

Oh, for crying out loud, we're still not through with this arc yet? I started covering Hawkeye with #5 at the tail end of 2012. Two years later, and the series still doesn't have two dozen issues to its name, which says a lot about its pacing. It wasn't all time well spent, either; for every brilliant page of character development, there was also a page of Clint scratching his head as to what's going on, a lot of brain-farting, or a bunch of guys saying "Bro" a thousand and one times.*This issue has a minimum of that, and as a result may be one of the most productive issues in the entire run. For once, every page keeps the plot moving forward, picking up on bits and pieces of story left behind from earlier. Maybe it's natural that it would take Clint being in such a dire position, with failure more likely than not, to get his act together and do and say all the things he should have all along. Maybe all that's important is he finally got to that point, despite meandering along the way. At the same time, certain resolutions don't have the satisfaction you'd expect precisely because Fraction lost focus on their plotlines some time ago. It's just been too long since we last dealt with them, and all the excitement has leaked away over time. You want to care deeply about Clint finally confessing to Jess that he knows he's been pushing her away (read: acting like a jerk) and wants to stop, but at the same time, you're wondering if you've ever seen them as a couple in the first place. You get a lot more out of Clint and Barney's man-to-man talk in the basement, but even there, you sense that the conversation is driven by history Fraction never quite communicated. What we've seen on this series, especially in the Barney-centric #12, is a brotherly relationship that's stayed tight, despite everything they've been through. So when Clint threatens to destroy Barney if he chooses this moment to leave him hanging, you're thinking he's referring to past bad experience, which we've yet to see. But all these criticisms fall in the camp of mourning what might have been executed a little better, and really, the issue is pretty well-executed as is. Now feeling the pressure to get this over with as soon as possible, Fraction doesn't waste much time with sweet sorrows, whether Clint's with Jess and Barney's with Simone. All this prep-work for the final battle with the Bro Gang is mostly for your benefit, namely to emphasize how freaking impossible it's going to be for our heroes. With Clint and Barney fighting deaf and crippled, supported by a few willing but hopelessly inexperienced city renters, the odds were always going to be long.**On the plus side, that's a lot of tension you're feeling as the fighting starts to heat up. Household traps and suicide stunts keep the good guys afloat for a while, but in the end, they get their feet knocked out from under them by Kazi—just like last time. You can forgive Clint and Barney for overlooking the sleeper agent in their midst, namely the evil Russian grandmother who, I am not kidding, singlehandedly turns the tide of the whole battle. It's harder to swallow that no one factored in the assassin that nearly killed our fearless leaders just six issues ago. Anyway, things look as poorly as can be expected by the end of the issue, though it's by narrative necessity alone that they don't look considerably worse. [Spoiler alert!] The Bro Gang doesn't hesitate to stab Barney in the back—as always, literally—but, as always, they leave Clint to drag his sorry self around, which is actually worse than just finishing him off, too. We shouldn't underestimate how much Clint has lost during this series, no matter how casual its tone. Certainly there's none of that breeziness in the final scene with Barney, which makes it that much more gut-wrenching for all of us. I often wonder if the delay between issues is due to waiting on Aja's art, in which case I'd say it's almost—almost—worth it. You can never fail to admire how much weight the slim frame of his art carries; there's a lot of hidden muscle in it, which only reveals itself when the action starts up and you see for yourself how hard it hits. The sequence of Bro grandma pummeling Clint with a bat in a motherly rage says it all: here's this seemingly frail woman who turns into the most monstrous, horrific force of all. Such is Aja's art—except for the monstrous

and horrific parts. Hollingsworth makes a bold choice in rendering the final leg of the issue in monochromatic brown, to underline how Clint's pain interferes with his sensory experience. It makes our reading experience a little tougher, but it's a worthwhile challenge when it pays off so well for the story at hand. Some Musings: * The alternating Kate issues also slowed things down considerably, without offering a bit of help its partner storyline in return. ** Especially since Jess decides to leave them to it and take off, citing Avengers work as an excuse. I imagine she does this mostly because having even a single superhero in the mix would have been too much of an advantage. - For the linguistically curious, "СВОЛОЧЬ," the epithet Bro grandma uses on Clint, means "riffraff, rabble, asshole, scoundrel," though "rat bastard" feels more appropriate in the moment. The post Hawkeye #21 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

Read more: <http://weeklycomicbookreview.com/2015/02/11/hawkeye-21/>