," Clint promised. "No, I just—" He closed his eyes and tried to center himself, and that was when he felt a new presence in his mind, not at all warm and inviting like Jean's was when she taught telepathic defense but sharp and honestly *painful* enough to get Clint to take a step back.

The assault on his mind didn't last long at all before he straightened up, lifted his chin to meet the Hulk's narrowed-eyed gaze, and said, "Come on. Follow me."

The change in Clint's demeanor was so obvious that the Hulk started to shake his head, taking a threatening step forward with his eyes narrowed. "Bring Yellow Hawk back," he growled.

"I'm right here," Clint said calmly, even though internally, he was *freaking out*.

"No," Hulk replied, drawing himself up as he squared up with Clint. "Bring. Yellow Hawk. Back," he demanded, getting louder with every word, towering over Clint.

"Or what?" Clint heard himself say, as if from far away. "You'll what, hit me?"

For only a second, the Hulk blinked, letting out a frustrated roar when he *couldn't* just smash the problem in front of him — though the guards at the door that tentatively came for Clint when there wasn't a resulting Hulk rage were a different matter entirely.

The second one of the guards got too close to Clint, that was it — the Hulk snapped. And with every bit of pent-up rage he'd been building since he got there, he rushed toward them, bellowing his displeasure as he batted both guards away with one massive hand, not realizing Clint was already moving *with* the guards until there were *three* distinct sounds of people hitting the reinforced walls and then falling to the ground to lie still.

That was enough to get the Hulk's attention, and he spun to see the guards splayed out at odd angles, along with his new friend, who was very, very still and breathing shallowly where he lay.

With that, the Hulk let out a bellowing cry, scooping Clint up with one hand before he simply smashed his way through anything between him and getting his friend to *help*.

A couple floors above where the Hulk was destroying things, the men following K and Barney suddenly changed directions as all hands were called to deal with the Hulk. The problem for K and Barney, then, was that the Hulk was the same direction Clint's scent was.

K didn't have a good plan at that point, and when chunks of concrete started to fall, it was clear they needed to get somewhere more stable. "We need a place to hide," K told Barney. "I will find him, but you need to get hidden."

"Hide *where*?" Barney asked, gesturing toward the cracks forming in the ceiling. "This place looks like it's coming down!"

"We gotta go up first," she agreed. "Stairwell. If we can get away from this section of the main building, the larger wing will go away from this hole in the ground."

Barney nodded, though he was still looking the opposite direction. "Clint's that way, though..."

"I will find him if it's the last thing I do," K swore. "But I need to know you're safe *too*. And you can't go with me. They'll kill you."

"They'll kill you and Clint too," Barney pointed out.

"*No*, they won't," K said. "You said they had a *use* for Clint. And... well ... they don't want me dead either." When Barney didn't look convinced, she laid it out for him. "Alright, listen — I know I've told you these people look at me and *most* mutants as animals, right? Well ... if they can't make me behave or work for them, they *would* try to use me for *babies*, okay?" She gave him a raised eyebrow look. "They won't kill me. I'm too *valuable*."

Barney's jaw dropped open. "...augh," he managed at last, pulling a spectacular face.

"Yeah, try it from my point of view, sweetheart."

"I really don't wanna."

"Me either," she agreed, pushing him along. "But please ... let's get you safe; then I'll find Clint."

Barney decided not to argue with her, purely because he was still so freaked out by what she'd told him. And K had been right about the relative stability of the facility as they moved away from the chaos in the lower levels. Higher and further out, they could still *hear* roars and rumbles, but the building was a lot sturdier. So they could actually *safely* hide.

He was still surprised, though, when K pushed him toward the *vents*, of all things.

"Umm... is this... safe?" Barney asked, though he felt dumb as soon as he'd asked it, since *nothing* in this place was safe.

"Safe enough," she said, then handed him her gun, too. "You need the back up weapon. Go down the shaft, find a turn and stay out of sight."

"You'll come back when you find Clint, right?"

"Oh yeah," she agreed. "I can sniff you down no problem. So don't be afraid to get away from this vent."

Barney nodded, gripping the gun tight. "Good luck."

"Love you, kiddo," she said before she closed the vent and screwed it back down — just so nothing looked out of place. With one last look, K finally turned and headed off back the way they'd come, intent on looking for Clint, though everything felt far more fragile the closer she got to the entrance to the lower levels. She wasn't entirely sure if she wasn't going to end up burying herself under tons of concrete when the building went down in that section — and she was pretty sure it was going to go down.

But she couldn't ignore that the sublevels were the last place that Clint had been — so she went down anyhow, trying to tune out the alarms and flashing lights all the way. She avoided soldiers, but only because most of them were focusing on trying to recover research ahead of the collapse. Whatever had happened that had the place rocking was already *done*.

Which meant a whole lot of creeps were all riled up and looking for a fight. K did her best work avoiding them, hiding in shadows and even simply behind doors as men rushed by and boots marched all around. She'd picked up Clint's scent and was following it deeper when she hit a wall of sorts as someone nailed her with a psychic attack. She wasn't sure if she was in a dampener zone *herself* or if the guy had something to boost his signal, but either way, he'd managed to stop her in her tracks. She found herself trying to find a place that was out of the way to *try* and get out of sight, but she couldn't focus enough to do so. So, instead of finding a spot to hide, she ended up on her hands and knees trying to find a way to ease the pain.

It was kind of wild from Barney's perspective, too, since whoever was hitting her with a psychic attack clearly didn't think *he* was any threat. So he didn't know what was going on when K went down; he only knew that he'd been trying to go deeper in the vents and heard her cry out.

Which wasn't exactly comforting.

He scrambled deeper into the facility, trying not to choke on some of the dust of debris that was in the vents closer to whatever had happened. He didn't get there in time to *see* K, but he did manage to overhear someone sounding smug and self-important as he ordered men to carry her back to her cell now that she was "subdued."

Which didn't sound great, admittedly. But, well, Barney knew where her cell was. And ... the higher-ups were scrambling to deal with K and the Hulk and Clint.

Maybe Barney could use the fact that they weren't even paying him any attention.

It took him longer than he was comfortable with, and he kept expecting to be discovered and dragged out of the vents, so he had a death grip on the gun he kept dragging along with him. But still, somehow, he managed to find a vent that connected to a supply closet. And, hey, that wasn't guarded, and it suited his needs perfectly.

He climbed out of the vents and searched the shelves until he found a spare radio. He didn't know what kind of range it had, and he'd have to play with it somewhere quiet until he figured out what frequencies he *couldn't* use, but, well, if the X-Men and Avengers were looking for them — and they had to be by then, if they weren't already headed there to investigate the damage from the Hulk — then they'd probably be looking for any distress call, right?

Barney sighed and climbed back into the vents. He hoped his makeshift S.O.S. worked sooner rather than later.

As for Clint and the Hulk, they were far from Ross and the department within an hour. Clint was still unconscious — he'd broken several things when the Hulk had hit him and he hit the wall — so he'd missed the show as the Hulk raged his way out of there while keeping Clint from any *more* harm.

It probably wasn't going to do either of them any favors for the department to see that in play, but at least they were out. They could worry about long-term implications later.

Eventually, the Hulk had stopped running, and when no one came after them, he'd finally been relaxed enough away from the telepathic interference that had been bugging him before that he shrank down again — leaving Bruce Banner trying to once again piece together what to do *now*.

Bruce had to take a second to adjust — and then do a double-take when he realized that he was far from home with an *unconscious kid* in tow. He frowned and knelt down by Clint, but when his vitals looked okay, he shook his head and got to his feet, looking around... trying to figure out what to *do*.

This definitely wasn't the usual kind of Hulk trouble.

Not that there *was* a usual kind of trouble there...

Bruce was still considering the situation when Clint finally started to wake up and let out a soft groan, putting a hand to his head. "Ugh. My whole *body* is tingling," Clint said, waking up a little faster because he was still *bothered* by the sensation of healing. He wasn't driven to insanity like Deadpool, but it wasn't exactly comfortable either when he felt like he was buzzing everywhere.

Bruce frowned and turned his attention back to Clint. He knew from Tony what the story was with Clint and his healing, but he'd never heard Logan or K *complain* after a hard hit, so he wasn't sure... "Is that normal?"

Clint turned to face him and then smiled and twirled his finger in the air in celebration. "Oh, hey, you figured out how to be small again, yay!" He lay his head back down in the dirt. "Buzzing should go away. It's normal, yeah. It just sucks."

Bruce let out an interested hum as he sat down. "I didn't know that."

"I didn't either until I got it," Clint said, still lying down but squirming slightly, unable to get comfortable with the buzzing. Finally, he sighed and rolled so he could prop himself up on one elbow and look Bruce's way. "So, um, what happened?"

"I have *no* idea."

"Great." Clint lay back down again. "Last thing I remember, someone was in my head. Like, telepathically? And they weren't exactly being nice. Ringing any bells? Maybe? Possibly? Hopefully?"

"Clint ... that ... could be a lot of people," Bruce pointed out. "Telepaths aren't exactly rare these days."

"Yeah, I know." Clint sighed. "I didn't recognize the guy. But I can guarantee Jean's gonna be pissed at him."

"I can't say that I feel sorry for him," Bruce replied. "Kinda earned whatever it is."

"That's what my dad says."

Bruce frowned and did a small double take, shaking his head to himself. "You alright? Now that you're not *buzzing*, I mean? Or are you still buzzing? I don't ... that's *not* normal, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Clint said, looking down at himself. "I'm okay. It's mostly faded. I mean, it's still there... I must have had to do some serious healing. Kinda glad I don't remember it."

"Do you know how that happened to you?" Bruce asked slowly.

Clint glanced at Bruce, bit his lip, and shrugged. "Kinda all happened fast."

"What are you trying not to tell me?" Bruce asked, but the way he had let his shoulders slump and the tone he was using made it pretty clear that he suspected that the other guy had something to do with it at *minimum*.

"Woah, hey, it — I mean, I'm pretty sure I was just in the wrong place. Looked like you were going for the guards manhandling me." He sat up better and gave Bruce his best winning smile. "I'm fine! I heal."

"Clint, I know that even if you heal, that doesn't make it alright, no matter how your parents handle it themselves."

"Yeah, but it wasn't your fault," Clint promised quickly.

"The excuse of it being the Hulk doesn't really hold much water with anyone," Bruce said.

