



xvi. Recruiting Ronin

A/N: Clint Barton has officially decided to embrace the dark aesthetic. I'm not sure how I feel about that, but I'll roll with it. a

It was dark and cloudy, as though even the moon and the stars were grieving the tragic ending that Thanos was trying to make permanent. Auralie usually appreciated the dark, it was one of the greatest allies on stealth missions, but tonight it was just mocking their desperate attempt to salvage the world.

Clint had gone off the grid. He wasn't at his house, he wasn't answering any form of communication, and he had clearly done a good job of hiding his movements. But even Clint made mistakes, and taking his cell phone with him was one of them. His best friend was a very talented hacker, who was very concerned about him.

They landed, and Auralie went with Natasha to go find Clint. Steve stayed with the quinjet.

The assassin and the hybrid walked side by side down the streets, which were practically empty. The world had seemingly shut down in the wake of the snap, and Auralie understood. The neon lights of signs washed over them, and the pouring rain dripped down on them. It soaked both women to the bone, but they didn't even care. There were far more important things they had to deal with.

"When did you grow up?" Natasha asked quietly, but out of nowhere.

Auralie sighed, "Nat, I know childhood was hard for you, but really if you don't understand basic biology....." a

"Oh you know what I mean," Natasha rolled her eyes, "I mean how much you've grown as a person. I mean, it's been nine years, but still, when we first met, you were a superpowered thirteen-year-old with a broken heart. A talented girl and a friend, but you were so closed off to everyone but Maria."

"Yeah, I guess I was, it feels so long ago," Auralie agreed.

"It was. You've changed a lot. Just joining the Avengers changed you a lot. It changed all of us, let us know we weren't alone, you know. But I think you really started to change after Sokovia. Wanda gave you a reason to be happy, really happy, and alive in the best way possible," Natasha reflected.

Auralie nodded, "she did. She still does. I still have a lot to figure out though."

Natasha shrugged, "don't we all?"

"Are you alright Nat, you've been trying so hard to take care of your team but no one's really taken care of you," Auralie asked, eyes filled with concern.

Natasha replied, "that's not true. Steve's been looking out for me, just like I look out for him. We're a team like that. And no, I'm not ok, none of us are, you most certainly aren't, but we're just trying to make it through."

"I guess that's all anyone can do," Auralie commented.

That was when they heard the sounds of fighting. Both women broke into a run, racing down streets, hoping that it was Clint, but fearing that he was hurt. What they found, however, was a surprise. A figure dressed in dark, battle appropriate clothing, hood up, standing in the rain.

Three dead bodies littered the streets. They wore garb that resembled that of Hydra or allies of the group. The kind of people Steve, Nat, Sam, Auralie, and Wanda had spent two years chasing down and stopping.

The hooded figure wielded a large blade, which he dropped at his side. He pulled off his hood and turned. Auralie and Natasha gasped. It was Clint, but not the archer they remembered. This Clint had eyes full of pain, a new haircut, and no sign of his signature gear.

"Natasha," he said, his voice hollow. As soon as they heard him, both women knew what had happened, "Ali."

"Clint," Natasha said, her voice so, "we were so worried."

"Yeah," he said, tears running down his face, mingling with raindrops. Then Auralie ran at him, hugging him, wanting to make sure he was real, that he stayed where he belonged, that they didn't lose him too.

"You're alive," she whispered, "oh hell Clint, oh hell! We thought we might have lost you. We thought you might be gone too, and oh Clint, I don't think I can take any more loss."

"I know, I know exactly how you feel," he murmured. The old friends broke apart so Clint could hug the best friend he had ever had.

Natasha then proceeded to explain, through tears from all three people, what had happened. Then they pieced together Clint's story.

His family had been killed by the snap. He hadn't been able to figure out what happened, so he ran, thinking Hydra might have had a hand in it. He had been tracking them, trying to figure out what had happened. In the span of a few days, he had become a different person. They called him Ronin.

"Wait," Auralie said through her tears at hearing all her friend had suffered, "I know you had no clue what was happening because you were on house arrest. But why couldn't you get in touch with Shield? I'm sure Fury or Maria had figured it out. They haven't contacted us yet, but we assumed things are very insane with them right now too."

Clint looked at her with surprise and pity, "Ali, you didn't know. I tried to get in contact with Fury and Hill. I couldn't."

Auralie felt her knees buckling. She hit the wet pavement, "no, no, no, they're fine! They're ok! It's all gonna be ok! Tell me they just didn't answer. Tell me it's all fine."

"I wish I could," Clint and Natasha hauled her back on her feet, "but you're an Avenger. You need to know the truth. I did a little investigating. They were last seen in a car in NYC. The car was found parked on the side of the road. They weren't there. I checked some traffic camera footage."

"No," Auralie whispered, feeling lost, "they're too strong. They can't be gone."

"Fury turned to dust," Clint said, as gently as possible, "and Maria did too. Oh, Ali, I'm so sorry."

Auralie collapsed into Natasha, who held her as she began sobbing again. Auralie had somehow thought that if Tony and Pepper and Clint and Scott had made it, there was hope for Maria too. But her sister was gone. Her sister and her girlfriend, the two people she loved most in the world. a

"Clint," Natasha said, "we need your help. We have a plan, a desperate plan, but a plan. We need all the help we could get. Please."

Clint seemed hesitant. He wanted revenge for his family, yes, and he also wanted to help the world. But he didn't want this. He didn't want to be sucked back into a world that ended only in pain. Even though he wanted to help his friends, he didn't want to die.

"Let me go my own way," Clint said, "please Nat." a

Natasha sighed, "I could. But I'm making a different call. You saved me all those years ago. Now let me make sure we save Laura and the kids. I'm not gonna let it end like this Clint."

"I'm not Hawkeye anymore," Clint argued.

"Then come as Ronin. Or just Clint. Just come, please," Natasha said. It was like a strange switch of rolls. Clint had brought her to Shield all those years ago, now she was bringing him to the Avengers.

"Alright," Clint looked down, "for my family's sake." He started gathering his stuff so they could head out. Natasha propped up Auralie, making sure the other girl wasn't going to collapse from stress.

"Ali, can you focus," Natasha asked.

Auralie wiped at her tears, "Maria's gone. Wanda's gone. I'd do anything to get them back Nat. If focusing is what it takes....." a

Natasha doubted Auralie was actually listening, but she just took the other girl's hand and led her away. Natasha hadn't known Auralie to be this broken since she was a young teenager. Even then, she wasn't this destroyed.

Auralie, who had seen a lot of things and was rarely reduced to a sobbing mess anymore, was an absolute wreck, and that was understandable. She had just found out she had truly lost almost everything. She didn't, however, realize how broken she was.

There was a hole where her heart had just been ripped out of, and she didn't feel pain because of it, she just felt numb. The sign of a dangerous wound. a

A/N: Poor, poor Auralie. She's been through so much and has so much to go through..... and poor Clint too, he needs to actually have a successful retirement one of these days. a

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