"No, I meant — it wasn't *his* fault either," Clint said. "Someone was in his head too, I'm pretty sure. He said it hurt."

"Well that's just *great*," Bruce muttered under his breath. He helped Clint to his feet and looked around at the lack of any signs of civilization. "We gotta get out of here. Before they go tracking the gamma radiation."

"They can do that?"

Bruce nodded. "So we should go. Try to put some distance between us and them." He stopped, then turned around, staring around them. "I don't suppose you know which way we came from, do you?"

"Sorry, left my map of the world at home," Clint said dryly. Then, seeing how genuinely tired Bruce looked, Clint sighed. "I'm gonna project as loud as I can for help. Professor X or Jean will hear me sooner or later."

"Won't that clue in the wrong telepath, too?"

"No one's as powerful as Jean," Clint promised. "She'll catch up."

"Good luck with that. I'm still going to start walking."

"I'll come with you," Clint clarified. "Just... gonna be real loud in my head, too."

X v A

Chapter Summary

Hi, sorry life has gotten away from us. But we haven't forgotten about this story, promise!

The X-Men and the Avengers had, of course, been looking for Bruce and K and the Barton boys the whole time they were missing. Logan himself already had a few good ideas of where they'd gone, but he didn't have it narrowed down just yet. He had about six places on his list, and he was seriously thinking about just hitting them all one after the other when one of them finally pinged — the Hulk's escape had tripped multiple surveillance codes in Tony's system.

Of course, they weren't sure if the others had escaped *with* the Hulk — and they didn't know where Hulk was headed, either — but that was enough information to Logan, who simply handed James to Jean and told Kurt to take the girls to Matt's place as he slipped out of there.

The Avengers took a bit longer to get in gear, purely because they wanted to get a *firmer* location. Tony kept an eye on Hulk's trajectory, but it was Steve who found the radio signaling SOS. They didn't know which of their friends was transmitting it, but it was coming from the busted-up facility. That meant someone was still inside.

So, both teams geared up to go — which meant Kurt needed to take the Bishop girls to Matt Murdock's place. Jean had James as well as the twins and Rachel, and with everyone chomping at the bit to go get their too-often-kidnapped friends, pulling in backup for the kids' care wasn't a bad idea.

Besides, Kurt wanted to get after his best friend — and quickly. This all had the makings of a trap, and he knew Logan knew that, too; he just also knew that his friend wasn't going to see sense until his family was safe and accounted for.

And now that Kurt was himself a father, well, he understood that only too well.

When he showed up at Matt's place, Foggy was the one to answer the door — and then simply raise an eyebrow when he saw Kurt standing there with the girls. Then, Foggy stepped back and called into the house, "Matt, your godkids are here. Better break out those Disney movies I bought you!"

Matt was already shaking his head at Foggy as he came out of the living room, where it looked like he and Foggy had been drinking and relaxing after a case. "Heard the teleport," he told Kurt, then had to laugh when Katie and Susie both launched themselves at him. He crouched down so he could catch them, but they still toppled him nearly backwards.

"Daddy has to go get Mom and Clint and Barney," Katie told him, her eyes wide.

"What happened?" Matt asked, already crouching down to Katie's level. "Are they alright?"

Katie shrugged. "I dunno yet, but the 'Vengers say that the Hulk's missin', too, so probably they're okay, cause of how the Hulk likes my Clint so much."

"Well that's the hope," Kurt said. "Clint *was* good with the Hulk. I'm not sure about the other two."

"Oh, yeah, totally normal," Foggy said, shaking his head as he leaned against the table near the front entrance. "One hundred percent something you just shrug off when a kid makes friends with the biggest, greenest cause of property damage this side of anywhere."

"Those are very good modifiers," Kurt teased, then gave Katie a kiss on top of her head. "Will you girls be alright keeping watch over these two?"

"I'll take real good care of 'em," Katie promised.

"Yeah, I'll make sure they get sleep and stuff," Susie added — smiling a little more with a *job* to do. "Matt needs it sometimes."

"He certainly does," Kurt agreed, then made a point to smile Susie's way before he turned his attention to Matt. "If you feel you need backup, you'll need to look toward the Four. The Avengers are mobilizing as well."

Both of Matt's eyebrows shot up. "Sounds serious."

"It's an international incident already," Kurt said, knowing that Matt would get the hints and keep them in mind when it came to being prepared with backup.

Thankfully, Matt seemed to get it, and he nodded slowly. "Yeah, I'll make sure a few others are in the loop."

"We'll be in touch as soon as we can," Kurt promised before he winked at the girls and disappeared in a poof.

Meanwhile, Logan had already made his way toward what he was sure was the most likely spot for the department and the joint military at large to have taken his family. He didn't wait for the teams. Didn't have the patience or the time to sit around and strategize when the push at the moment had to be action. He knew the kind of crap that they'd try to pull. He'd lived enough of it to remember what kinds of tricks would be at the top of the list, and he didn't want to get there to find that his wife had been through a mind wipe or something worse.

And he knew damn well that would be at the top of the list of things that needed to be done *to her* so they could use her. He had no idea what that might do to Clint, but it would be akin to a death sentence for Barney. None of it was something he was able to just ... wait and see.

So, he was long gone by the time the Avengers or the X-Men could even load up their jets. He'd stolen a mini jet to get there first, knowing that they'd likely catch up eventually. And they were welcome to bat clean-up as far as Logan was concerned. He really didn't need either group to play Jiminy Cricket for him anyhow. Not when these creeps had a whole world of hurt coming for them.

He landed just a few miles out, under cover and under radar, but he figured it was going to be a hard, slow trek to the facility. He just hadn't really expected them to be quite so populated at the site. There were more soldiers and security there, patrolling, recovering, and starting cleanup after the Hulk's hasty exit, so he had to go incredibly slowly to avoid detection. What's more, the mess that the Hulk had made also made it hard to scent out where he was going or where his people were. But he still worked his way into the building, avoiding the guards and soldiers. He had to stop himself from outright killing a doctor or three as he passed them by just for the way they were talking, and instead of acting, he cataloged their scents away to maybe find later if he couldn't get who all he'd come for.

He was several levels down before he caught a somewhat fresh marker that belonged to Barney, though it wasn't flowing the way it should have. Scent trails were supposed to be in a line. Any line. Anything following the path of who or what he was tracking. But this ... it was just hanging in the air with no direction, no points of contact. And for the first few rooms, it bugged the hell out of him trying to figure out how and why he was finding that scent so ... dispersed.

Until he realized why that was. He'd taken a step to leave the room he was in, then paused and stepped back, looking around the room at large to find ... yep. Central ductwork. He started for the grate high on the wall and pulled himself up to get an idea of where the kid was. He could find the others once he checked in with Barney. Chances were good Barney had a solid idea of what might have happened and where the others might be anyhow.

He double-checked that no one was around and that there were no cameras before he pulled himself into the ductwork and closed the grate behind himself, half scrunched up just to fit and hoping like hell he found the kid before he found a weak point in the ducts.

But even with the enclosed space, it was no easy thing to find the kid. The scent was blowing though the ducts, after all. All Logan knew was that the boy was upstream somewhere.

And then, Barney let him know where he was by calling out, "Come any closer and you'll get shot."

"Go ahead if you need to," Logan called back quietly. "Won't bug me much."

"*Logan?*" Barney's relief was palpable, and Logan could hear him scooting through the ductwork. "Man, am I glad to hear you."

"Keep quiet, kiddo," Logan advised. "Still got plenty of those morons wandering around. You got any idea where your brother and K are?"

Barney's head appeared around a corner, and he looked wide-eyed. "No idea where Clint is, but I followed K as far as I could," he whispered low. "Clint was down toward where the

Hulk was."

"You got a locator on you?" Logan asked, already pulling his off of his belt to hand over.

Barney shook his head as he took Logan's. "They searched us."

"Keep that one on you then," he said. "And point me to where I'm headed. The others're probably on the way now. That'll bring them right to you."

"Okay, perfect," Barney said, gripping the locator tighter, then scooting around so he could reposition and show Logan where he'd lost track of K — where the ductwork took a dive and then a turn Barney had obviously decided he couldn't navigate. But he *did* show Logan the closest vent to where he's lost track of K with a whispered, "Can you track her from here?"

"If I can get a scent, I can find her," Logan promised. "Hell, even if I can't, I've got a direction. I'm on it."

"She said they wanted her for babies," Barney whispered as he backed up to give Logan room to get out.

Logan stiffened up on hearing it, but nodded curtly to confirm that ... he was probably right. "Not letting that happen." He slipped past Barney and rushed off, a little too keyed up to try and say anything else with that on his mind now, too.

The trail from where Barney had pointed him really wasn't that hard to track, though there was a pretty heavy note of blood in the scents, and it just ... it felt too easy, if he was being honest. But he wasn't focused enough to really care much about that when he knew Barney wasn't wrong.

Especially with how little she would be cooperating.

The soldiers that were in his way when the scent started to concentrate gave him a fight, sure. But after he'd killed a few, it was almost like they wanted him to keep going forward. But again, he was so *close* to where she was and was worried enough that he really didn't care what the deal was. Not when he could get to her, get her moving, and get her out.

When he did find her, seeing her still on a cot in a tiny cell did nothing to help his focus, and anyone between them wasn't breathing for very long as he cut his way to her.

He just hadn't realized how little time they'd needed to screw with her, and the look she gave him when he got her to face him after cutting into her cell was one that held no recognition at all. "Come on, sweetheart, time to get movin'."

But K pulled her arm away from him and backed toward the wall. "Don't touch me."

"Is this man bothering you?" asked a man as he stepped into the confrontation, smirking as he tipped his head Logan's way.

"I ... maybe," she said, though she looked confused as she put more distance between herself and Logan.

"Don't worry; I'll take care of it."

Once Logan's locator beacon went off, the heroes coming to get their friends knew exactly where to go — which meant that, once they landed, they had an exact location, and they could save time on the search.

"Tony," Steve started to say as Jan landed the Quinjet.

"Already tracking the Hulk's gamma signature," Tony said over the comma. "I can scout it ... see what kind of trouble we're looking at there, because I can tell you already ... it's not the same spot."

"Of course it isn't," Steve said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Never is," Scott said over the comms from the blackbird.

"Um, am I the only one that expected a much more distinct trail of destruction if it *was* the same location?" Tony asked. "Think about it ... those two do not play well."

"Depends on if he's still big and green," Jan pointed out.

"Pretty sure they still don't like each other too much," Tony countered.

"Fair point, handsome," Jan said, just because he sounded stressed out even if he was playing it cool over comms.

"Tell you what," Tony said. "Scanners are good enough that I won't approach unless there's no sign of unnaturally green drama. Tiny Banner drama ... I'm there for it."

"Good luck," Jan said.

"You too," Tony said before he signed off, leaving the teams to deal with whatever mess they were walking into.

Both the blackbird and the Quinjet landed with enough space from the facility that they were reasonably sure they wouldn't get blasted in the air, but from there, as soon as the team hit the ground — they were *off*.

"Pietro, you've got the location," Steve said. "Think you can—"

"Oh, yeah, absolutely," Pietro said before Steve could finish and zipped off.

Scott let out a sigh and tipped his head toward Kurt. "Make sure he doesn't die," he said, and Kurt smirked and disappeared as well.

They hadn't even gotten close enough to the facility to blast their way in before Pietro came back, too — with Barney on his shoulders. "Found a kid," he said and set Barney down, since the kid was already protesting being carried like he was younger than he was. "But no one else was around. Oh, and also? It looks like everyone's packing up to leave. Might want to

check in with our Wolverine, because it sure didn't *seem* like everyone was running screaming."

"Where are they positioned to evac?"

"Looked like they were headed sublevel, so I'm guessing tunnels to an exterior point," Pietro said.

"Oh, of course," Scott muttered, his eyes glowing slightly brighter. "Alright. We need a couple people topside to look for the exterior extraction and make sure we don't get boxed in. Everyone else—" He glanced toward Steve. "Sounds like Wolverine's sprung the trap already. Let's see how prepared they are for the rest of us."

Pietro stayed topside and was already trying to run a search to see if he could spot where the tunnels led out, and Jan stuck with Barney, already fussing over him despite his protests. But that meant that everyone else ran in, following a red blast that knocked down the double doors of the entrance and part of the wall.

As Pietro had said, most of the people there were evacuating, since they had Logan and presumably everyone else but Hulk. So they weren't prepared for the backup force, and they *especially* weren't prepared for both the Avengers and the X-Men.

The soldiers closest to topside weren't nearly as concentrated as they should have been, so they went down fast to a combination of blasts, shield strikes, teleports, and ice, as well as a few solid punches. But once the teams got moving deeper into the facility, there were more soldiers.

And then, Kitty glanced over to where Scott had been and stopped, grinned, and put her hand on Piotr's arm to direct his gaze. "Ohmigosh," she squeaked delightedly.

It was clear Scott and Steve weren't even *aware* that they'd synced up with each other so effortlessly, but Kitty couldn't stop giggling over it. As soon as it became clear that the soldiers had rallied enough to be an actual *obstacle* to getting to Logan and K and Clint, it was like a switch went off. The two team leaders were nearly back to back, and they didn't say a *word* between them as they took down the soldiers. Wherever Scott focused his beams, Steve was bouncing his shield off of soldiers in the opposite direction; and when Steve would point a new way, they would effortlessly redirect so that there was no one group of soldiers able to regroup fast enough.

"Jean's gonna be so jealous she missed this," Kitty said, grinning delightedly. "I don't think Scott even *knows* he's doing that."

"He is very determined to find Wolverine," Piotr said, though he was smirking hard.

"Oh, *very*," Kitty said, which got Bobby snickering nearby.

But between Scott and Steve, the soldiers were on the run fast, so after that brief moment of levity, they had to redirect, rushing down the entrance to the tunnels that had just opened up. And when Kurt saw Logan, he let out a cry of anger and teleported right to where Logan was,

running his sword through the guards around Logan before teleporting his friend away — not that Logan could do much to help them when he had a helmet on, chains, and a *muzzle*.

"Kitty!" Scott called out when he saw Logan — and saw that Logan was swaying and looking ill from the teleport. "Get those things *off*."

"Got it, got it," Kitty said as half the heroes closed ranks around her and Logan and the rest kept pushing the soldiers, trying to find Clint and K.

"Found her!" Warren called out — though no sooner had he said as much than he let out a strangled shout as someone pushed into his head. He toppled out of the sky, gasping in a few breaths — and to the teams' alarm, he then turned back to the others and tackled Bobby off his ice path.

"Augh!" Bobby managed to get out of Warren's grasp by freezing his grip, but that didn't make it any less disconcerting when his friend was attacking him. Even if he was, sadly, used to it.

"What just happened?" Steve asked, his shield out in front of him, though his eyes were narrowed.

"They must have a telepath," Scott said, shaking his head. "Bobby's fine. We need to get K before they get her on a transport."

"You're not concerned about—"

"I'm married to *Jean Grey*. Why the hell would I be concerned about any other telepath?" Scott shot back, still running down the path Angel had taken.

Sure enough, there was K, muzzled and restrained — but not nearly as much as Logan had been. That was probably because she looked half dazed and sedate next to a smirking man whose eyes were alight with power.

Scott's eyes were bright behind his visor, and he had raised his hand to let this guy have it — only to get hit from behind with a vibranium shield. "*What the hell*," Scott ground out, seeing stars, but before he could wrap his head around it, he could already hear Steve running his way. He rolled out of the way and then onto one knee, glaring when he saw Steve catch his shield off a rebound.

"Pretty cowardly move hiding behind my teammates," Scott said without taking his eyes off Steve.

"'Coward' is just a word you use when you want someone to relinquish their power and call it a fair fight," the man replied.

Scott narrowed his eyes, but just then, Steve drew back his shield, and Scott reacted on instinct, knowing a department telepath would just as soon order Steve to kill him as capture him. Before Steve could release the shield, Scott opened up his visor and put Steve nearly

through a wall with the blast. Halfway through it, Steve managed to get his shield between himself and Scott, but it was obvious Steve was panting and hurt.

Which Scott was sure he'd feel bad about later.

In the meantime, though, he pressed his advantage, opening up the power a little more until Steve had to crouch behind his shield, letting the vibranium take the blast for a good, long while. Scott let up, and Steve jumped to his feet, flinging the shield Scott's way.

Scott took it in the chest, and it just about knocked every bit of air out of him — and probably broke a few ribs or seven — but it also meant that the shield wasn't in Steve's hands anymore. So, all he had to do was open the visor again, and the next second, Steve was laid out on the ground, totally unconscious.

Scott winced and tried to push himself up, already mad at the *smug* look on the face of the guy next to K. But before he could get up — or try to — he smelled sulfur, and Kurt teleported right to where K and her captor were, using the man's gloating moment of distraction against him to put his sword through the man and then teleport off with K.

"Anyone know where Clint is?" Bobby asked, picking himself up from where Warren had just punched him, though Warren was blinking out of it fast.

"We'll see if he's already been loaded up," Kitty offered, already running ahead with Piotr, though when they opened the door to see that the transports hadn't taken off, Kitty simply started to phase through them one at a time, looking for a hold or any sign of the youngest captive.

Across the way, once K had a handle on the teleport's after-effects, she was pushing Kurt away and trying for *distance*. "Get *away*," she hissed, though she was still out of it, all things considered, and lost her balance in her attempt to get back while still dealing with restraints and all that went with them.

"Give her space, Elf," Logan said from not too far away. "They screwed with her head. Didn't recognize me."

"*Entschuldigung, fraulein*," Kurt said as he stepped back, though he stayed close by. "My friend can help you with those restraints if you will allow him. I'm afraid the girl who helped him out of *his* is currently looking for an eleven-year-old trouble magnet."

"I'll wait."

"As you like," Kurt said, though he was frowning hard, especially when Kitty and Piotr came back not much later, looking wide-eyed.

"Clint's not on any of the transports," Kitty said.

"No, of course not, because that would make this too easy," Bobby muttered.

"Might be with the Hulk," Warren said as he helped Scott to his feet and put his arm underneath Scott's shoulders, since it was pretty clear Scott was already having a hard time staying upright after that hard blow.

Scott tried to shrug Warren off, but that wasn't happening, so he shook his head and went to his comm instead. "Stark, do you have a visual yet?"

"I was just listening in to your drama. Didn't think it was time to interrupt yet," Tony said. "But yes. Pretty sure I've got them. Headed in to make contact."

"We'll meet you there," Scott said as Bobby got Steve to his feet with a half-muttered joke about being on ice again.

"Coordinates are on your dash now," Tony answered.

"Alright. Keep us in the loop," Scott said as the teams got themselves moving to the jets.

Don't You Forget About Me

Chapter Summary

In which everyone is concerned about each other. Everyone.

"You making smores or did I miss the good stuff?" Tony asked as he came up to the clearing. He'd landed silently — or near enough to it — not far off before walking up to the little campfire, somehow not at all surprised to see that Clint and Bruce looked so... comfortable while everyone else was worried out of their minds about the two of them.

Clint picked his head up and grinned, waving Tony over. "Hey, did the team get my telepathic distress call?"

"I can't say ... not wired in to that particular circuit," Tony said. "But we got a whole bunch of distressing signals all at the same time. Seemed like it had your name on it."

"Sounds right," Bruce said as he got to his feet. "Clint's been filling me in. Seems like the Big Guy's been dealing with a telepath too."

"Sounds like a recurring theme," Tony said. "Cap and Cyclops had a little Intro to Telepathy class, sounds like."

"Um, Scott doesn't need an intro class," Clint said, scrunching up his nose.

"No, he was teaching Steve, who is apparently remedial in psychic defense."

"Yeah, um, if you guys're gonna help with X-Men baddies, you need that stuff," Clint said.

"Not gonna lie, glad I wasn't there for that part."

"Yeah, trust me on this one: getting taken over is *not* fun," Clint agreed, pulling a face. "It's worse when you can remember everything you did, too."

"I'll bet," Tony said, settling in. "Your brother's safe and sound, by the way. Thought you'd want to know."

Clint let his shoulders drop. "Oh, *good*. I got to see him for a minute, but they said they were gonna kill him if-" He cut himself off, looked toward Bruce, and shook his head. "Well, he's alive, so we're okay."

"Yep, looks like the good guys got a few points," Tony said, though he hedged before deciding to tell Clint the rest of what he knew. "Go easy with your mom, though. Not sure where she's at as far as memory and manipulation goes."

Clint frowned. "She was okay last time I saw her..."

"She apparently didn't recognize Logan," Tony said. "Unless that's her way of saying she's reneging on the whole ... married to Wolverine thing ..."

"Um, no," Clint said flatly, though before Tony could respond, his onboard system picked up *several* intruders.

"Uh-oh," Tony said as he got his focus back to where it needed to be. "We've got company."

"Oh, great," Clint said, settling into a fighting stance — not that it was going to do much when an actual *tank* came their way ready to deal with the Hulk.

Tony's reaction was exactly what it should have been once the attack was imminent. He didn't even get off the ground before he'd deployed the proper firepower to get the tank *gone*, not feeling the least bit badly about blowing it up, since they'd gone after a kid with a *tank*.

While he was dealing with that, however, another wave came up from a different direction, with their weaponry aimed at the three of them in the clearing.

Tony's armor was bulletproof, and one could not simply *shoot* the Hulk, even when Banner was in control. But Clint didn't have armor or super resilient skin wrapped around a near-indestructible rage monster.

It happened when Hulk wasn't looking Clint's way — one second, Clint was doing alright sticking behind the big green guy, and the next, someone had managed to shoot him four times, all of them grouped in his chest, so that he was down and out before either of the heroes realized it had happened.

Tony turned toward the soldiers, already firing back as he moved, responding to the attack in kind and not at all concerned that those men might not make it. Especially since they'd come after a kid with a *tank* then opened fire on him without so much as a warning to comply.

Jarvis was scanning Clint before he'd hit the ground, and a second later, Tony was at his side, putting pressure on his wounds before the AI could even reach out for backup. But when Jarvis reported that Clint didn't have a *pulse*... Tony went into a pure panic. (Hulk, meanwhile, went into a full *rage*, but Tony could deal with that in a minute. Why these guys thought it was smart to shoot the kid just then, Tony couldn't fathom.)

With the Hulk fully occupying the military's attention and Clint not breathing, Tony switched gears to get *out* of his suit — and get Clint *in* it. The kid could get stabilized in there.

Just as the armor had encased Clint, Tony got a report in his ear from Jarvis that the kid had a heartbeat again, and he swore in pure relief. "Get him back to the tower. *Now*."

The suit rocketed off... which left Tony standing in the desert watching the Hulk finish off the soldiers who had come after him. "Well, at least the Big Guy's having fun," he muttered, settling in to wait for the others to show up.

Something was *wrong* with K, and Barney didn't like it.

He hadn't thought that he would *miss* her teasing him or messing with his hair or any of the other things he had always complained about, but now... now that she wasn't doing *any* of that, he desperately wanted her to do it again.

Instead, she was watching all of them warily, keeping her distance and her guard up. And he hadn't expected it to hurt this much to see her so unlike herself, to feel like she'd been taken from him after all she had done for him and his brother.

Everyone was giving her space, so he figured that was the right thing to do, even though, after everything that had happened, he just wanted to hug her. And he could almost hear, in the back of his mind, her delighted laugh at being attacked with a hug.

And he still didn't know what had happened to Clint, either, so he was having a hard time hiding his nerves. He tried biting his lip, bouncing his foot... but he just couldn't shake the feeling that his family was never *not* going to be on the brink of falling apart, at this rate.

"You okay?" Kitty asked — and at any other time, he would have been blushing, thrilled that she was coming to sit down next to him, that she was showing an *interest* in his well-being.

But instead, he just shook his head and couldn't even come up with the right words to explain, well... everything that was going on.

"Yeah, I get that," Kitty said. She glanced toward Logan, who was frowning at K but didn't look devastated or anything — so that was something, anyway. "She'll get it back."

"Maybe."

"No 'maybe's about it," Kitty insisted. But when Barney just kept frowning, she sighed, saddled up to him, and bumped shoulders with him. "Hey, you really think *Jean* is going to let this stand? If all else fails, you think she won't ask the Phoenix to just *fix it*?"

"I'm not actually sure that's all that comforting?" he pointed out.

"Yeah, I realized it as soon as I said it," she agreed. She bit her lip. "You know Logan's gone through this kind of thing before too, right?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't remember all of it."

"Right, but my point was... I mean, they didn't have her long enough to do anything *that* bad. And we have the most powerful telepaths on the planet here, so—"

"Kitty, I really appreciate you trying to cheer me up, and any other day, I'd be happy to sit with you and talk, but I just..." Barney let out a breath. "If it's okay with you, I'd just like to sit here and be worried, okay?"

Kitty nodded. "Okay," she said — and stayed next to him for the flight over.

Carol had been off-world for a SWORD consult until that morning, so she had missed all of the excitement. And considering her comms had gotten fried when the consult turned into a skirmish with some rogue Skrull faction, she wasn't aware of anything other than the need to take a nap. She saw that the team was gone except for Wanda and her boys — who were watching a kids' show in the living room while Wanda herself napped — but it wasn't unusual for the Avengers to be called out for something or other.

What *was* unusual, though, was Tony's armor rocketing into the tower, straight past Carol and Wanda — startling Wanda awake.

The two women shared a look, and Wanda put a hand on her boys' arms. "Stay here," she told them. "I'm going to go make sure Tony's okay."

"Can we come?" Tommy asked excitedly.

"Not right now, baby," Wanda replied. "I need you to be on the lookout in case anyone else needs help." She tapped his nose and then Billy's. "That's very important, okay? If you see anybody who needs help, you just shout for me, okay?"

The twins shared a look before they nodded in unison. "Okay."

Wanda nodded to herself and then followed Carol down the path Tony had made — which led straight down to the team's med lab. Which already wasn't a great sign. But then, when Carol and Wanda arrived at the lab, the armor opened up to let out not Tony but *Clint*, who was still unconscious.

"Damn," Carol whispered when she saw immediately what the problem was, considering the holes in Clint's tee shirt. She rushed to check him over, relieved that he was at least breathing, but she wasn't sure what to *do* from there. He'd said he'd been shot before, and he'd healed from that — but four to the chest?

Wanda already had her comm out. "Hey, Tony, we just got your armored delivery. What happened?"

Tony didn't answer at first, and when he did, Wanda could hear gunfire in the background, as well as the Hulk's roars. "Is he okay?" was the first thing Tony asked.

"He's breathing," Carol said over Wanda's shoulder. "Are *you* okay? What's going on?"

"Oh, hey, Carol," Tony said in a breezy tone. "Uh, Hulk's teaching some soldiers not to shoot kids in front of him. Pretty sure everybody else is inbound. Apparently, Steve and Scott just about tried to do each other in."

"What?" Wanda shook her head. "That doesn't sound like them."

"Mind control," Tony explained.

Carol and Wanda frowned at each other, then decided to go ahead and prep for injuries, switching to signal Kurt so he could give them an overview. It sounded like most of the people on the team had been hurt — Steve and Scott worst of all, but Warren and Bobby had

done a number on each other, and just about everyone else had at least three wounds needing disinfectant. Not to mention Barney, who was still in shock, and K — who still didn't remember everyone.

Everyone arrived on the blackbird rather than the Quinjet — which Jan had taken to go pick up Tony and Bruce — and Carol shook her head when she saw Steve *trying* to apologize to Scott, who was hearing exactly none of it and kept cutting him off before he could get started.

"Come on," Carol said, hoisting Steve up while Wanda cheated with a small spell to get Scott into the lab.

"*Clint.*"

Carol spun on her heel when she heard Barney, then winced in sympathy with Steve when the sharp movement was a little too much for his bad concussion.

"He's okay," Wanda said — though she wasn't entirely sure of that either. "Still breathing and everything. Tony sent him our way."

Barney frowned, but he sat down close to his brother anyway, still obviously put off by his mom and his unconscious brother and ... all of it. And he was so obviously in shock that he didn't even have a quip at the ready.

Thankfully, Clint was starting to come around, so Barney could breathe a little better when he saw that much. Not-so-thankfully, though, as soon as he started coming back into consciousness, Clint was making small whimpering sounds, and he was squirming as he woke up.

And then he started *crying*.

"Woah, woah." Barney glanced over both shoulders, but everyone was focusing on unloading the blackbird. "Umm..." He climbed up onto the bed where Clint was and grabbed his brother up — which was about when Clint was awake enough to genuinely fall apart crying.

"You guys okay?" Kitty asked, frowning as she made her way over to the two brothers, and Barney looked wide-eyed as he shook his head.

"I don't know what's wrong," he admitted as Clint just kept right on crying and clinging onto him.

Kitty winced and looked around as well before she hopped up onto the end of the bed and reached out to put a hand on Clint's arm. "Hey, you're okay," she said with an encouraging smile. "Everyone's home and safe, okay?"

Clint finally looked up at that, then narrowed his eyes when he saw Kitty. She could practically see the wheels in his head turning. "Hey," he whispered. He wasn't sobbing, but he was still crying, even if he was trying to wipe his face.

"Hey yourself," Kitty said, making her smile a little brighter for him. "You okay?"

"Not... really," he said. Now that he was looking around, he seemed to be getting a better handle on things, but he was jittery, and he kept rubbing his hands on his knees, his arms, his face.

"Yeah, looks like you got a little bit shot there," Kitty said.

Clint looked down and picked up his shirt to see the holes in it. "Oh. Yeah, that's right," he said, then let out a frustrated sound and pulled away from Barney, dragging both of his hands down his face. "Everything is fuzzy, but cranked *way* up," he grumbled.

"That... uh... doesn't sound normal," Barney said, glancing toward Logan. And when Logan looked away from K to meet Barney's gaze, Barney mouthed "help?"

"Just gotta focus on something else, kiddo," Logan told him. "Distract yourself."

"Yeah, it's just — it's never been this *bad* before," Clint said, trying to shake out his legs over the edge of the bed. "It's not *stopping*."

"You never been hurt like this before. It'll pass. Just pick something *strong* to focus on."

"Yeah." Clint dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I, um, can think about um..." He took a few shallow breaths. "How's, um, how's Mom?"

"Not herself yet," Logan admitted, glancing toward her where she and Tony were flirting back and forth at a quick pace.

"But she will be?" Clint asked quietly. "Because... because I can't..."

"I hope so," Logan replied, not wanting to lie to him in case it went south. "Not sure what they did to her, so I don't know what needs to be done to reverse it."

"Okay, well, there was, like, a telepath tryna control the Hulk, so... maybe Jean can help?" Clint offered, rubbing his forehead as he *tried* to focus on the conversation.

"The only trouble with that is that the problems telepaths have in controllin' the Hulk have more to do with how *smart* he is," Logan said. "Trouble with dealin' with your mom is that she's almost as hard-headed as I am. Have to be one helluva telepath to even make a dent."

"Well, he was bugging the Hulk, and he took over my whole brain, like I wasn't in charge anymore, you know?" Clint said, making a face.

"That's most telepaths," Scott added, trying — and failing — to get Carol to let him up, even though she had him pinned down with one hand while the scans came back.

"Yeah, I know." Clint sighed, then let out a frustrated sound again. "Gah. Dad, does it tingle this bad every time? Because *wow*."

"You've been shot before, though, right?" Barney put in.

"From what Tony told us, he stopped breathing," Wanda put in, floating over their way to look over Barney. "So Logan's right; this is a little different."

"Explains why you woke up so upset," Barney said, glancing over at Clint, who grimaced and looked down at his chest.

"Yeah. Well." Clint cleared his throat. "I was, um..." He gestured vaguely. "Anyway... Can I talk to Mom?"

"She doesn't remember... much," Barney tried to warn him.

"Yeah, but I need to get moving or I'll go crazy," Clint said. "I'll be careful, okay?" When Barney simply frowned, Clint shrugged him off and hopped over to where K was. "You okay?" he asked her, still rubbing his hands over his arm.

She turned his way with a smile caught on her features. "Hi there. I'm fine, thanks for asking." She frowned as she watched him. "Are ... you okay?"

He bit his lip and then went for honesty as he shook his head. "I'm... new to healing," he admitted, though his voice caught as he tried to explain it. His mom didn't recognize him at *all*, and it left him nearly breathless.

For a moment, she just stared at him, not wanting to admit or deny anything about *healing*. "Maybe ... you should drink some water and sleep it off?"

"Maybe," Clint agreed, surprised when his eyes were wet again.

"I'm sorry, I don't ... really know what you *need*."

"Yeah, I know. I just..." Clint took a deep, steadying breath. "The, um, the people who had you locked up had me locked up too, so I kinda just... wanted to check on you. I saw you. I dunno if you remember me..."

She looked off-guard at that. "No, but ... thank you? For the concern?"

"She doesn't remember being locked up," Tony said around her to Clint.

"Oh." Clint took a deep breath and let it out, trying and failing to keep his snuffle from being too loud. "Yeah. Okay."

"Hey," K said, dipping her head to catch Clint's attention. "You look like you could use a hug. Can I?"

"Uh-huh," Clint said, then practically buried himself in her shoulder, clutching on tight. He hadn't told anyone, but he'd come back into the world remembering — no, *reliving* — the day his first mom died. He was dangerously close to losing it if he lost *this* one too.

And though K wasn't prepared for that kind of a response from him, she settled in and let him take his time. "Do you want to stay with me for a little while?" she asked after a long while.

Clint nodded, wiping his eyes. "Yeah. I think... I think that would be good."

"Then we can do that," she said, putting on a half smile for him.

No one wanted to break up the moment the two of them were sharing, especially since it was so clear Clint *needed* it, but Scott had stopped trying to fight Carol on attending to his ribs to instead focus solely on reaching out to Jean: *Jean, K's lost a good chunk of memories, and I need you or the professor or both of you to get here right now. Sam can watch the kids. They like him anyway.*

We were planning on letting them rest before an assessment, Jean replied.

She doesn't remember any of the kids, Scott said. *And you know those boys need her. Especially since they were grabbed too. They rely on her.*

I can come down, but honestly, Scott, it might not be an easy fix if she's missing that much.

They didn't have her for long, and you're the best telepath in the world, Jeannie.

Mr. Summers, I'm trying to be realistic, but I'm on my way, and you know I'll do everything I can.

Thanks. See you soon, Mrs. Summers.

Telepathic Defense

Chapter Summary

In which K still doesn't remember everyone, but she does know that the Barton Boys are sweethearts.

When Jean arrived, she almost thought things were back to normal, purely because Clint was curled up with K the way he always would be. But then, she saw the look on K's face and realized that she wasn't holding onto Clint because he was her son but because she could tell he was scared and hurt and emotional, and even without knowing who he was, she wasn't going to let a little boy be scared and hurt without support.

Jean stopped in the doorway, covering her mouth with one hand, and Scott stepped up beside her, looking as serious as ever as he whispered, "That's why I called you."

Jean turned to face him and raised both eyebrows, letting her gaze linger on his bare chest — but not because he was shirtless. He was badly bruised, wrapped, and wincing just from standing there. *Sure you didn't call me for your own moral support?* she teased him lightly. *It looks like you could use it.*

I'm fine.

You're always 'fine', she countered. *But you're hurt.*

They had a telepath who thought it would be funny to turn us against each other. We're alright now. If anything, we probably need to talk to Captain Rogers. I think he still feels bad about the whole situation.

Scott, I don't need to be a telepath to see that he feels bad. Look for yourself, Jean replied, tipping her head toward Steve, who was, in fact, watching the two of them with baited breath, just as badly injured and bruised but looking like he would do anything to make it up to them.

Scott let his shoulders drop. *He got in a good hit.*

I see that. You should talk to him.

I did.

Then you should talk to him again.

We'll talk to him together about having you work with the Avengers on telepathic defense. Clearly, they're going to need it if they're going to be more involved in our lives, Scott suggested instead, and Jean could hear how torn he was about the whole thing in his mind. He'd worshiped Captain America as a kid, and he hated being in this awkward spot with his childhood hero.

So, she didn't push it. Instead, she went over to where the others were, stifling a smirk when she realized that K and Tony were flirting lightly, though K was holding back slightly — *only* because there was a scared kid still hanging close to her and she was still a bit disoriented.

What had always been present between the two of them was now a glaring neon sign that they were interested in each other, even if it was mostly expressed in once-overs and knowing looks.

So far, anyway.

"I heard you all came on the bad side of a nasty telepath," Jean said by way of introduction — and to her surprise, it was *Barney* who looked most relieved to see her, practically jumping to his feet and nodding vigorously.

"Yes, it was awful, like it *always* is — please *fix it*," he said, gesturing sharply toward K. And she could hear without even trying that he was projecting how very much he hated that she was flirting with Tony all the time. He was sure she wouldn't be doing that in any way but teasing if she were in her right mind, and he was also worried Tony would read too much into it.

"I'll do what I can," Jean said, knowing that K in particular was a hard mind to get into, so she wasn't going to promise fast results and get his hopes up. She looked past him to the others. "And from what Scott told me, *all of you* could probably use more work on your telepathic defenses."

Steve winced and nodded. "Yeah, it's apparently a glaring hole in our tactical defenses."

"It's alright. I'll just come over more often until you've got it down. I'm sure Jan will be sad about seeing Rachel."

"Oh, *very* sad. Definitely," Steve chuckled.

"She'll just have to suffer," Jean said philosophically. When Steve grinned, Jean looked toward K, though she directed her hello toward Clint, knowing how little K trusted telepaths. "You alright, Clint?"

Clint nodded but didn't say anything. He didn't need to when he was projecting pure *hurt* from what he'd apparently seen when he had come back to consciousness. Something about that massive healing had been traumatic enough to dredge up one of the worst days of his life: when he heard his biological mother had been killed by his dad.

No wonder he wanted to be so close to K.

Jean sat down beside him and K. “My husband’s the one in the red glasses,” she explained. “He’s in charge of the fun ones.”

K smirked. “Is that what you let him think?”

“See, this is why we’re friends,” Jean chuckled. “Even if you don’t remember me right now.”

“You team up on the guys,” Clint put in helpfully. “Because you say they need to remember to think with the correct heads.”

K couldn’t help but smirk at that one. “Sounds like me.”

Jean smiled wider. “If you’d like,” she said, “I can try to see if I can restore your memories. The mutant who had you all captive is a powerful telepath, but I doubt he’s as powerful as I am.”

But at that, K’s smirk dropped, and she narrowed her eyes. “And I’m supposed to trust you because...”

Jean’s smile disappeared instantly, and she floundered for words for a moment — only for Barney, of all people, to ride to her rescue with an insightful: “I mean, that’s kind of the whole game, isn’t it?” When everyone turned to look at him, he blushed but pressed on. “You don’t know anyone, so you’re not exactly inclined to trust any telepaths who could fix what they did. But the whole reason you don’t know anyone and don’t trust Jean is *because* of what they did.” He shrugged and met K’s gaze. “So I guess it comes down to not if you trust us but if you think it’s worth taking the risk that we’re right or not.”

Jean couldn’t help but smile Barney’s way. He truly didn’t give himself enough credit; he was just as insightful as his brother was; he simply didn’t have the same self-confidence that gave Clint the courage to speak up. He was getting braver and more willing to accept compliments, sure, but that didn’t change the first ten years of his life.

Jean made a mental note to remind Barney how smart he was. She already did, but she was going to be far more deliberate about it now. He needed to know it.

“I mean,” Clint said cautiously, “maybe you could ... I mean, maybe it’ll come back on its own?” He glanced toward Logan. “But I don’t know if that’ll work when it’s telepathic...”

“It should,” Logan said. “It’s not a quick fix.”

“Yeah, I just didn’t want anyone to think there’s only *one* solution...” Clint swallowed. “Don’t wanna scare anyone off,” he whispered at the low end of Logan’s hearing.

“All we can do is take care of her until she comes around,” Logan whispered back, to the point that he knew Clint would only catch it because he could read lips.

Clint nodded and tried to sit up a bit taller. “So, umm, I guess the Avengers need to come to our school and learn about telepaths?” he teased lightly, and Scott smirked.

“They could spend years there and not learn anything,” Logan said dryly.

“Still probably dead useful,” Steve said — *still* looking apologetic, somehow. “If you don’t mind sharing your telepathy teacher,” he said, raising his eyebrows Jean’s way.

“I’ll bring Rachel. She loves to play with Jan,” Jean shot back, which had everyone there smirking.

“And in the meantime...” Clint smiled K’s way. “So... you and I don’t need to stay in the doctor’s office, so do you want to play with my dog?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” K said. “What kind of dog have you got? And have you taught him how to play dead yet?”

“He’s a golden retriever, and his name is Arrow, and you’ll *love* him,” Clint said, grinning widely.

“I got a better idea,” Logan said as he offered K his hand, then pulled her over like he *normally* would, though he stopped short of stealing a kiss. “C’mon, gorgeous. We can let the kids give you the tour, see if it shakes anythin’ loose. Failin’ that, we’ll figure somethin’ out.”

Before even Jean could say anything about going easy, K broke into a bright grin. “Alright then.”

Barney and Clint shared a look, and Barney snorted outright. “I mean, are we even surprised anymore?” he teased. “They’re *always* like this.”

“You probably shouldn’t be,” Jean said in an amused tone. “And yet ...”

“You boys should get cleaned up,” Steve said.

Clint looked down at himself and pulled a face. “Yeah. Sand *everywhere* ... Ugh.”

“Nothing a good shower and sleep won’t fix,” Jan agreed. “C’mon. Any second now, the adrenaline comedown is going to hit.”

“Think you can get the others?” Logan said toward Jan. “Probably shouldn’t leave the smallest ones in Hell’s Kitchen with that crowd.”

“I’ll send Tony to go stake a claim,” Jan said, grinning. “He’s hilarious when he gets all gushy over the kiddies.”

“Oh, come on,” Logan said in a tired tone. “If I wanted Stark, I’d ask Stark.”

“Oh, but it’s so fun to watch him!” Jan clasped her hands together. “And I have him *this close* to agreeing to a tiny, dark-haired baby.”

Logan closed his eyes and let out a weary sigh. “How the *hell* is my son going to be a prop for you with *him* ?”

“Because he goes gooey for babies — weren’t you listening?” Jan bounced on her toes.
“C’mon, pretty please? I *neeed* this.”

“You *neeed* a baby,” Clint said, sticking his tongue out at her. “Just tell him that’s what you want and he’ll do it. That’s how it works.”

“He ends up with so much as a scratch and I’ll hunt your idiot boy toy down and skin him alive,” Logan warned.

“They’ll come back all sugared up,” Jan promised.

“The *girls* anyhow,” Jean said under her breath.

“Yeah, James doesn’t really like sugary things,” Barney agreed, swinging his legs around the side. “I’m definitely gonna take a shower. We were locked up for a while, and I feel *gross* .”

“Barney doesn’t get kidnapped as often as we do,” Clint told K in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Is that a regular problem?” K asked, lowering her tone to match his.

“Mostly recently,” Clint admitted.

“Well, you *are* a handsome kid.”

Clint grinned up at her. “And I can heal,” he told her in a whisper only she could hear, since he knew she probably didn’t want people she didn’t know to hear about *healing* .

But she took the revelation in stride and seemed to keep right up with her teasing streak. “Your brother gets awful worked up when I flirt with the other one. Yes, I noticed. Is that *not* normal?” She kept her tone soft, but since Clint seemed to be happy to give her a few tips — and had clearly felt better with a little attention — she decided to confide in him to see how it played out.

Clint bit his lip as he considered his answer. “Well, you never flirt *seriously* ,” he told her. “You do it as a joke. A *lot* . But he and Jan are working really well, and Jan’s one of my favorite people in the world. Her ex used to hit her, so we’re watching out for her, you know?”

“She doesn’t seem to be too bothered, so what I do can’t be serious,” K reasoned.

“No, not really,” Clint said. “It’s more that, you know, Barney...” He trailed off, trying to figure out how to explain it. “It’s complicated. Me and my brother bounced around families, so he doesn’t like when things get complicated. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But the other one ...” she pulled a face, waiting to hear if she was off on Logan, too.

“Oh, Logan?” Clint glanced up at her openly. “He taught me how to throw a carbanadium knife into Victor Creed’s *ass* ,” he said, because he knew it would impress her if she remembered even a little bit about who *that* guy was.

“Shame he didn’t teach you a better target.”

“Well, his heart, but it’s funnier to say it that way,” Clint said, his eyes glinting like any kid who was swearing.

“So ... fair game, then,” she decided with a nod.

Clint’s grin turned crooked, and he leaned toward her. “Totally,” he said. “And considering he adopted me and Barney, you should know we *like* you two together.”

K matched his crooked smile and leaned in closer. “Is it *just* that or are you waiting to see what he’ll put up with?”

“We like trouble too,” Clint teased. “Seriously, I know you don’t remember it, but you’re part of our family. And I’m just really glad you’re okay.” He paused and blushed lightly. “Sorry I cried on you, by the way. I know you don’t remember me...”

“If all that’s true, I will,” K said as she pulled him over for another tight hug.

Clint attached to her tightly, his face almost buried in her shoulder, since he was getting taller now. “Barney was caught with you and me. He was scared for you; that’s why he’s being weird,” he whispered. “He was scared for me too. The bad guys wanted me to help them, and he *hates* that.”

K gave him another little squeeze but let him stay there until he loosened up his grip. “I think you two rated enough guys in spandex to keep that from being a big problem.”

“Yeah, I sort of accidentally guilt-tripped Captain America when I was a kid, and they haven’t left us alone ever since,” Clint joked.

“Yeah, don’t stop doing that,” she laughed.

“You got it,” Clint promised. He hugged her tighter again and then glanced up. “Okay. So. I do actually need to wash all this sand off. I kind of ended up stranded in the desert earlier. Long story.”

“I think all of us could use a rinse,” she agreed, then messed up his already jacked-up hair.

Clint grinned delightedly, even though he was trying to fix his hair back up. “Just in case I do end up crashing — ‘cause I *am* tired — don’t let my dad get away with anything he hasn’t earned, huh?” he teased her.

“Sliding scale,” she said with a wave. “Kinda looked like he wanted to work anyhow.”

“Yeah, he’s like that.” Clint gave her one last hug. “Have fun, okay? And if you remember me, come find me, *please* .”

“Okay, will do,” she said, then tapped the end of his nose and headed off with Logan.

The Defender Babysitters' Club

Chapter Summary

In which Tony comes to pick up the girls, and K is finally feeling more like herself.

"This is seriously the best decision you've ever made, Matt," Jessica said, grinning lazily as she watched Susie with her pink and glittery doctor kit *insist* to Luke that he needed to get a checkup, all while Kate was curled up on Matt's lap eating some of the candy that Matt now kept around the house, since the girls were starting to become more regular fixtures.

"I thought you said there was no way in hell anyone should be trusting me with their kids," Matt said dryly, though he smirked when Kate giggled at him for swearing in front of her.

"I did, and I stand by that, but that doesn't mean they're not the best things to ever happen to you," Jessica said, grinning even *wider* when Luke obediently let Susie look in his ears with her plastic tools.

Susie tutted as she leaned away from Luke and gave him a serious nod. "Yep, you've got an ear infection," she told him, and he made sure to look properly dismayed. "It might help if you get a hot rice bag and lay on the side that hurts; that helps me."

"You're my favorite doctor, Susie," Jessica sang out to her, and Susie blushed brilliantly pink with pleasure.

"My dad lets me help sometimes," Susie said, her hands behind her back and her foot kicked up behind her.

"I can tell," Jessica said, beaming back at her. "That's why you're my favorite. You're going to be even better than your dad when you grow up."

"You think so?" Susie asked, straightening up and *beaming*.

"Oh, without a doubt," Jessica said, knowing the little girl needed hyping up. Every time she came to see Matt, she clung to praise like she was hungry for it. And Jessica knew she was getting hyped up at home, but she had been old enough when she lost her home that whatever her birth family had done to make her think she was supposed to be seen and not heard had *stuck*.

And Jessica wasn't going to let this girl think that *only* her family thought she was amazing.

Susie beamed at Jessica and then turned her attention back to Luke. "While you're feeling bad, you can watch whatever you want on TV," she told him brightly. He wasn't sick at *all*,

but he was fully going along with it, and he kept shooting Jessica looks like he wanted to be rescued.

She had *no* interest in rescuing him. This was too much fun.

"What if I want to watch something scary?" Luke asked, knowing it was a good way to get Katie wound up — and hopefully get Susie off his back.

And as expected, Katie immediately jumped off of Matt's lap to rush over to Luke, her eyes wide. "We're not *allowed* to watch scary movies!" she scolded him with one finger out. "It gives me bad dreams!"

"Susie said I could watch whatever I wanted, though," Luke said, smirking hard.

"Susie!" Katie put her hands on her hips and stomped her foot. "Tell him he can't watch scary movies!"

Susie turned toward Luke, looking the very picture of apologetic, complete with her hands clasped in front of her and her eyes wide. "I'm really sorry," she said. "But you're only *pretend* sick, and she's *for real* scared of scary movies."

"I'm not scared when I'm *watching* them, just when I'm *dreaming*," Kate insisted, jutting out her chin.

"We know that, Katie," Matt said, leaning back and chuckling.

"Yeah, you're going to be a hero when you grow up; we know you're brave," Luke promised her before she could get *too* wound up.

"That's right I am," Katie said.

Luke smirked and then scooped her up to pull her into a tickle. "You sure I can't watch scary movies?" he teased her as she screeched and wiggled and laughed.

"Lu-u-u-u-uke!" Katie squealed, still squirming.

"I'm just askin'."

"No-o-o-o-o!" Katie shot back. "No scary movies! Really, really!"

"Sounds like you're serious," Luke said, nodding. "Okay, nothing scary. I promise." He rearranged Katie so that she was snuggled with him instead of trying to escape.

Jessica watched him with both eyebrows raised, but when he looked her way, she looked away. Seeing him like this with kids... yeah, she wasn't quite ready for that.

Thankfully, before she could think too long on it, there was a knock at the door. Katie looked toward Matt, who smirked and tipped his head toward the door.

"Sounds like Iron Man."

Katie pushed her lower lip out in a pout. "Not Mom 'n' Dad?"

"Not yet."

Katie snuggled deeper into Luke as Matt went to get the door. And, of course, when Tony saw how curled up Luke and Katie were, he smiled *widely*. "You look cozy."

"Tread carefully," Luke said, one eyebrow raised in warning.

Tony grinned, but then, Susie rushed over, distracting his attention. "Is it time to go home?"

"Yep! We're just stopping by the tower first. Your mom got in a little trouble, but you know how it goes."

Susie nodded. "That happens *all* the time," she said, dramatically sighing with her head tipped back.

"Yeah, you'd think they'd learn," Tony chuckled.

Katie climbed out of Luke's arms and headed over to Tony, colliding hard with his knees in a hug. "Susie's been playing doctor *all day*," she complained. "How come she never wants to do anything else?"

"No idea, squirt. You should ask her," Tony laughed as he bent down to pick her up and toss her in the air.

"Dad says it's because she's too smart for her own good," Katie told him primly as he set her on his shoulders.

"He's probably right," Tony said and then reached out to snag Susie with one hand and pull her under his arm in a hug. "What do you think? You girls ready to go?"

"Oh, wait, wait!" Katie said. "Matt got us candy, and he said I could take some home!"

"He did, huh? Baiting kids with candy, Murdock?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, sure," Matt said with an easy shrug.

Tony laughed as Katie pointed him to her stash. And then, with one Bishop girl on his shoulders and the other one holding his hand, he headed off, knowing full well Jan was going to have a fit when he got home.

Jan had been expecting Tony to come back with the girls walking all over him like usual, but she hadn't expected to see him walk in with Susie giggling and clinging to his shoulders while she rode piggyback and Katie clinging to his hair while she sat on his shoulders. Tony had a sucker stuck in his hair and looked like he needed help... but all Jan could do was stand there, one hand over her mouth, grinning.

"Okay, last stop. Everybody off," Tony declared, and Susie let go to drop to the ground, but Katie wrapped her arms around his forehead.

"No!" Katie sang out.

"Hey, Katie, Clint needs some hugs," Jan called out, knowing she wouldn't pass up the chance to dote on her favorite brother.

And sure enough, Katie let go of Tony and practically jumped into Jan's arms. "Is he okay?" she asked earnestly.

"Not really," Jan told her frankly. "He got hurt, and your mom's head got hurt, so she's having a hard time remembering everyone."

Katie's eyes went wide, and she brought both hands to her mouth. "Oh no!"

"So everyone needs snuggles until your mom feels better, okay?"

Susie nodded. "I can help with James," she offered. "I know how!"

"I know you do," Jan said, ruffling her hair. "But right now, everyone is getting ready for dinner."

"Oh! Oh! Race you, Susie!" Katie declared, already dashing off.

Jan laughed as the girls raced ahead, though instead of immediately catching up to them, she smirked and reached up to yank the lollipop out of Tony's hair. "You're *way* too cute with them. You know that, right?"

"Ow." Tony shook his head at her. "You're having too much fun."

Jan grinned and stood on her toes to steal a kiss. "Oh, definitely. And I don't think you even know why."

The next morning, after a long night of not *quite* fooling around and joking a *lot*, K came down to coffee with Logan, who was texting Jan to get moving. She didn't remember the kids yet — or Logan, really — but she hadn't missed the tone that Clint had used that made it so clear that he *needed* her to remember ... something. And though she didn't, she also couldn't ignore a kid that looked completely lost and half asleep over a bowl of cereal.

So, she made her way over to say hello. She almost sat down, then thought better of it and rested both hands on his shoulders to give him a little squeeze. "Sleep okay, big guy? You look like you slept on your head, you know." She didn't think about it when she reached out to straighten out his messy hair, combing her fingers through it.

Clint leaned into her while he was still half-asleep. "Yeah, kept waking up. I've never been shot that many times, and the *buzzing* is hard to sleep with," he admitted.

She swore in Swedish, then took the seat next to him anyhow. "Can I hug you? That really does suck."

"It really does," he agreed, already shifting so he could hug her too, leaning deeply into her shoulder, since he still felt sore, and the phantom pains were something else.

K felt badly for him, and when she scented out how stressed he was, she wrapped him up a little better. Without thinking about it, she turned her head his way and slowly went still. He didn't see it when she wrinkled up her nose and closed her eyes tighter, and just as he was ready to let loose, she doubled down and held on a *lot* tighter.

Clint was surprised, obviously, but the second she held on, he returned the favor — just as tightly — until he was trying to hold back his own emotions all of a sudden. "I just really want my mom," he said in a whisper, trying hard not to cry.

"I'm working on it," she promised.

"Thanks."

When the hug finally ended, she sat back, studying him more carefully before she again ran her fingers through his messy hair. "Help me out."

"What do you need?" Clint asked without hesitating.

"I don't know, but it's right *there*," she answered.

Clint watched her, studying her face, before something occurred to him. "What're you smelling?" he asked.

"Mostly *you*," K said. "A lot easier to catch than last night."

Clint nodded. "Yeah, we don't usually end up in sandy places. Actually, we spend our summers here, if that helps?" He closed one eye in a wince. "Maybe?"

"That's lame, you'd be amazing on the beach." She smiled a little crookedly. "Helping baby sea turtles. Or something."

Clint laughed in spite of himself. "We always say I'll be an archeologist, actually. Maybe I should get used to sand and dirt?"

"You'll be a heartbreaker in no time if you do."

"Yeah, you keep saying that too," Clint said. He flattened his hair without thinking about it, and in a fit of playfulness, she had to reach up to mess it up again. "Barney's the only one who's ever had a girlfriend, though, so *ha*."

"He's older, though, so that's how it should be. Imagine how upset he'd be if his little brother was outstripping him with the ladies?" K teased. "And ... something else, too."

"Yeah, but he's going to be the ringmaster when he grows up." Clint's eyes lit up. "Ooh, we should go to the circus if you still don't remember things later, because I bet—"

"*Archery.*"

Clint froze, a disbelieving but hopeful smile on his face. "Yeah!" He nodded encouragingly. "Yeah, I'm the best at it, but Barney's better with swords and knives."

She closed her eyes and tipped her head as she tried to find it, one finger pointing his way. "Not turtles, either."

"No, um, I have a dog?" Clint offered.

"No, no," she said, shaking her head a little more firmly. "It had to do with water."

"Huh." Clint absently fixed his hair again... "Umm..." He narrowed his eyes and glanced up at her and realized she was still staring at his hair. "...duck fluff?" he offered quietly.

Her shoulders relaxed on hearing it. "*Yes.*"

Clint smiled. "You've been saying that about my hair since I was *six.*"

"It fits when it's all ... fluffy."

"I'll only agree with you because I'm glad you're remembering me," Clint said. "But you totally taught my baby sister to follow me around while quacking, so don't think this truce will last," he added quickly, teasing and grinning the whole time.

"It should, though," she said, then reached out to play with his hair again. "Is it growing too fast?"

"Yeah, it grows when I'm healing. A *lot.*"

"Sorry, I don't know why that is," she said. "It just is."

"That's okay; I'm getting used to it," Clint promised. "And Jean offered to cut it. She knows about styles and stuff."

"The redhead?" K asked. "No way. Have you seen what she did to her husband's head? Nah."

Clint snorted. "He's weird, but I like him alright."

"He'd be less weird if he got a better cut," K teased, just in time for both Summerses and Logan to try and stop the laughter from the kitchen, where they were all linked up via Jean and completely eavesdropping.

Clint glanced back toward the others and then leaned in toward K. "Jean's alright, though, I promise. She's helped my family a *lot.*"

"She can't keep her brain to herself," K said. "That's so gross."

"Yeah, but she can't get into you and Logan without asking — and she has a harder time with me since I started healing," Clint said.

K thought about it for a long moment. "What do you think I should do?"

Clint bit his lip. "For totally selfish reasons? I think you should let her undo whatever those bad guys did to your head. Because I miss you. A lot."

K reached over to cover his wrist with a sigh, but couldn't keep it at just sweet when she knew the others were eavesdropping. "Alright. Worst case scenario, I'll forget everyone and go after the tall brunette."

Scott made a choking sound as he tried not to laugh, especially because Jean's telepathic reaction was so *extreme*. It wasn't even words but it was an echoing "nope" on *multiple* levels.

Clint giggled. "I think that means she'll do a good job because she doesn't want that at *all*."

"I'm not sure which one she thinks I'm after," K said. "But ... I suppose just about any of them would do in a pinch."

Clint grinned and gave her a hug. "Good luck," he whispered.

The whole time Jean was sitting with K, Clint was pacing. He could help it, and he couldn't hide it, either. K and Barney had been the only consistent things in his life for so long that the idea of losing either of them — or Logan or James or Katie or Susie at this point — had him on edge.

A few different people tried to distract him. Jan tried to entice him into a game of darts, and Scott sat down and tried his best to start a conversation that both of them knew wasn't going to go anywhere.

Katie had been the best distraction, because she had grabbed his hand and sat him down in the middle of the hallway to share her candy from her godfather, and that had been fun. He always liked hanging out with Katie, even if she could be annoying sometimes.

So, yeah, it had been nice sitting with Katie. But every time he heard someone moving around behind the door, that's where his attention was.

He wondered if Jean was pacing too. That might explain why people kept moving.

But then, *finally*, after what felt like an age, he heard the door open, and he dashed to it, his eyes wide, just watching K.

"Do I look that bad?" she asked when she saw his wide eyes. "A little time off my game and you're *horrified*?"

Clint let all his breath out in a rush and dashed over to her, practically trying to knock her over (even though he knew he couldn't) in his efforts to wrap himself around her.

"I missed you so much," he whispered into her side, and she held him that much tighter for it.

I Get It Now

Chapter Summary

In which Clint is maturing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had been a few weeks since what had happened with Ross and the department, so Clint knew that the grace period of time he'd bought himself before someone came to "check on him" was fast running out. Everyone had given his family time to recover from K's loss of memory, and then on top of that, Barney had been pretty badly shaken up, and K had taken them out camping for a weekend.

But now, Clint was sitting at the dining room table, a few bites away from finishing his breakfast, *keenly* aware of the fact that Scott was watching him and clearly waiting for him to finish eating before he said anything.

Clint met Scott's gaze and then pointedly shoveled two bites worth of food into one bite, then got to his feet and took his dishes to the sink, knowing Scott was probably going to follow him.

And he did — and then jerked his chin to the side to indicate to Clint that he should follow him.

Clint knew this talk was coming, so he didn't say anything as he headed down the hall with Scott — though he did pause and raise both eyebrows when they didn't go somewhere casual like the living room but actually went to Scott's *office*.

So this was a *talk* talk.

Clint was almost bouncing on the balls of his feet as he walked with Scott. He wasn't sure now what this talk was going to be, because it felt official. And Scott *had* agreed to let him train with the teams, but what if he was rescinding that offer?

He'd spun up a dozen different possibilities in his head by the time the door closed behind him in Scott's office, but Scott didn't get behind the desk or anything. Instead, he stopped in front of Clint and put a hand on his shoulder to look him in the eyes.

"How are you holding up — *really*?" Scott asked.

And Clint could have lied to him. He knew he was okay at it now, because he had so much practice lying to bad guys. But he also knew that Scott knew everything Jean knew, and he

knew that Jean had to at least *suspect* some things, even if she couldn't peek into his head as easily as she used to be able to before he had healing powers.

"What did Jean tell you?" Clint asked rather than answering the question. And it wasn't just for his own benefit, either. Sure, he would rather keep his emotional secrets, but he *also* knew that what he'd experienced, what he'd seen when he *died*... that might give Scott some insight into Logan and K, too. Clint hadn't missed that, even memoryless, K had given Clint more attention and care once she'd heard how badly he'd been hurt. And not all of that was just because of the phantom pain.

And, yeah, Clint was a Hawkeye, but he knew Scott was pretty good at spotting things too. Especially for people he cared about. And since Jean had more or less decided Clint was part of the family from day one, Clint knew Scott cared about his family. All of them.

Scott, for his part, blew all his breath out in a whoosh and ran his hand through his hair — both actions that told Clint that, yes, he was right to suspect that Scott had more of an idea of what was bugging Clint than he was letting on. "I know you're doing better now that your mom remembers who you are," Scott said first. And that was telling too. It meant he wanted to build Clint up first before he got to what was really bugging him.

Which was nice and all, but Clint would rather rip the bandaid off.

"Did she tell you about what happened when I stopped breathing?" Clint asked bluntly — and when Scott straightened up quickly, he knew he was on the right track.

"She doesn't know all the details, but she does know that you were reliving some loss when you came back," Scott said carefully.

"Yeah." Clint kicked one foot against the other and then gestured vaguely toward the desk and the chairs that sat in front of it. "Should we sit down or something? I'm not sure where this falls on the scale of X-Men discussions."

"I'm not sure either," Scott said with a wry smile. "It's not like everyone comes back from the dead on our team—"

"—but enough people do that it's kinda normal, huh?" Clint finished for him.

Scott sighed and then ran his hand down his face. "I wish it wasn't."

"Me too. It's not fun, and I don't recommend it." Clint kicked his foot again and then cleared his throat. "I asked Mom about it, you know. After she remembered me."

Scott did a horrible job of acting like he wasn't as interested as he was. "Oh?"

"Yeah." Clint thought about not elaborating, like Logan would do, but he also knew that Scott wouldn't have called him in there without a reason. So, he cleared his throat again and said, "She said it's normal. But she wasn't happy about the fact that those guys literally *killed* me. That's what happened, you know. I stopped breathing. And I healed, but that doesn't mean I wasn't dead for a minute there."

Scott let out a soft sound and reached out to rest his hand on Clint's arm, though Clint pulled back, leaving the two of them sitting in silence for longer than either of them was entirely comfortable with.

Finally, Clint cleared his throat. "Anyway," he said slowly, "I guess, um, dying has some repercussions. Mom's not sure about it, either; she said she tends to remember loss and other things too. We're not sure what happens. Maybe it's our life flashing in front of our eyes again or..." He trailed off, unwilling to say the rest out loud, because he didn't know what he'd do if K's theory that he might have actually been *with* his mom was true.

But Scott could figure out the rest of it, even if Clint didn't say it out loud. And without a word, he simply opened his arms in an invitation to Clint to fall into a hug — if he wanted it.

And Clint was old enough by that point that, usually, he wouldn't take a hug from someone who wasn't his mom or dad. Not when it was anything but a quick moment of affection. He was starting to get to the point where he didn't want people to treat him like a scared kid even when he *was* a scared kid. He always *had* wanted to be taken seriously, but there was something about being eleven that made that urge even more pronounced than usual.

But this time? This time, none of that mattered. Not when the topic was *that* sensitive. And so, he all but fell into the hug, clutching on tight.

They stayed there for a long time before, eventually, quietly, Clint cleared his throat and straightened up. "So, um, I get it now."

Scott frowned, moving back enough to give Clint space but obviously still close enough to be there if Clint needed him again. "Get what?" he asked with a frown.

Clint gestured outward with both hands, red-faced, though he was embarrassed to admit it out loud. Still, with Scott sitting there and watching him so intently, he finally cleared his throat again. "I get, you know, why I have to wait."

"Oh?"

Clint nodded, holding onto his arms. "This is... this is a lot," he said, slowly, quietly. "And I don't... I don't think I'm ready to ... I don't want to have to do that again. Dying, I mean."

Scott let both of his shoulders drop before he reached out to put his hand on Clint's shoulder to get his attention. "Even when you join the team, we're going to do everything we can to keep that from *ever* happening." He smiled grimly. "I try my damndest to keep your parents from having to go through that too. And I'm sorry that we haven't been able to keep you as safe as you deserve to be," he added, and Clint could swear he heard Scott's voice crack.

And, well, Clint didn't want Scott to cry — not over *him* — so he just gave Scott a tight hug until it seemed like they were *both* going to be okay to let go.

The next time Clint and his family went to Avengers Tower, he knew that Steve was going to come check on him — and that conversation went just about as well as the one with Scott had

gone — but he also made it a point to seek out Bruce. Or at least ask Tony where he'd be.

Which was how he ended up outside of Bruce's lab, biting his lip and bouncing on his toes as he tried to figure out what he could even *say* after everything that had happened lately.

He had raised his hand to knock on the door about a billion times, but he kept lowering it again. He wanted *so badly* to make sure that Bruce was okay, but he was, weirdly, better at dealing with the Hulk than with Bruce.

He was just about to try knocking again when the door swung open, and Bruce stood there, one eyebrow raised, his arms crossed as he looked down at Clint.

"Hi," Clint said, kicking one foot behind his ankle.

"Hi," Bruce said, his eyebrow still raised, obviously waiting for an explanation.

"Hey, so, um, I wanted to check on you," Clint said, feeling his cheeks burning red. "You know, after everything that happened. And, um, ask if the Hulk was okay too, if that's okay to ask you. I don't really know if it is, but he was hurt, and I want him to be okay, you know?"

Bruce's disbelief turned into a quiet smile, and he stepped back to let Clint in, shutting the door behind them so that they could speak in private. "We're both okay, thanks for asking," he said as he showed Clint to a couch that looked like he had probably slept on it a few times even though he had his own room in the tower that he could have used instead of sleeping in the lab.

But then, Clint had seen his parents fall asleep in weird places, and he'd seen Scott asleep at his office, so maybe he had just managed to find himself in a group of people who didn't know how to stop until they *had* to.

He'd picked up that habit, too. That was kind of what had gotten him into this mess.

"How are *you*?" Bruce asked as he came to sit down on the couch as well, putting himself on the far end so that he and Clint had plenty of space between them even though they were on the same couch. He didn't look like he knew what to do with himself around Clint.

And Clint honestly couldn't blame him. This was all a bit... weird.

"I'm okay," Clint said, belatedly answering Bruce's question.

Bruce scoffed into a chuckle and shook his head. "Well, now that we've both lied to each other..."

Clint let his shoulders drop, relieved when the tension between them broke. "I guess I mean I'm trying to be okay, huh?"

"Me too," Bruce agreed, his smile more genuine now. He gestured toward Clint with one hand. "Did the, ah, buzzing stop?"

Clint nodded quickly. "Yeah, that doesn't last long after I'm done healing — usually."

"Usually." Bruce raised both eyebrows significantly, and Clint cleared his throat.

"Yeah, well, I've never been that badly hurt before," Clint admitted. "And ... I kind of wanted to apologize about that part."

Bruce was already shaking his head before Clint could even finish his sentence. "Apologize for being hurt? Don't. It wasn't your fault."

"It kind of was," Clint argued. "If they hadn't seen me playing with the Hulk—"

"No," Bruce said firmly. "Don't apologize for being a kid. You have every right to be reckless and make mistakes. You're a *kid*. That's what you're supposed to do."

"I don't think making friends with the Hulk was a mistake," Clint clarified. "I actually like the guy. I just think it was a bad move to do it openly where the guy who's obsessed with taking you down was around to see it." He took a deep breath, held it, and let it out again. "I... I'm learning that I have a lot to learn, and I'm trying to do right by the people who got hurt."

Bruce sighed and then reached over to rest his hand on Clint's arm. "Clint," he said softly, "I'm not mad at you."

"I know," Clint said. "But you got hurt, so I wanted to say I'm sorry."

Bruce watched Clint for a long time, but he must have realized that Clint wouldn't be deterred. As strange as it was, Clint was trying to take responsibility, and he was dealing with the trauma he'd been through by trying to take all of it on himself in a preteenager's understanding of the word "responsibility."

"I'm sorry too," Bruce said.

Clint pressed his mouth into a smile and then shifted nervously until he finally stood up and cleared his throat. "So, ah, is it okay if I stay friends with the Hulk? I do actually like him."

Bruce's smile seemed more genuine as he nodded. "We'd both like that, honestly," he said. "You can probably imagine he doesn't have many friends."

"Which is weird, because he's easy to get along with."

"I think it's the other way around, and you just get along with everyone, but sure," Bruce said, smiling as he stood up to mirror Clint. The awkwardness between them was gone as Bruce walked with him over to the door, where they both paused. "Thanks, by the way."

Clint wrinkled his nose. "Um... you're welcome? What did I do?"

"I'm glad you came to check on me. I was worried about you too."

"You don't have to do that," Clint promised. "I'm always okay."

Bruce gave him a tired smile. "And I've known far too many people in my life who use that exact phrase to think it means anything but that you've gotten used to being hurt. And that's

not okay, either."

"Yeah, I guess." Clint shrugged both shoulders and then gestured to the door. "So, um, see you around?"

"See you around," Bruce agreed, letting Clint out again, though he paused before he would have closed the door. "And Clint?"

Clint spun around. "Yeah?"

Bruce smiled. "I think you're going to be a great Avenger."

At that, Clint broke into a huge grin and gave Bruce a two-fingered salute as he backed down the hall. "One day," he agreed — and then spun on his heel, his head held higher than before.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last chapter of this volume! Keep your eyes peeled for the next edition in this universe: "Clint's Guide to Flirting"!

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